

The Heavenly Books of Life and of Human Deeds

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The Bible mentions several heavenly books in which the experiences and acts of human beings are recorded. Here we will explore the significance of those records and their particular function. It will become clear that human practices of record keeping employed in Israel and in other ancient Near Eastern countries are being used in the Bible to illustrate heavenly practices or to communicate some specific information concerning them. At the same time it will also become clear that the purpose of the heavenly records far exceeds the social role of their earthly counterparts in Israelite society. The study of this subject raises interesting questions with respect to the biblical use of cultural practices to describe heavenly ones. These we should briefly address in this paper.

I. The Book of Life

I.A. Social Background of 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”¹ in the Old Testament could designate genealogical records usually kept by families and/or by the city (Ezra 2:62; Neh 7:64).² It appears that those who had no children were

¹ Two main Hebrew terms are used to refer to registers. One is *sēper*, which designates a written record (Deut 17:18), e.g. a letter (1 Kings 21:9) or a genealogical record (Neh 7:5; 12:23). The other is *k’tāb*, from a verbal root whose basic meaning is “incise, inscribe.” It designates a “writing” or “document” (Est 3:14; 8:13) or a “register” (Ezek 13:9; Neh 7:64; Ezra 2:62).

² There is another type of register in Israel, a type of census taken for two main purposes: namely, to levy taxes and for military purposes (e.g. 2 Sam 24:1–9). This list of names does not seem to be significant in defining the background for the study of the heavenly books (Leo Koep, *Das himmlische Buch in Antike und Christentum* [Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1952], 38).

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identified in the city's register as "childless" (Jer 22:30).³ Genealogies were important to determine legal rights and social and 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 have no place in the council of My people, nor will they be written down in the register of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel" (Ezek 13:9). 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 Gen 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.⁴ 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.⁵

Isaiah gives to the practice of keeping records of the inhabitants of a city an eschatological 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 for life in Jerusalem" (Isa 4:3). According to him there is an eschatological register containing the names of those who will be citizens of the renewed Jerusalem.⁶ 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

³ See, H. Haag, "כְּתָבִים *kāṭab*," *TDOT*, 7:376–377. For other suggestions on the meaning of the verse consult, Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1–25* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 322.

⁴ Leo Koep considers the "book of the generations of Adam" to provide the "Ansatzpunkte"—"starting point"—for the origin of the metaphor of the book of life (*Das himmlische*, 38–39). But he also considers the list of citizens to be significant in the search for the backgrounds of the concept of the heavenly book of life (pp. 31–35).

⁵ Richard S. Hess refers to Enoch as "the first biblical character to forgo death" ("Enoch," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:508). Nahum Sarna disagrees. He has argued that the phrase "then he was no more" describes how Enoch died, i.e., a sudden or unexpected death, and that the other phrase, "for God took him," is "a euphemism for death" (e.g. Ezek 24:16, 18) designating here a premature death (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* [Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 43). It is true that the phrase "he was not" is sometimes used to refer to death (e.g., Ps 39:14). But in Gen 5 "it stands in contrast to the usual phrase 'then he died,' which shows that Enoch did not experience a normal death. This is confirmed by the final remark, 'because God took him,' a phrase used of Elijah's translation to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kgs 2:1, 5, 9, 10)" (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* [Waco, TX: Word, 1987], 128). It has been suggested that the absolute usage of the verb "to take" (Heb. *laqah*) in Gen 5:24 and 2 Kgs 2:3, 5, should be interpreted "in the sense of 'to rapture'" (H. H. Schmid, "לָקַח *lqh* to take," *TLOT*, 2:651).

⁶ Isaiah 3:4 is related to judgment in a form similar to that in Dan 12:1. Only those whose names are recorded in the book of life will be preserved after the judgment. The emphasis is juridical and not predestinarian; see Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 86–87.

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with their being part of it. The birth-lists found in the OT in the form of genealogies seem to provide a proper background for the interpretation of the book of life.⁷

I.B. 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” (Exod 32:32), the “book of life” (Ps 69:28; 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-nam-ti-la*). 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)!”⁸ The few Sumerian texts where the “tablet of life” is mentioned do not provide enough information to determine its nature and function. After reading them I concur with those who have argued that the “tablet of life” in those texts is “a tablet where the deeds of an individual are recorded”⁹ or a tablet of destiny, and therefore do not provide a good parallel for the book of life in the OT. There is also an Akkadian text from the time of Esarhaddon (680-669 BC), 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.”¹⁰ 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 for ever 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.

I.B.1. Recording Names in the Book of Life

Based on the Old Testament background discussed above, we should readily acknowledge that the heavenly book of life contains a particular list of names. The question is, whose names are recorded there? Psalm 69:28 states, “May they [my enemies] be blotted out of the book of life and may they not be recorded with the righteous.” Since in this Psalm the enemies of the psalmist

⁷ L. Kaiser, “Book of Life,” *ISBE* (1939), 1:503; L. Keop, “Buck IV (himmlisch),” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. Theodor Klauser (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1954), 2:col. 727; W. Hermann, “Das Buch des Lebens,” *Altertum* 20 (1974): 7–8.

⁸ Shalmon M. Paul, “Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 5 (1973): 345.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 345 n. 2, where Shalmon M. Paul quotes W. Heimpel.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 351.

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appear to be Israelites,¹¹ 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.¹² Particularly important is Ps 87:6, where God is described as registering in the book the names of people who serve Him in non-Israelite lands: “The Lord will count when He registers the peoples, ‘This one was born there.’” This appears to be a register of foreigners who worship the Lord and includes the place where the 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.¹³

The New Testament indicates that the book of life contains only the names of those who are citizens of the New Jerusalem.¹⁴ Hebrews identifies those whose names are written in heaven as “the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb 12:23). John writes, “Nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it [the city], but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev 21:27; cf. 13:8). More explicit is Rev 17:8, where a follower of the beast is defined as one “whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.” On the other hand, Jesus encouraged his disciples to rejoice because their “names are recorded in heaven” (Luke 10:20), and Paul refers to his fellow workers as those “whose names are in the book of life” (Phil 4:3). We could conclude that only the names of the righteous are inscribed in the book of life.¹⁵

¹¹ See, James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 231.

¹² Hans-Joachim Krauss, *Psalms 60–151: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 188. The phrase “book of life/of the living” (*sēper hayyīm*) is used in the OT only in Ps 69:28. Some have suggested that the Hebrew phrase should be rendered “book of the living” and not “book of life.” That is linguistically possible, but the parallel expression in Isa 4:3—“written for life in Jerusalem”—supports the translation “book of life” (cf. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 169).

¹³ Arthur Weiser writes that in Ps 87:6, “the particular nations and human beings who worship Yahweh are recorded in the celestial book like a roll of citizens, classifying them according to their native country. God counts those who profess him. It is an imposing number of people from all over the world. Those who were once the enemies of Israel and so also of Yahweh now belong among his worshippers!” (*Psalms: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962], 582). One cannot totally exclude the possibility that the persons mentioned in the Psalm whose names are inscribed in heaven are the names of Israelites born in exile, in a foreign land (Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 187–188). Mays writes, “Exiles from Judah and the Jews among the dispersion could know that by the grace of God they were ‘born there.’ The psalm can be read as a dramatic portrayal of the Old Testament hope that all nations would be drawn to the kingship of the Lord (e.g., Isa. 2:2–4; 45:22; Zech. 2:10–11; Pss. 22:27; 48:8–9)” (*Psalms*, 281–282).

¹⁴ Leo Koep writes, “We understand the expression Book of Life, especially if we equate it with the expression Book of the Living, as a proper designation for the heavenly register of citizens in which the names of the citizens of the kingdom of God are written” (*Das himmlische Buch*, 36).

¹⁵ Based on Exod 32:32, some scholars have suggested that the book of life contains the names of all living on the earth, and that only those who sin are blotted out of it (J. Kühlwein, “סֵפֶר *sēfer* book,” *TLOT*, 2:813; H. Haag, “כְּתָב *kātab*,” *TDOT*, 7:380). Such an idea is not explicitly stated in the text or required by the context. What is certain is that Moses’ name is written in that book and

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Scripture does not describe the process by which names are recorded in the heavenly book of life. Some have found Rev 17:8 useful when dealing with this particular concern. As mentioned above, there a follower of the beast is defined as one “whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.” 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.¹⁶ 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 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.¹⁷ In fact, “the divine foreordination is thus linked with the human readiness to carry the conflict to victory.”¹⁸

I.B.2. 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” (Exod 32:32). 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.¹⁹ God’s answer came back: “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book ” (32:33). Only on account of rebellious sin would a name be removed from that divine register. The psalmist prayed with respect to the enemies, “May they be blotted out of the book of life

that only the names of sinners will be blotted out of it. The text implies that the names of the Israelites are written on that book because Moses, as I will suggest below, seems to be asking that his name be blotted out in order to preserve the names of the Israelites in it. As we have seen, other passages from the Bible indicate that only the names of the righteous have been written in the book of life.

¹⁶ Gottlob Schrenk, “*Biblion*,” in *TDNT*, 1:620, comments, “In the NT the image is freed from fatalism and becomes an expression of the assurance of salvation of the Christian community, which knows that it is elected on the impregnable basis of the divine counsel of grace (2 Tim. 2:19).”

¹⁷ H. Balz, “*Biblion* scroll; writing; document,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:218, writes, “According to Rev 3:5, the baptized are also threatened with the danger of being blotted out of the book . . . if they do not remain loyal and conquer in the battle of the end time. Also in other places the idea is not predestinarian; believers show by their own lives that they are in the Book of Life.”

¹⁸ Schrenk, “*Biblion*,” 1:620.

¹⁹ Moses was attempting to atone for the sin of the people with his own life; see John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 432; Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 290.

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and may they not be recorded with the righteous” (Ps 69:28). 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.

I.B.3. 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: “Everyone who is found in the book, will be rescued,” and will enjoy “everlasting life,” but the others will experience disgrace and “eternal contempt” (12:1, 2). Notice that in Dan 7 the reference is to “books,” in the plural, but in Dan 12 we have the singular, “the book.”²⁰ 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 (Exod 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.²¹

John states that “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” (Rev 3:5). 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 in the book of life” (20:15), they are not recognized as citizens of the kingdom of God.

If the reason for removing a name from the book of life is sin, then natural human sinfulness would make it simply impossible to retain any name on that book (Rom 3:22). 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 (Exod 32:31). 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

²⁰ John J. Collins writes, “The book in question is undoubtedly the book of life, as distinct from, though related to, the ‘books’ of judgment in Dan 7:10 and the ‘book of truth’ of 10:21” (*A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 391).

²¹ F. L. Hossfeld and E. Reuter have suggested that Exod 32:32 “associates it [the book] with the theme of the relationship between the righteous and the unrighteous at God’s judgment” (“סֵפֶר,” *TDOT*, 10:339, 340).

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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.²² They will be acknowledged as loyal citizens of the kingdom of God.

I.B.4. The Nature of “Life” in the Book of Life

The nature of the “life” mentioned in the name of the book of *life* is 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 persons²³ or only that of the righteous.²⁴ Removing the name of a person from that register would then mean that the person’s life will be shortened.²⁵ This interpretation is possible but very

²² C. Becker, “Biblion, Book,” in *NIDONTT*, 1:244.

²³ F. F. Bruce, “Book of Life,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd edition, ed. J. D. Douglas, F. F. Bruce, N. Hilyer, D. Guthrie, R. Miller, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), p.146; J. Kühlewein, “סֵפֶר סְפָרִים *sēfer* book,” *TLOT*, 2:813.

²⁴ E.g. Schrenk, “Biblion,” *TDNT*, 1:619.

²⁵ See Edgar W. Smith, Jr., “Book of Life,” *ISBE*, 1:534, who writes, “To be blotted out of this book means an (untimely) end of life.” Hans Wildberger comments, “Those who are written into the book are not simply the living, but rather those designated to live a full life” (*Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 169). This position is partially based on the idea that supposedly the Old Testament has little to say about eternal life. But the fact is that the idea of eternal life is known in the Old Testament; cf. Helmer Ringgren, “חַיָּה *chāyāh*,” *TDOT*, 4:340; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 101–150* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), XLI–LII; Valentino Cottini, *La vita futura nel libro dei Proverbi: contributo alla storia dell’esegesi* (Jerusalem: Franciscan, 1984), 363–389; and Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 258–269, 283–346. Traditionally scholars have argued that it was after the exile that the Jews accepted the Persian ideas of resurrection and judgment after death. Others have sought the origin of the Israelite idea of the resurrection in the Canaanite myth of the death and return to life of Baal. A third group has suggested an inner-biblical origin based on the biblical conviction that God is the Creator and that as such He also have the power to recreate, to bring back to life (for a brief summary of these views see P. S. Johnston, “Death and Resurrection,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000], 446; Johnston himself argues for a sociological explanation: “It was the threat and then the reality of exile which led to the prophetic development of the motif, perhaps one already known from Canaanite religion(s). But the development was a distinctly Israelite one – not of a dying and rising deity, but initially of a moribund and revived nation, and then of dead and resurrected individuals”). B. C. Ollenburger, “The Old Testament and Resurrection,” *Ex Auditu* 9 (1993): 29–24, has argued for the inner-biblical development. Concerning the influence of Persian ideas on the biblical concept of the afterlife, Edwin Yamauchi, “Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East,” *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

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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?²⁶ What would be the significance of that request? As we have 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 Ps 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 Ps 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.²⁷

It is important to observe that “the book of the generations of Adam” (Gen 5:1) 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;

1998), writes, “There are also fundamental differences in how the Jews and the Persians conceived of the resurrection. The Jewish dead, who are buried, rise from the dust of the earth, whereas the Persian dead, who are exposed, must be recreated from the elements. Furthermore, in Zoroastrianism the resurrection is linked with the Fiery Ordeal and the Renewal, whereas in Judaism resurrection hope means life beyond the grave with Yahweh. The case for reliance of Judaism on Zoroastrianism, therefore, is highly speculative at best . . . It is, therefore, best to hold that belief in a resurrection was an inner-Jewish development and to abandon the appeal to a retrojection from very late Persian sources” (48–49). For a similar view, see Richard Bauckham, “Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Second Temple Judaism,” *Life in the Face of Death*, 80–86.

²⁶ This is suggested by Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 210.

²⁷ Mitchell Dahood finds in the expression “book of life” (Ps 69:28) a reference to eternal life. In fact he renders the Hebrew as “the scroll of life eternal” and adds, “Since the context is eschatological, *ḥayyim* here . . . refers to everlasting life” (*Psalms II: 51–100* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1968], 164). See also Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907), 2:120, which states that the book of life in Ps 69:28 designates “the book recording the names of those who share in everlasting life, cf. Ex. 32^{32,33} Dn. 12¹ also Hb. 2⁴.” Marvin E. Tate tries to combine two different positions when he writes, “The reference is primarily to ordinary earthly human existence, but an eschatological dimension in the sense of eternal life should not be excluded entirely” (*Psalms 51–100* [Dallas: Word, 1990], 200). He does not explain how the two views are valid at the same time.

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a life beyond the grasp of death.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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 there was in the Israelite faith an expectation of a life that will overcome death and be enjoyed in the company of God and the righteous.

I.C. Significance of the Book of Life

The biblical information concerning the book of life leads us 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 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. Something 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 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

²⁸ Koep is right when he argues that the book of Adam contained the name of the living and the dead, but the book of life contains the name of those who will not die, who belong among the living ones in the kingdom of God, enjoying eternal life (38–40). See also Pronk, *Afterlife*, 267–268.

²⁹ John J. Collins, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 391, comments, "The 'book' inevitably recalls the books of judgment that are opened in Dan 7:10, and the fact that the account of the resurrection follows immediately suggests that it is the book of eternal life."

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counsel. What this means is that writing the names of believers in the book of life was not a divine after-thought 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.³⁰

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.

II. Book of Good and Bad Deeds

Besides the book of life, there are biblical references to other heavenly "books" in which are recorded the deeds of human beings. Daniel mentions "books" that are opened during the eschatological judgment (7:10), and Revelation refers to these same "books" (20:12). There is little in Scripture about the nature of these books, but what is available will be useful in an attempt to explore their significance and function.

II.A. Social Background of the Books of Deeds

Probably the best parallel for the heavenly books of good and bad deeds is found in the ancient practice of keeping a record of the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah. For instance, there was a book called the "Book of the Deeds of Solomon" (1 Kings 11:41), containing "the acts of Solomon and whatever he did, and his wisdom." This book may have been used by the composer of the biblical book of Kings to gather information about the king. There are also references to the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel" (1 Kgs 14:19; 15:31; 16:5, 14, 20, 27; 22:39; 2 Kgs 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 15, 21, 26, 31), and the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah" (e.g. 1 Kgs 14:29; 15:7, 23; 22:46; 2 Kgs 12:22; 14:18; 15:6, 36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5).³¹ These books contained information similar to what we find in the

³⁰ 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.

³¹ The name has been translated from the Hebrew as "Book of the Words of the Days of the Kings of Israel/Judah," but the Hebrew term *dābār* means not only "word" but "affair" or "thing," and in the context of the name of those books it expresses the idea of "events [of the days]," that is to say, "[current/daily] events." A book of daily events is tantamount to "Book of the Chronicles of . . .

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biblical book of Kings. They probably were a record of the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah, or the royal annals.³² In the biblical books of Chronicles several books of the deeds of the kings of Judah are mentioned, but the most common one is the “Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel” (e.g., 2 Chr 25:26; 28:26).³³ Those royal annals contained the good and bad deeds of the kings of Israel and Judah.

The practice of preserving the activities of the kings in chronological records was very common throughout the ancient Near East.³⁴ In Ezra there is a reference to “the record books” of the fathers of Artaxerxes (4:15), and in Esther “the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia” is mentioned (10:2; cf. 2:23). That book appears to have contained information concerning the activities of individuals who had come into contact with the king (Esther 6:1).

II.B The Heavenly Books of Deeds

The belief in heavenly records of human deeds was widely spread throughout the ancient Near East.³⁵ We have already mentioned several texts where that belief was expressed. Other ancient texts mention “the tablets of his misdeeds, errors, crimes, oaths” and also “the tablets of his good deeds.”³⁶ These references are not common, making it difficult for us to know the exact nature of those books in the ancient world and their purpose.

II.B.1. Content of the Books

In Scripture the heavenly books of human deeds are simply designated “books” (Dan 7:10; Rev 20:12) or “book” (Ps 56:8). There is only one passage where we find what appears to be a specific name for it, “the Book of Remem-

.” Cf. W. H. Schmidt, “דָּבָר: *dābhar*,” *TDOT*, 3:105. Several different suggestions have been offered regarding the content of that book; see Duane L. Christensen, “Chronicles of the Kings (Israel/Judah), Book of the,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:992.

³² Hossfeld and Reuter, “סֵפֶר: *sēper*,” *TDOT*, 10:331.

³³ Some times the name of the two kingdoms are inverted and instead of “Judah and Israel” we find “Israel and Judah” (2 Chr 27:7; 35:27; 36:8); in one case it simply reads, “Deeds/Acts of the Kings of Israel” (2 Chr 33:18). Several other books used by the biblical writer are “the Chronicles of Samuel,” “the Chronicles of Nathan,” “the Chronicles of Gad” (1 Chr 29:29), “the Prophecy of Ahijah,” “the Visions of Iddo” (2 Chr 9:29), “the Records of Shemaiah” (12:15), “the Midrash [Treatise] of the Prophet Iddo” (13:22), “the Annals of Jehu the Son of Hanani” (20:34), “the Vision of the Prophet Isaiah” (32:32; cf. 26:22), and “the Records of the Hozai [Seers]” (33:19). These books contained information concerning the performance of the kings. Some of them may have been official royal annals.

³⁴ See, for instance, John A. Wilson, “Egyptian Historical Texts: The Asiatic Campaigns of Thut-mose III,” *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, edited by James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969), 234–241; A. Leo Oppenheim, “Babylonian and Assyrian Historical Texts: Text From Hammurabi to the Downfall of the Assyrian Empire,” *ibid.*, 269–301; and Albrecht Goetze, “Hittite Historical Texts,” *ibid.*, 318–319.

³⁵ Koepf, 14–18; Paul, 346.

³⁶ Paul, 346.

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brance” (Mal 3:16).³⁷ In some cases there is some information with respect to what is written in the books. For instance, they contain the painful experiences of God’s servants (Ps 56:8), the acts of love performed on behalf of others (Neh 13:14), the conversations of those who fear the Lord (Mal 3:16), and the evil acts of the wicked (Isa 65:6). It is difficult to establish whether there are two different records, one for evil deeds and another for good deeds, or one record of all human deeds. The plural “books” suggests the possibility of at least two books, or several volumes. The fact that the Book of Remembrance “contains the names and an ongoing account of the words and deeds of the God fearers”³⁸ suggests that only good deeds are recorded there. Jewish traditions distinguish between a book recording the deeds of the righteous and a second one recording the deeds of the wicked.³⁹ A similar distinction is made by E. G. White.⁴⁰

II.B.2. Function of the Books

The primary function of those records is judiciary.⁴¹ That is to say they preserve evidence that will be used in the divine tribunal to determine the nature of the commitment of the individual to the Lord. This is not clearly present in all the passages dealing with the books of human deeds, but it is clear enough in most of the passages to allow us to assign to it a central importance. Besides, the book of deeds of the kings of Israel and Judah were unambiguously used by the biblical writers to judge the commitment or lack of commitment of the kings to the Lord.

³⁷ The Hebrew name of the book is *sēper zikkārôn*. A book with a similar name is mentioned in Esther 6:1, the “Book of Remembrances” (*sēper hazzikkrônôt*) further defined as “the Chronicles” of the Medo-Persian king. The activities of Mordecai on behalf of the king were recorded in it.

³⁸ Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 340.

³⁹ See David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1102. *Jubilees* 30:21–23 reads: “All of these words I have written for you, and I have commanded you to speak to the children of Israel that they might not commit sin or transgress the ordinances or break the covenant which was ordained for them so that they might do it and be written down as friends. But if they transgress and act in all the ways of defilement, they will be recorded in the heavenly tablets as enemies. And they will be blotted out of the book of life and written in the book of those who will be destroyed and with those who will be rooted out from the land. And on the day that the children of Jacob killed Shechem he wrote (on high) for them a book in heaven that they did righteousness and uprightness and vengeance against the sinners and it was written down for a blessing.” In the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* 9:21–23 the prophet describes his experience while in vision in the seventh heaven: “And I say to him [the angel] what I had asked him in the third heaven, [‘Show me how everything] which is done in that world is known here.’ And while I was still speaking to him, behold one of the angels who were standing by, more glorious than that angel who had brought me up from the world, showed me (some) books, but not like the books of this world; and he opened them and the books had writing in them, but not like the books of this world. And they were given to me, and I read them, and behold the deeds of the children of Israel were written there, their deeds which you know, my son Josab. And I said, ‘truly, nothing which is done in this world is hidden in the seventh heaven.’”

⁴⁰ *Great Controversy*, 481–484.

⁴¹ Koep, 28–29.

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Usually, when a king is introduced in the book of Kings, a judgment formula is employed, a verdict is stated with respect to his relationship with the Lord. The experience of king Abijam illustrates the point: “Abijam became king over Judah. . . . He walked in all the sins of his father . . . ; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, like the heart of his father David” (1 Kgs 15:3). In another case we read, “Jehoash became king He did right in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kgs 12:1-2). This judicial pronouncement was followed by an exposition of the evidence that supported it, taken from the chronicles of the kingdom, the record of the good and bad deeds performed by the king. Clearly, “the reign of each king is evaluated in terms of whether he *did what was right in the eyes of the Lord* (e.g., 1 Kgs 15:11) or whether *he did evil in the eyes of the Lord* (e.g., 2 Kgs 13:2).”⁴² This is judgment by works. The concluding formula, “the rest of the acts of . . . , are written in the Book of the Chronicles of Israel/Judah,” alerts the reader to the fact that more evidence is available, if needed, to support the judgment passed on the king. In other words, the biblical writer is arguing that there is enough objective evidence recorded in the books of the deeds of the king to demonstrate beyond any doubt that the verdict for or against the particular king is legally justifiable.⁴³ A similar phenomenon is to some extent found in 1 and 2 Chronicles.⁴⁴

The use of the heavenly records of human deeds in the divine judicial proceedings is already present in Isa 65:6—“Behold, it is written before Me, I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will even repay into their bosom.” There is some ambiguity concerning the meaning of the expression “it is written before Me.” It could refer to the record of the sins of the people or it could designate a written decree of judgment that is immutable.⁴⁵ The context suggests that the reference is to the heavenly record of the sins of the people which God, at the moment of making a legal decision, has in front of Him.⁴⁶ After examining it He determines not to keep silence, that is to say, not to appear to be indifferent, but to act against sin. Verse 7 indicates that what provokes this divine legal reaction

⁴² I. W. Proven, “Kings (1 and 2): Theology of,” *NIDOTTE*, 4:848 (italics in the original).

⁴³ The same procedure is applied to Jeroboam (1 Kgs 13:33; 14:19), Asa (15:3; 15:23), Nadab (15:26, 31), Baasha (15:34; 16:5), Elah (16:13, 14), Zimri (16:19, 20), Omri (16:25, 27), Ahab (16:30–34; 22:39), Jehoshaphat (22:43, 46), Ahaziah (22:52; 2 Kgs 1:18), Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 13:2, 8), Jehoash (13:11; 14:15), Amaziah (14:3, 18), Jeroboam (14:24, 28), Azariah (15:3, 6), Zechariah (15:9, 11), Menahem (15:18, 21), Pekahiah (15:24, 26), Gotham (15:34, 36), Ahaz (16:2, 19), Hezekiah (18:3; 20:20), Manasseh (21:2, 17), Josiah (22:2; 23:28), and Jehoiakim (23:37; 24:5). The book of Kings seems to be taking all the kings of Israel and Judah to the divine tribunal to evaluate them based on their acts in history.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, the experience of Amaziah (2 Chr 25:2, 26), Jotham (27:2, 7), Ahaz (28:2, 26), Hezekiah (29:2; 32:32), Josiah (34:2; 35:27).

⁴⁵ See John N. Oswald, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 640, who leans towards the second possibility but concludes that “in either case, the point is that judgment is sure and inescapable.”

⁴⁶ See Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:504; and R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 270.

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is the sin of God's people, implying that what is written before the Lord is exactly that sin.

The books of good and evil deeds are opened particularly during the eschatological judgment, before the kingdom of God is established on earth. The scene of judgment in Dan 7:9-10 describes the divine tribunal in session and the use of books during the proceedings. A similar scene is described in Rev 20:12, during the judgment of the wicked. It is explicitly stated that the final and immutable verdict is based on what has been written in the books. All are judged according to their deeds, as recorded in the heavenly books.

II.B.3. Blotting out Recorded Deeds from the Books

Nehemiah 13:14 suggests an intriguing idea with respect to the books of deeds. Nehemiah requests that his loyal deeds not be blotted out from the heavenly records. The possibility of deleting good deeds from those records suggests that evil deeds could be also blotted out from them. That idea is found in one ancient Near Eastern text, in a collection of Sumerian and Akkadian incantations. It reads, "May his sin be shed today, may it be wiped off him, averted from him. May the record of his misdeeds, his errors, his crimes, his oaths, (all) that is sworn, be thrown into the water."⁴⁷ In Scripture misdeeds are eliminated or blotted out from the heavenly registers not through incantations, but through repentance and divine grace (Ps 51:1; Isa 43:25; 44:22; Acts 3:19; cf. Ezek 18:21-22).⁴⁸ Sins that are not blotted out of the heavenly books are unforgiven sins (Ps 109:14).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Erica Reiner, *Šurpu: A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* (Graz: Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, 1958), 27.

⁴⁸ Koep has correctly argued that biblical passages where the blotting out of sins is mentioned presuppose the existence of heavenly records where evil deeds are inscribed (27–28). L. Alonso-Schökel, "מַחֵה *māḥâ*," *TDOT*, 8:229, also writes, with respect to the context in which the verb *māḥa* [to blot out] is used, "Although the verb *kātab* [to write] and the noun *sēper* [book] are not frequently mentioned in the same context, they are presupposed in many instances."

⁴⁹ L. Alonso-Schökel, 8:230. We should make a few comments here concerning Col 2:14, where the Greek verb *exaleiphō* ("wipe off, erase, cancel, remove") is used in connection with the term *cheirographon* ("handwritten document, certificate of debt"). The verb *exaleiph* is the one used in other places to refer to the blotting out of sins (Acts 3:19) and for the erasing of a name from the book of life (Rev 3:5). This has led some scholars to conclude that the reference is to the heavenly record of human sin which was blotted out, removed by Christ (e.g., James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 164–165). Support for this view is often found in documents of Jewish origin in which the term *cheirographon* is used to designate the document in which the good works of the righteous and the sins of all are recorded (see Eduard Lohse, "*Cheirographon*," *TDNT*, 9:435). In that case *cheirographon* simply designates a document or bill of indictment. If we accept that possibility, Paul would not be necessarily discussing the blotting out of sin from the heavenly records but explaining that "any kind of indictment against us on the basis of regulations is meaningless right from the start because of the cross of Christ" (Markus Barth and Helmut Blanket, *Colossians: New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1994], 372). But the noun *cheirographon* was used in common Greek literature as a technical term to designate "a receipt signed by a

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Perhaps Nehemiah's statement implies that during the final judgment, the few good deeds performed by the wicked, or by those who turned from righteousness to wickedness, will not make any difference with respect to their final destiny. Their evil deeds will reveal that they did not remain in a permanent covenant relationship with the Lord. The idea is well expressed in the book of Ezekiel: "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for he will die" (18:24). Instead of the verb "blot out," we have here the verb "remember," preceded by a negation ("will not be remembered"). Not to remember deeds is the equivalent of blotting them out from the heavenly books. This is explicitly stated in Isa 43:23: "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (cf. Neh 13:14; Ps 109:14).⁵⁰ Guilt or virtue can under certain circumstances be removed from the divine registers.⁵¹

II.C. Significance of the Books of Human Deeds

An omniscient God does not need to keep records of the life of human beings, but they could be very useful to all intelligent creatures, including human beings. Heavenly creatures seem to be involved in the procedures of the final judgment (Dan 7:10; cf. 1 Cor 6:2; Rev 20:4). Since the Bible does not discuss the nature of those records, they remain shrouded in mystery. However, the significance of those records for us is important and very relevant.

First, those records indicate that God is interested in every one of us as individuals. In the Old Testament the books of chronicles were mainly a record of the activities of the kings and the impact of their actions on other persons. They were the most important leaders among the people of God, and their actions were preserved in the records for future generations. In the heavenly records no

debtor, who acknowledges that he owes a certain sum and undertakes to repay it" (Cestas Spicq, *TLNT*, 3:508). It could be translated "certificate of indebtedness" (N. Walter, "Cheirographon handwritten document," *EDNT*, 3:464). Outside the Jewish documents mentioned above, *cheirographon* does not refer to heavenly records, and that meaning is not required in Col 2:14. The image Paul is using is not the one of heavenly books in which sins are inscribed, but that of a debt that needs to be paid. "According to Paul, humans are in debt to God because of their sins (*ta paratōmata*) and are insolvent. Christ came to lift this mortgage, and through his blood he paid for them, annulling the debt" (Spicq, 509–510). The debt is probably the penalty for sin the Colossians acknowledged when they heard the gospel and which Christ paid or canceled for them on the cross (N. Walter, 3:464). Other suggestions have been offered, but it would be better not to press the metaphor of the *cheirographon* beyond what seems to be its intended purpose. Paul was using a metaphor taken from the world of business transactions to illustrate the significance of the work Christ has done for us.

⁵⁰ See W. Schottroff, *TLOT*, 1:383.

⁵¹ Alonso-Schökel, "מַחָה *māhâ*," *TDOT*, 8:229.

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distinction is made among human beings. We are all equally important before the Lord, and what we do, say, and experience is recorded there. Each one of us plays a significant role in the conflict between good and evil, and our actions reveal that particular function. We were not born to exist for a short period of time and then return to eternal oblivion without leaving traces of our presence on this planet. God created us and allowed us to become what we are through our experiences, decisions, and actions. The history of our lives is preserved by God in the heavenly records as a witness to the fact that He considers our presence here of significant value.

Second, the record is not only about our actions, but about God's involvement in the lives of humans. Humans may at times feel that they are facing life by themselves without the supporting and guiding presence of God. But the heavenly records will reveal that God was always present with them leading, guiding, and trying to influence their lives. The record of our lives is at the same time a record of the involvement of the King of the universe in every facet of our experiences in a world of sin. In other words, the books of human deeds are in fact the Books of the Chronicles of God in which are recorded His activities on behalf of every sinner on this rebellious planet. Every one of our actions are recorded there because He was always present in every one of them seeking us out, extending to us His loving hand of salvation. In the records are preserved God's providential care and guidance as we were confronted by challenges and choices that forced us to make decisions for or against Him.

Third, the fact that human deeds are recorded in heaven in some form implies that they are accessible to others for objective analysis. Those records play a valuable role during the final judgment in the heavenly realm in that they testify concerning God's impartial judgment. He has established that the faith-commitment of every individual to Him and to His Son is revealed through human actions, and that becomes a defining concept during the judgment. The examination of those records will once and for all unveil before God's intelligent creatures the justice of God's judicial decisions and will lead to the extermination of sin and sinners from God's creation. The examination of the books of deeds will close with a universal doxology in which God and the Lamb will be praised by all creation for their love and justice in all their actions (e.g., Rev 19:1-2).

Concluding Remarks

Our study of the heavenly books suggests that heavenly things, in this case the heavenly records, are being patterned after earthly practices. That is to say, the social practice of keeping records of people in the form of birth-lists, genealogies, and chronicles appear to be projected into the operations of the heavenly realm. The question is whether the earthly practices are being used in the Bible as metaphors to help us understand theological concepts and ideas but are not intended to describe similar procedures in heaven. It is difficult to provide an

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answer to that question. It is clear that the biblical writers were persuaded of the reality of the heavenly books. Hence, we must ask, should we feel free to dispose of their convictions in order to appropriate only abstract ideas from the language and images they used? That may not be necessarily wrong. However, the question we are raising probably would have never occurred to an Israelite. Hebrew thinking does not seem to allow for the argument that earthly patterns are simply being used to convey heavenly concepts for which there is not at some level a concrete correspondence in heaven itself. This does not necessarily mean that the heavenly things have to correspond in every respect to the earthly ones. The biblical writers are clearly using human language and images to allude to a heavenly reality that cannot be fully contained in the language or in the social practices they employed to communicate their message.

The phenomenon we are describing is very similar to the biblical tendency to pattern human things on earth after the heavenly ones. For instance, the earthly sanctuary was patterned after the divine (Exod 25:8). Evidently that should not be interpreted to mean that the earthly is an exact replica of the heavenly. The biblical writers were aware of the superiority of the heavenly temple vis-a-vis the earthly. Another example comes from the sphere of human behavior. In the Old Testament the religious and social behavior of the Israelites was to be patterned after the heavenly one. The Israelite society was expected to reflect the heavenly model: "Be holy, for I am Holy" (Lev 11:44; cf. 19:2; 20:7, 26). But the holiness of the people was a pallid reflection of the unique and magnificent holiness of God; in fact, it was a limited participation in the holiness of God. Therefore, one should not press the discontinuity between the earthly and the heavenly or the heavenly and the earthly to the point of denying the reality of the heavenly. The specific nature of the heavenly is not accessible to us, but inaccessibility should not be equated with nonexistence.

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