

Did God Leave Out Some People's Names from His Book? An Analysis of the Book of Revelation

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'All who dwell on the earth will worship him [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written *from the foundation of the world* in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.' (Revelation 13:8, New American Standard Bible)

'The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth, whose name has not been written in the book of life *from the foundation of the world*, will wonder when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come.' (Revelation 17:8, New American Standard Bible)

Introduction

Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 are unique in Scripture for using this kind of language. John Piper, an advocate of Calvinist double predestination, says of this:

'Before the world was created there was a book called *the book of life of the Lamb that was slain*. The Lamb is Jesus Christ crucified. The book is the book of Jesus Christ crucified. Therefore, before God made the world he had in view Jesus Christ slain, and he had in view a people purchased by his blood written in the book. Therefore, the suffering of Jesus was not an afterthought, as though the work of creation did not go the way God planned. Before the foundation of the world God had a book called *the book of life of the Lamb that was slain*. The slaying of the Lamb was in view *before* the work of creation began.'¹

This means, by extension, that God planned the fall because it was absolutely necessary for Him to accomplish His purpose of saving sinners through Jesus Christ. In Piper's view, God engineered Eden such that Adam and Eve would necessarily commit the original sin. Piper assumes God possesses a book, figuratively or literally, and that He alone writes some names and not others in 'the book of life.' The book is thus shorthand for God's inscrutable will: Only some people will be saved to eternal bliss; the rest are damned forever. This is what is called the doctrine of double predestination. Some are predestined to salvation; others are predestined to hell. However, Piper's rendering is highly questionable. Each of these phrases must be examined carefully.

The Book of Life

What is the 'book of life'? What is its function? Is it shorthand for God's predestining of specific people? Here is the usage of this motif in the book of Revelation.

- ^{3:5} He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the **book of life**, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
- ^{13:8} All who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the **book of life** of the Lamb who has been slain. ⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear.
- ^{17:8} The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth, whose name has not been written in the **book of life** from the foundation of the world, will wonder when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come.
- ^{20:12} And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the **book of life**; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the **book of life**, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

¹ John Piper, 'Suffering and the Sovereignty of God', edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, p.82 – 83.

- ^{21:24} The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; ²⁶ and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; ²⁷ and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's **book of life**.

The idea that God writes some people's names but not others in a book has to be considered very carefully. Sources from outside the Bible should be considered, as should sources within the Bible. William Barclay notes, 'In the ancient world rulers kept registers of those who were citizens of their realms. So long as a man was alive, and so long as he was a good citizen, his name remained on that register; when he died, or, when he lost his rights as a citizen, his name was removed. The Book of Life is the register of the names of those who belong to God.'² This practice was known to biblical writers: Nehemiah used the ancient practice of keeping genealogical records (Neh.7:5, 64; 12:22 – 23) and Jeremiah and Ezekiel understood that citizens were registered for various purposes (Jer.22:30; Ezk.13:9). If the cultural context is what determines how this motif should be understood, this weighs against Piper's argument that God's book of life has a predetermined list of names. Ancient books and records merely reflected what happened to people; they did not predetermine people's fates.

Of course, once an idiom from the surrounding culture is drawn into the thought world of the Bible, the definition of that idiom might change under the theological impact of God's own use of these words and phrases. Hence, the 'book' or 'record' of names *might* mean a predetermined destiny when used to describe how God operates. However, according to Revelation 3:5, a name can apparently be erased from the book of life. 'He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the *book of life*, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.' If a person chooses to not 'overcome' (using the language of this verse) God will 'erase' his or her name from this book. This corresponds with the same idea in Exodus 32:31 – 35 and Psalm 69:18:

- ^{Ex.32:31} Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, 'Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. ³² But now, if You will, forgive their sin – and if not, please blot me out from Your *book* which You have written!' ³³ The LORD said to Moses, 'Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My *book*. ³⁴ But go now, lead the people where I told you. Behold, My angel shall go before you; nevertheless in the day when I punish, I will punish them for their sin.' ³⁵ Then the LORD smote the people, because of what they did with the calf which Aaron had made.
- ^{Ps.69:18} Oh draw near to my soul and redeem it; ransom me because of my enemies! ¹⁹ You know my reproach and my shame and my dishonor; all my adversaries are before You...²⁸ May they be blotted out of the *book of life* and may they not be recorded with the righteous.

F.F. Bruce believes that the early Old Testament idiom of the book of life refers to physical, immediate life in the present world. In other words, Bruce argues, in Exodus 32 and Psalm 69, the idea of blotting someone's name out of the book of life means 'let them die.' But in later Judaism and in the New Testament, Bruce suggests, this idiom came to be used of the life of the age to come.³ Hence Daniel 12:1 – 2 says, 'Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the *book*, will be rescued. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.' Jesus referred to names being recorded in heaven: 'Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that *your names are recorded in heaven*.' (Lk.10:20). Paul commended aid be given to 'these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the *book of life*.'

It seems to me that we can question how F.F. Bruce can be so sure that Exodus 32 and Psalm 69 refer to this present life only. Can they not refer simultaneously to both this life and the life of the world to come? But regardless of whether or not we can answer that question, we do find that Revelation 3:5 supports the general understanding that names can be erased from the book of life. Apparently the book of life began with more names than it will end with. This means that the ancient cultural element of such a book *reflecting* what happens to people rather than

² William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, volume 2, p.124.

³ F.F. Bruce, 'Book of Life', *New Bible Dictionary*, second edition, Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1982, p.146

predetermining what happens to them is *preserved* in God's usage of this idiom. I suspect that the proper way to think about this is as follows: God writes *everyone's* name in His book; only afterwards, based on their own choices, do their names get erased or blotted out.

Inevitably, one must also question what this 'book of life' signifies. The Revelation uses many figures of speech that are drawn from other biblical sources to indicate the supernatural life of God offered to human beings. There is a tree of life (Rev.2:7; 22:2, 14, 19), a crown of life (2:10), a book of life (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 21:27), water of life (7:17; 21:6; 22:1, 17), and breath of life (11:11). All these figures of speech have antecedents in the biblical story, yet we must still ask: Will there literally be a special tree, crowns, streams and rivers, and breath all imparting life from God in this way? Probably not. These are expressions designed to communicate perhaps one or two ideas about how God supplies His people with life through Jesus, by the Spirit. If we insist that God keeps a literal book, then must we also insist that any and all things listed in Revelation are literal: a glassy sea, a sword coming out of Jesus' mouth, a woman riding a ten headed beast, inscriptions on foreheads, etc.? That would be a highly untenable position. Hence, many scholars suggest that the idea of a book is a *figurative* expression of theological realities, and I concur. The tree of life represents Jesus nourishing humanity. The crowns of life represent our status as co-heirs with Jesus and sharers in his glory. The streams, rivers, and waters of life all represent Jesus in his healing and cleansing power. The breath of life is Jesus sustaining us with his life. And the book of life indeed represents Jesus. The names written in this book of life are of those who are present in the new humanity of Jesus and partake of him.

I would explain it in the following way: We were always intended for Jesus. If the fall never happened, we would still be called by God into union with His Son; recall that the tree of life is (somehow) the Eternal Son of God present in creation and that we were meant to eat from him and of him. Since the fall happened, the Son of God by the Spirit took our common humanity to himself and became Jesus of Nazareth. By doing this, Jesus embraced each and every human being. Even though the fall did occur, all our names were still written in the book of life, as it were, because Jesus took on our humanity, healing and transforming that humanity, reconciling it to the radically loving nature of a God who is holy triune love, and offering it to all humanity. Only our rejection of Jesus results in our names being erased from the proverbial 'book of life' for we are attempting to place ourselves, not 'in Christ,' but outside of him.