# **“INVESTIGATIVE Judgement” In The Perspective Of John Wesley**

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**ABSTRAK**

Konsep Pengadilan Pemeriksaan (*Investigative Judgment)* sedikit banyak bersumber dari pemikiran John Wesley. Di dalam beberapa khotbahnya John Wesley menuliskan ide-ide tentang pengadilan. Beberapa penulis mengatakan bahwa Wesley menjabarkan konsep “pengadilan pemeriksaan” dalam konteks perumpamaan “Penatalayan yang Baik.” Artikel ini membahas tentang kontribusi Wesley terhadap konsep Pengadilan Pemeriksaan, dan ditemukan bahwa walaupun Wesley tidak pernah mengungkapkan kata Pengadilan Pemeriksaan, namun ide dan konsep pengadilan pemeriksaan secara jelas dijabarkan, tetapi penekanan dari Wesley lebih kepada keselamatan dan kehidupan kudus.

# **Introduction**

John Wesley wrote about the idea of judgment in some of his sermons. Current scholarship suggests that Wesley describes the concept of the ‘investigative judgment’ in the context of the parable of “the Good Steward.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Wesley is considered as the founder “Evangelical Revival.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He wrote about the judgment and the details of his understanding of this subject are clarified in 1758 sermon entitled “The Great Assize.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In Wesley’s thought there are two theological issues that are significant to this study, (1) the sovereignty of God and the justice of God.[[4]](#footnote-4) These theological issues are connected to eschatology. There seems to have been ongoing discussion concerning tension between John Calvin’s theory of predestination, and Arminius’ belief in free will thought with respect to belief in a final eschatological investigative judgment teaching.[[5]](#footnote-5) This study confines itself to Wesley’s judgment thought. Gulley notes it is significant that the judgment is an important eschatological event in Scripture, as are the Creeds, and theological systems.[[6]](#footnote-6) In Wesley’s concept, the basis for judgment is “works”, along with “words and tempers, upon which we shall either be condemned or acquitted in the last day.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Another key to Wesley’s judgment concept, vital to its development, is the “order of salvation.” This is “rooted in the existence and recognition of original sin and God’s response to it.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Finally, the eschatological insight that the end is near contributes the exposition of the judgment in the context of holiness and freedom of the will.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

This study will seek to understand Wesley theological ideas, and attempt to answer this question: What are the contributions of John Wesley to the concept of the investigative or pre-Advent judgment?

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study will explain the judgment concept of John Wesley, and attempt to assess the biblical basis of his ideas.

**John Wesley’s Concept of Judgment**

The sermons, “The Great Assize” and “The Good Steward”, are the two known treatises of Wesley concerning the judgment. These sermons are significant because there is no other reference to Wesley’s judgment concept. Also, these sermons are cited by Wesleyan scholars.

THE CONCEPT OF THE SECOND COMING

Wesley’s idea of the judgment was central to his doctrine of the second coming of Christ.[[10]](#footnote-10) He believed that before the judgment takes place, events that he called “chief circumstances” (or, in Adventist understanding “signs of the second coming”), would precede the “standing before the judgment of Christ.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Central to this association of ideas was the imminence of the judgment. Wesley described the events prior to the judgment: “First, God will show ‘signs in the earth beneath’ Acts 2:19.” The upheaval of nature and the gross dislocation of regions in the world (Isa. 24:20, Rev. 16:20, Luke 21:25, Joel 2:30) awakens the senses of men of the impending doom.[[12]](#footnote-12) Wesley continued to predict the catastrophic turn of events that would usher in the dispatching of the angels and the appearing of Christ from the clouds.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Wesley interpreted the second coming texts mentioned above literally except for the expression in Rev. 20:12 “and the books were opened.” He refers to this “expression, plainly referring to the manner of proceeding among men.”[[14]](#footnote-14) However, Wesley never put emphasis on the millennial phase of the judgment. He elaborated on the events before the judgment.

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF THE JUDGMENT

Speaking about “the person by whom God will judge the world,” Wesley clarifies that Christ, the “only-begotten Son,” whose ‘goings forth are from everlasting,’ ‘who is God over all, blessed forever,’” is the rightful judge.[[15]](#footnote-15) Wesley further states, “unto him ‘being the out-beaming of his Father’s glory, the express image of his person,’ the Father ‘hath committed all judgment.’”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Collins rightly commented, “And though Wesley does not specifically state in this sermon that God will judge the actions of people by the standard of the moral law, his Christological language, just cited, hints at the continuity and usefulness of just such a standard.”[[17]](#footnote-17) On the divinity of Christ, Wesley affirms that Jesus is “from everlasting.” Concerning the humanity of Christ Wesley quotes Heb. 1:3; John 5:2,27; Phil. 2:6-7 as standard Christological references for the full humanity of Jesus.[[18]](#footnote-18)

THE CONCEPT OF INVESTIGATION

Oden, intending to show Wesley’s consistent Scriptural teaching on the judgment, pinpoints the sermon “The Good Steward” as the nucleus of an ‘investigative’ idea in Wesley’s thought.[[19]](#footnote-19) This ‘investigative’ terminology was not used by Wesley and does not necessarily refer to prophetic time periods. Hugh Dunton, in his study of Great Britain’s millennial hope from 1780 to 1960, observes that “in practice many evangelicals are, for practical purposes, Amillennialinst.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

A study of the concept of investigation and its terminology of the judgment suggests that Wesley believed judgment included some form of examination.[[21]](#footnote-21) The examination of the “stewards” implies the use of their free will and the ramifications of their acts are laid bare.[[22]](#footnote-22) According to Wesley, when the “inquiry” begins, “The Judge of all will then inquire: How didst thus employ they soul?”[[23]](#footnote-23) Another question God will ask is “How didst thou employ thy *body* wherewith I entrusted thee?”[[24]](#footnote-24) This is to underline that the judgment by God will hide nothing.[[25]](#footnote-25) God will examine the employment of the human resources which He had given to men.[[26]](#footnote-26) This is for the satisfaction of all those who are present in the court proceedings, “before the cosmic audience.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Wesley saw the need of divine court proceeding to defend man’s free will and God’s justice. He “has often been characterized as Arminian rather than Calvinistic.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The judgment “portrays each one standing before the Judge and in some recollecting, witnessing, and beholding the entire history of their moral decision making.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Wesley thus supported belief in free will as being important to the investigative judgment phase of judgment before the execution of the judgment.

**Purpose and Mission of the Judgment**

THE PURPOSE OF THE JUDGMENT

Wesley believes that the purpose of the judgment is that “God will vindicate himself, his own justice and moral perfections, in the ‘amazing contexture of divine providence,’ by showing such a plausible way why he permitted evil that the righteous will rejoice with joy unspeakable.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Oden describes this thought in these words:

This vindication is necessary to display the wisdom, the power, and mercy of God in their precise conjunction, where for each free agent “all the circumstances of their life should be placed in open view, together with all their tempers, and all the desires, thoughts, and intents of their hearts. Otherwise how would it appear out of what a depth of sin and misery the grace of God had delivered them?”[[31]](#footnote-31)

God’s justice is based on transparency that scrutinizes “all transient ambiguities.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The seriousness of sin is demonstrated by how high the cost paid for it is. Wesley’s judgment concept reminds God’s people, “It will be sufficient for them that ‘all the transgressions which they had committed shall not be once mentioned unto them’ to their disadvantage.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

The purpose of the judgment is the vindication of God’s righteousness. Clarence Bence observes correctly, “For Wesley theology is soteriology” and “eschatology and soteriology are two parts of one system of understanding.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

THE JUDGMENT AND MISSION

Outler notes that Wesley endeavored to work by love, follow holiness, and become a blessing to his neighbors.[[35]](#footnote-35) He contends with Wesley that, “Faith is in order to love, as love is in order to blessedness, which is God’s original designs for his human creatures.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Wesley shaped his movement on the basis of his eschatological hope. He understood the judgment as solemn and clarion call for repentance. Wesley, nonetheless, preached his judgment concept as imminent “evangelist,” “organizer,” and “social reformer.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

**WESLEY’S CONCEPT OF TIME IN JUDGMENT**

For Wesley the timing of the judgment is set during Christ’s second coming. He did not elaborate on the timing and it appears he had not made any effort to explain his views about the millennial as mentioned beforehand, except for asserting that the parousia commences the judgment.[[38]](#footnote-38)

THE CONCEPT OF PERSONS TO BE JUDGED

Wesley contended that the persons to be judged will be “‘a great multitude which no man can number.’”[[39]](#footnote-39) For him the judgment will include “‘all that have sprung from the loins of Adam since the world began, till time shall be no more!’”[[40]](#footnote-40) Though not knowing of the length of the interval between the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, Wesley did recognize a distinction between judgment of the righteous dead and the wicked dead.[[41]](#footnote-41)

He described the *parousia* as orderly and noted the precisely rehearsed entrance of Christ’s entourage of the waiting world.[[42]](#footnote-42) This momentous and decisive event operates on the swiftness of Divine power to raise the dead.

Wesley explained that the just before Christ occupies the judgment throne the good and the bad were gathered and separated with the good on the right and the bad on the left.[[43]](#footnote-43) The separation of the two classes of people when Christ comes indicates prior decision about them. Before the general judgment the cases have already been decided regarding who belongs on the right hand” and the “left hand of God.

This separate prior arrangement is for all people. Wesley asserted that when Christ shall come He will judge “both of those who shall be found alive at his coming, and whose who were before gathered to their fathers.”[[44]](#footnote-44) This statement implies the fact of a prior decision for all dead and all living. During the final judgment the announcements will be made by the “righteous judge” to all mankind, until time expires. Wesley wrote that, “it does not appear that a thousand years will suffice” for judgment. It seems apparent that Wesley did not know of two resurrections separated by the millennium.[[45]](#footnote-45)

THE CONCEPT OF THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Commenting on Heb 9:27, “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this judgment “(KJV), Collins sees the thesis of Wesley concerning the final judgment as being “that there is—and can be—only one reckoning, the general judgment, which occurs at the resurrection.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The final judgment will be a formal inquiry, a public declaration, and the execution of God’s decision.

This single reckoning compels all rational beings to acknowledge the authority of Christ as Judge. Wesley viewed the final judgment as the revelation of God’s will. His concept of this prior arraignment may not necessarily parallel the details of the later pre-Advent judgment teaching among SDAs, but implies the logical necessity of an investigation before the final judgment. Though this is not necessarily peculiar to Wesley, he seems to have influenced the theological milieu toward belief in an investigative judgment.

## **Conclusion**

Wesley’s concept of judgment is an important contribution to the development of the investigative judgment idea, even though his emphasis is on salvation and holy living. The evangelical tone of Wesley perhaps hindered some developments, since he did not anchor his theology on eschatology. Wesley’s judgment concept was not peculiar as other evangelical thinkers also believed in some aspects and there are no major disagreements between his views and theirs.

Wesley influenced, to some extent, the concept of the need for an investigative judgment as a logical step in the final judgment teaching. He did not use the world “investigative judgment’ though Oden believed that his sermon “The Good Steward” contained some concepts about an investigative judgment. Wesley contributed to the idea of a prior arraignment of all people, dead or living, being separated according to their righteous or wicked character before the judgment. This may be an indication that Wesley had anticipated the pre-Advent judgment, but had not given importance to it as a doctrine. Thus, belief about ongoing investigation by an omniscient God, before the final judgment, may be implied in what Wesley wrote. It is not, in a strict sense the same as the Adventist concept of an open judgment in heaven.

The strength of Wesley’s judgment concept rests in his fervent belief in a just God who continues to bless mankind with freedom of will, and provides the prevenient grace for all men to experience conversion. Wesley emphasized man’s struggle to meet God in the crossroads of sin, hence the affirmation of the Arminian doctrine of free will and the rejection of the Calvinistic theory of absolute predestination.

Wesley believed that man was not left to die without fair treatment or judgment. This belief concurs with the position of Sabbatarian Adventists in 1850’s of whom J. White was a key founding leader. The judgment idea of Wesley strongly taught that it was God who initiated man’s salvation.

The weakness of the sermons “The Great Assize” and “The Good Steward” in this comparative study lies in the lack of sufficient detail for us to answer such questions as, where will the judgment take place? Why exactly is it relevant? Wesley had thoughtfully reflected on Rev. 20, but he did not seem to believe in two resurrections, or show importance in the millennium because of his pre-occupation was on preaching revival sermons to promote holy living. Wesley was chiefly interested in soteriology and eschatology, though important, was mainly on an addendeum to his main emphasis.

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1. Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 351-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley’s Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Norman Gulley, *The Impact of Eschatology on Protology,”* Journal of the Adventist Theological Society 11 (2000): 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The contention of these two ideas reflects the relevance of explaining the judgment concept of Wesley for evaluating the position of absolutism in the predestination doctrine of Calvin. Wesley champions the Arminian cause of free will defenders. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gulley, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley’s Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dane’s Place, *The Order of Salvation in John Wesley’s Theology,”* [database on-line] (accessed March 4th 2010] available from <http://www,shot.com/featheredprp/theo4.html>; internet. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Wesley, *The Great Assize. John Wesley’s Works,* 14 vols.[CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Sage Digital Library, 1996), 5:250. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 5:251. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wesley, “The Great Assize.” 5:251. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Collins, 194. This Christological vocabulary of Wesley shows the emphasis to the belief in the Trinitarian concept of the Catholic Church. Wesley uses this traditional view to demonstrate his support the belief that Christ was both fully divine and fully human. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. He gave an example when Wesley was drafting a sermon in 1750. Wesley utilizes an idiom: “Yea, in some sense, we may apply to this law [moral] what the Apostle says of his Son—it is ‘the streaming forth’ or *out-beaming of his glory*, *the express image of his person.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Wesley, “The Great Assize.” 5:252. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 6:160. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Hugh Dunton, *Millennial Hopes and Fears: Great Britain, 1780-1960,” Andrews University Seminary Studies* 37 (1999):207. It is possible that Wesley was an Amillennialist though it is rather hard to prove otherwise. What is clear in this study is that Wesley did not emphasize the millennial concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Oden, 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wesley, 6:619. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wesley views the soul and the body in Platonic terms. It seems that the confusion between soul and spirit in “The Good Steward” sermon is pronounced. Wesley believes that the soul is immortal and the body temporal. The distinction is made in this sermon. In analysis, Wesley’s method is from Oxford. His critical method, however, is at times “inclined toward the superficial and expeditious.” See Samuel J. Regal, “John Wesley’s Journal: Prescription for the Social, Spiritual, and Intellectual Ills of Britains Middle Class,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies 26* (1988), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Wesley, “The Great Assize,” 6:170. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Oden, 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Edward W. H. Vick, John Wesley’s Teaching Concerning Perfection, *Andrews University Seminary Studies 4* (July 1966): 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. God’s sovereignty will not interfere with human freedom and His way of judging mortals will not be arbitrary. Gulley, “The Impact of Eschatology on proctology,” 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Oden, 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. William M. Greathouse, *John Wesley’s View of the Last Things,”* in the Second Coming: A Wesleyan approach to the Doctrine of the Last Things, ed. H. Ray Dunning (Kansas, MO: Beacon Hill, 1995), 141-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley’s Sermon: An Introduction. Nashville: Abingdon, 1991.* [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. Cf. Wesley, “The Great Assize,” 5:261-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Robert V. Rakestraw, *John Wesley as a Theologian of Grace,”* Journal of Evangelical and Theological Society 27/2 (June 1984): 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Concerning the timing of Judgment Wesley said, “But God will reveal this also in its season.” Wesley, “The Great Assize,” 5:252. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Wesley, “The Great Assize.” 5:253-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Wesley, “The Great Assize,” 5:251. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Wesley, “The Great Assize,” 5:253-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. What Wesley is doing here is rejecting the idea of a judgment immediately after death for the disembodied soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)