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THE HEAVENLY BOOK OF HUMAN DEEDS

**In a way, a list is being put together
in heaven of the times
when we've been “naughty or nice.”**

Besides the book of life, the Bible refers to other heavenly “books” in which are recorded the deeds of human beings. Daniel mentions books opened during the end-time judgment (7:10), and Revelation refers to them as well (20:12). Though Scripture offers little regarding the nature of these books, what is available suggests their significance and function.

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, a book called the “book of the acts of Solomon” (1 Kings 11:41), contained “the acts of Solomon, all that he did, and his wisdom” (NKJV). This book may have been used in the biblical Book of Kings to gather information about the king. There are also numerous references to the “book of

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the chronicles of the kings of Israel” (e.g., 1 Kings 14:19; 22:39; 2 Kings 1:18; 10:34, et al.), and the “book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah” (e.g., 1 Kings 14:19, 29; 15:7; 14:18). These books contained information similar to that found in the biblical books of Kings. They probably were a record of the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah, or the royal annals. The biblical books of Chronicles mention several books of the deeds of the kings of Judah, but the most common one is the “book of the kings of Judah and Israel” (e.g., 2 Chron. 25:26; 28:26). 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. The Book of Ezra refers to “book of the records” of the fathers of Artaxerxes (4:15, NKJV), and the Book of Esther alludes to “the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia” (10:2, NKJV). That book appears to have contained information concerning the activities of individuals who had come into contact with the king (6:1).

The Heavenly Books of Deeds

The belief in heavenly records of human deeds was common throughout the ancient Near East. Several texts already cited express this belief. Other ancient texts mention “the

tablets of his misdeeds, errors, crimes, oaths” and also “the tablets of his good deeds.”¹ It is difficult, however, for us to know the exact nature of the books in the ancient world and their purpose.

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). In only one passage there appears to be a specific name for it, “a book of remembrance” (Mal. 3:16, NKJV). Some cases provide 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”² 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. A similar distinction is made by Ellen G. White.³

Function of the Books

The primary function of those records is to preserve evidence that will be used in the divine tribunal to determine 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 suggest it was of 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.

Usually, when a king is introduced in the books of Kings, a judgment formula is employed, giving a verdict with respect to his relationship with the Lord. For example, Abijam “reigned three years in Jerusalem. . . . He walked in all the sins of his father, . . . [and] his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David” (1 Kings 15:2, 3, NKJV). In another case, “Jehoash became king, and . . . [he] did what was right in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 12:1, 2, NKJV). This judicial pronouncement was followed by supporting evidence 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 Kings 15:11) or whether he did evil in the eyes of the Lord (e.g., 2 Kings 13:2).⁴ 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 enough objective evidence is 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. A similar phenomenon is to some extent found in 1 and 2 Chronicles.

The use of the heavenly records of human deeds in the divine judicial proceedings is already present in Isaiah 65:6: “Behold, it is written before Me: I will not keep silence, but will repay—even repay into their bosom” (NKJV). 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. 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. After examining it, He determines not to keep silence, that is to say, not to appear to

Nehemiah 13:14 suggests an intriguing idea about 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. . . . In Scripture, misdeeds are eliminated or blotted out from the heavenly registers not through incantations, but through repentance and divine grace.

be indifferent, but to act against sin. Verse 7 indicates that what provokes this divine legal reaction 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 Daniel 7:9, 10 describes the divine tribunal in session and the use of books during the proceedings. Revelation 20:12 describes a similar scene, 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.

Blotting Out Recorded Deeds From the Books

Nehemiah 13:14 suggests an intriguing idea about 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. That idea is found in one ancient Near Eastern text: "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."⁵ 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). Sins that are not blotted out of the heavenly books are unforgiven sins (Ps. 109:14).

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

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. Since the Bible does not discuss the nature of those records, they remain shrouded in mystery. However, for us those records are highly significant.

did not remain in a permanent covenant relationship with the Lord. The idea is well expressed in the Book of Ezekiel: “When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done will not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die” (18:24, NKJV). 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 Isaiah 43:23: “I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins” (NKJV). Guilt or virtue can under certain circumstances be removed from the divine registers.

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. Since the Bible does not discuss the nature of those records, they remain shrouded in mystery. However, for us those records are highly significant.

First, they indicate that God is interested in every one of us as an individual. 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 distinction is made among human beings. We are all equally important

before the Lord; what we do, say, and experience is recorded there. Each 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 is 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).

A consideration 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 appears 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 answer to this question.

It is clear that the biblical writers were persuaded of the reality of the heavenly books. Hence, should we feel free to dispose of their convictions in order to appropriate only abstract ideas from the language and images they used? This may not be necessarily wrong. However, this question would have never occurred to an Israelite. Hebrew thinking does not seem to allow for the argument that earthly patterns are being used simply 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 described here is similar to the biblical tendency to pattern human things on Earth after heavenly ones. For instance, the earthly sanctuary was patterned after the heavenly. 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 in contrast to 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. Israelite society was expected to reflect the heavenly model: “Be holy; for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44, NKJV). 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.

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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