

IS YOUR NAME WRITTEN THERE?

Because the book of life has often been the focus of many an Adventist sermon, it is important to know clearly what it means in terms of our salvation.

The Bible mentions several heavenly books in which the experiences and acts of human beings are recorded. Human practices of record keeping employed in Israel and in other ancient Near Eastern countries were being used in the Bible to illustrate heavenly practices or to communicate some specific information concerning them. The purpose of the heavenly records far exceeds the social role of their earthly counterparts in Israelite society. But this subject raises interesting questions with respect to the biblical use of earthly practices to describe heavenly ones.

The Book of Life

It seems to have been common among Israelites to keep records of

the names of those who dwelt in their cities. Those records or registers not only served to identify the citizens of a particular city, but were also used as genealogical records (Neh. 7:5; 12:23). In fact, the term *register* in the Old Testament could designate genealogical records usually kept by families and/or by the city (Ezra 2:62; Neh. 7:64). It appears that those who had no children were identified in the city's register as "childless" (Jer. 22:30, KJV).

Genealogies were important to determine legal rights and social and

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religious functions. For instance, the descendants of Aaron had a right to the priesthood, and genealogical records identified those who belonged to his family. In the absence of that evidence, some were excluded from the priesthood (Ezra 2:62). The deletion of the name of a criminal from those registers would have been a severe legal punishment. This is precisely what the Lord announced against the false prophets: "They will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel" (Eze. 13:9, NIV). False prophets would not be part of the people of Israel.

Mention should be made here of the "book of the generations of Adam" in Genesis 5:1, which could be called a "book of life and death" in the sense that it included information about the birth of Adam's descendants and the time when each one died. It is basically a genealogical record of Adam's descendants. The book also includes an important exception to the fatal "birth-death" nexus in the person of Enoch (5:24), who did not experience death.

Isaiah gives to the practice of keeping records of the inhabitants of a city

an end-times significance when he announces that in the Messianic kingdom "he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy—everyone who is recorded among the living in Jerusalem" (4:3, NKJV). According to him, there is an eschatological register containing the names of those who will be citizens of the renewed Jerusalem. One could conclude that the register of a city could be called a "book of life" in the



sense that those inscribed there had the right to live in that particular city and to enjoy the privileges and responsibilities associated with their being part of it. The birth lists found in the Old Testament in the form of genealogies seem to

provide a proper background for the interpretation of the book of life.

The Heavenly Book of Life

The Bible refers quite often to the existence of a heavenly register in which the names of those who belong to the Lord are recorded. This book is located in heaven (Luke 10:20) and is called "Your [God's] book which You have written" (Ex. 32:32, NKJV), the "book of life" (Ps. 69:28, NIV; Phil. 4:3), and the "book of the Lamb" (Rev. 17:8). It is also referred to as "the book" (Dan. 12:1).

It has been suggested that the idea of a heavenly book of life was not exclusively Israelite. The Sumerian goddess Nungal possessed a “tablet of life.” In a hymn to the god Haia we read, “Grant to prince Rim-Sin a reign all joyous and length of days! On a tablet of life never to be altered place its [the reign’s] names(s)!”¹ The few Sumerian texts where the “tablet of life” is mentioned do not provide enough information to determine its nature and function. The “tablet of life” in those texts appears to be “a tablet where the deeds of an individual are recorded” or a tablet of destiny, and therefore do not provide a good parallel for the book of life in the Old Testament.

There is also an Akkadian text from the time of Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.), the Neo-Assyrian empire, that mentions a tablet of life: “To the king, my Lord. . . . May all be very very well with the king, my lord. May Nabu and Marduk bless the king, my lord On the seventh day is the making of the reckoning of Nabu. In his tablet of life [may he make] the reckoning of the king, my lord (and) of the sons of my lord forever.”² Again, the text seems to describe a tablet of fates rather than a book of life. What seems to be requested is that the dynasty of the king be firmly established forever in the heavenly records. At the present time we do not

seem to have a good ancient Near Eastern parallel for the Old Testament heavenly book of life.

Recording Names in the Book of Life

This discussion of the Old Testament background suggests that the heavenly book of life contains a particular list of names. The question is, Whose names are recorded there? Psalm 69:28 states, “Let [my enemies] be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous” (NKJV). Since in this Psalm the enemies of the psalmist appear to be Israelites, the text implies that only the names of the righteous, those who are part of the people of God, are recorded in His book of life. Particularly important is Psalm 87:6, in which God is described as registering in the book the names of people who serve Him in non-Israelite lands: “The Lord will record, when He registers the peoples: ‘This one was born there’” (NKJV). This appears to be a register of foreigners who worship the Lord and includes the place where each person was actually born. The reference is most probably to the book of life, in which the names of non-Israelites are included as citizens among the people of God.

The New Testament indicates that the book of life contains only the names of those who are citizens of the New Jerusalem. Hebrews

God knows in advance the names of those who will respond positively to the work of the Spirit in their lives and has written their names in the book—but not predestination in the sense of an arbitrary decision fixing the eternal destiny of every human being. The language of divine foreknowledge serves to emphasize the assurance of salvation.

identifies those whose names are written in heaven as the “church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Heb. 12:23, NKJV). John writes, “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev. 21:27, NIV). More explicit is Revelation 17:8, where followers of the beast is defined as those “whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world” (NKJV). On the other hand, Jesus encouraged His disciples to rejoice because their “names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20, NKJV), and Paul refers to his fellow workers as those “whose names are in the Book of Life” (Phil. 4:3, NKJV). We could conclude that only the names of the righteous are inscribed in the book of life.

Scripture does not describe the process by which names are recorded in the heavenly book of life. Some have found Revelation 17:8

useful when dealing with this particular concern. As mentioned above, there followers of the beast are defined as those “whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is” (NKJV). The implication appears to be that only the names of the servants of God have been written in that book from the foundation of the world. Obviously, the text describes divine foreknowledge—God knows in advance the names of those who will respond positively to the work of the Spirit in their lives and has written their names in the book—but not predestination in the sense of an arbitrary decision fixing the eternal destiny of every human being. The language of divine foreknowledge serves to emphasize the assurance of salvation.

Within the arena of history, the inclusion of names in the book of life is based on the event of the Cross (Rev. 13:8) and appears to

We could conclude that writing down and retaining the names of the righteous in that book is an act of divine forgiving grace. That grace initiates the process and accompanies believers in their journey of faith and commitment to Christ. It is through their constant dependence on it that their names will be preserved in the book of life of the Lamb. They will be acknowledged as loyal citizens of the kingdom of God.

take place when the individual surrenders his or her life to the Lord. This is suggested by the fact that the name of a righteous person could be removed from the divine ledger because of unfaithfulness and sin. That awful possibility excludes the idea of predestination, as defined above. In fact, “the divine foreordination is thus linked with the human readiness to carry the conflict to victory.”³

Deleting Names From the Book of Life

The possibility of removing a name from the heavenly book of life is very real. Moses asked the Lord to remove his name from “Your book which You have written” (Ex. 32:32, NKJV). He was asking the Lord to exclude him from being part of His plan if that would make it possible for the Israelites, who had sinned against Him, to be part of it. God’s answer came back: “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him

out of My book” (vs. 33, NKJV). Only on account of rebellious sin would a name be removed from that divine register.

The psalmist prayed with respect to enemies, “Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous” (Ps. 69:28, NKJV). As already indicated, the enemies appear to have been among the righteous, but the way they dealt with the psalmist indicated that they were no longer righteous, and consequently the psalmist asked that their names be blotted out of the book of life. Revelation 3:5 reaffirms the regrettable possibility of a righteous person falling from grace and having his or her name removed from the book.

Judgment, Grace, and the Book of Life

It is through a divine act of judgment that names are removed from the book of life. Daniel 7:9, 10, describes a scene of judgment during

which heavenly books were opened. Toward the end of the Book of Daniel, the eternal verdict is announced: “Every one who is found written in the book” will be rescued, but the others will experience “shame and everlasting contempt” (12:1, 2, NKJV). Notice that in Daniel 7 the reference is to “books,” in the plural, but in Daniel 12 we have the singular, “the book.” As a result of the judgment, names are preserved in the book of life or removed from it. Interestingly, the first reference to the book of life is found precisely in the context of God’s judicial activity against the sin of Israel (Ex. 32:32). Moses argues his case before the Lord based on the understanding that God’s verdict against a person results in the removal of his or her name from the book of life.

John states that “he who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (Rev. 3:5, NKJV). In the judgment, where Christ represents His people and speaks on their behalf, those who overcome will be dressed in white garments and their names will be retained in the book of life. They are acknowledged to be true citizens of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem (21:27). The implication is that it is possible for believers to fall from grace and consequently to have their

names blotted out from the book of life. The book of life is also opened during the judgment of the wicked, after the millennium (20:12). Since their names were “not found written in the Book of Life” (vs. 15, NKJV), they are not recognized as citizens of the kingdom of God.

If sin is the reason for removing a name from the book of life, then natural human sinfulness would make it simply impossible to retain any name in that book (Rom. 3:23). However, Moses was very much aware of the fact that the only way to keep the name of a sinner in the book of life was through God’s atoning work (Ex. 32:31, 32). Revelation 13:8 correlates the writing of names in the book of life with the atoning death of the Lamb of God. We could conclude that writing down and retaining the names of the righteous in that book is an act of divine forgiving grace. That grace initiates the process and accompanies believers in their journey of faith and commitment to Christ. It is through their constant dependence on it that their names will be preserved in the book of life of the Lamb. They will be acknowledged as loyal citizens of the kingdom of God.

The Nature of “Life” in the Book of Life

The nature of the “life” mentioned in the name of the book of life has been debated. The references to that

book in the New Testament clearly indicate that the noun *life* designates eschatological life, i.e., eternal life in the kingdom of God. It is debatable whether the same meaning or a similar one can be assigned to the references to the book of life in the Old Testament. The tendency among scholars has been to interpret the name of the book as referring to a book in which are inscribed either the names of all living persons or only those of the righteous. Removing the name of a person from that register would then mean that the person's life will be shortened.

This interpretation is possible but very unlikely. It weakens the significance of Moses' request to have his name blotted out of God's book. Why would he make that petition if sooner or later, after all, his name was going to be blotted out of the book—that is to say, he would die? Was he simply asking the Lord to shorten his life, to kill him? What would be the significance of that request? As already suggested, He seemed to have had something more significant in mind. The blotting out of a name from the book is a divine act of judgment that alienates sinners from God once and for all and totally and permanently obliterates the person from the world of the living; it is a divine act of destruction (Deut. 9:14).

According to Psalm 69:28, blotting out a name from the book of life does

not mean the person will simply die. It means the person will not be able to enjoy life in the company of the righteous. This same idea is contained in Psalm 87:6. The life mentioned in those passages is not available to the wicked. In fact, they are excluded from it. Therefore, the reference is not to a natural life that at some point will come to an end for both the wicked and the righteous. The name of the book of life seems to express an eschatological hope in the Old Testament.

It is important to observe that "the book of the generations of Adam" (Gen. 5:1, KJV) deals with life in the here and now, but at the same time points to a hope that transcends the present world of life and death. It points to a life that overcomes the power of death and that is enjoyed in the presence of God. The experience of Enoch appears to illustrate what would be the experience of those whose names are recorded in the heavenly book of life. For Enoch "the book of the generations of Adam"—the book of life and death—was in fact a book of life; a life beyond the grasp of death.

There is at least one passage in the Old Testament where the eschatological significance of the book of life is clearly indicated. Daniel 12:1 states that retaining the name in the book of God means enjoying eternal life, that is to say, a life in union with God after the resurrection.

The nature of the heavenly book of life is unknown to us, but that should not lead us to question its reality. It is obvious that the Bible is using a human social practice—keeping record of the names of those who were citizens of a particular city or group—to help us understand heavenly realities. The social practice illustrated and pointed to something more significant in the heavenly realm.

This discussion has some important implications for the nature of eschatological hope in the Old Testament. The references to the book of life in the Old Testament witness to the fact that the Israelite faith included an expectation of a life that will overcome death and be enjoyed in the company of God and the righteous.

Significance of the Book of Life

The biblical information concerning the book of life leads to several important conclusions.

First, the nature of the heavenly book of life is unknown to us, but that should not lead us to question its reality. It is obvious that the Bible is using a human social practice—keeping record of the names of those who were citizens of a particular city or group—to help us understand heavenly realities. The social practice illustrated and pointed to something more significant in the heavenly realm. Some-

thing happens at the administrative center of the universal government of God when a person becomes a citizen of His kingdom. The liberation of souls from the kingdom of darkness and their incorporation into the kingdom of God is not only celebrated in heaven but also recorded in the book of life.

Second, the reality of the book of life underscores for the people of God the fact that those who belong to Christ are already members of the heavenly city, of the kingdom of God. Their names are already written in the heavenly ledger, and they are considered to be citizens of that kingdom with all the privileges, prerogatives, and responsibilities that entails. The certainty of their heavenly citizenship is so unquestionable that Jesus encourages them to rejoice because their names are already in the book of life. The certainty of that act is also emphasized by insisting that it is God Himself who writes the names in the book and that this

takes place in heaven, out of the reach of human envy and evil powers. Whatever may happen to the name recorded in heaven will be the result of the decision of a loving God.

Third, the decision to record the names of believers in the book of life is not arbitrary or accidental. From the divine perspective, and based on God's foreknowledge, He inscribed in His book, even before the foundation of the world, the names of those who will believe. This decision was hidden in the divine counsel. What this means is that writing the names of believers in the book of life was not a divine afterthought but part of the divine intention, even before they actually and willingly decided to be members of the city of God. Divine foreknowledge and human freedom do not cancel out each other.

The obvious question is, If God also foreknew those who will fall from grace, why did He include their names in the book of life, knowing He would blot them out later? Possibly because God also determined in advance that the blotting out of the names of apostates will take place during the final judgment in order to show to all intelligent creatures throughout the

universe the justice of His decisions. God is more interested in saving people than in condemning them—in writing down their names for salvation than in blotting them out of the book of life.

Fourth, it is possible for the name of a person to be removed from the heavenly book of life. This is obviously based on the fact that God respects human freedom. But believers are fully persuaded that what makes possible the inclusion of their name in that book is at the same time what makes it possible to retain it there, namely, the forgiving grace of God. The names recorded there are those of repentant sinners, and as long as they persevere in faith, retaining a spirit of dependence on and submission to God through Christ's atoning work, their names will not be blotted out during the judgment. They are indeed citizens of the heavenly kingdom. □

REFERENCES

¹ Shalmon M. Paul, "Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 5 (1973), p. 345.

² *Ibid.*, p. 351.

³ Gottlob Schrenk, "Biblion," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, p. 620.

