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“The Book of Life”

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With

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The Book of Life

There are over a dozen references in the Old and New Testaments to “books” in heaven. The idea of such books extends back to Sumer and Mesopotamian (“tablets of destinies”). In this episode, we trace the lineage of the idea through ancient Near Eastern examples, the Old Testament, 2nd temple Jewish texts, and the New Testament. Are these records “real time” record keeping? Proof of predestination?

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 89, The Book of Life. I'm your layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing this week?

MSH: Very good, good to hear your voice again.

TS: Welcome back from Colorado. How was that?

MSH: It went well. We had estimates 50-70 people over the course of two nights, nice crowd. People asked good questions. They're real attentive, met lots of nice people so it was fun.

TS: Sounds good, so this week we're going to be talking about some heavenly books.

MSH: Yeah, we're continuing sort of if you can call a string of unrelated topics a series, this would be the latest installment of our topical items. And this one comes from a number of passages actually that actually make reference to things being written in heaven or heavenly books and, specifically, the book of life. So what I want to do is I want to at least read these passages and talk about where this idea comes from and sort of how to think about it, how to parse it, how an ancient person would've perceived this sort of language and what it all meant or at least could have meant. There's more than one option here because the language is actually used in different contexts as we'll find. But just to give people an idea of what it is we're talking about, in Luke 10:20 for example, we read this. Jesus says,

²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

MSH: So there we get this writing language that somewhere there's some record in heaven of their names. You get the same idea in Philippians 4:3 where Paul writes,

³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

MSH: A clear reference there, a number of these are in the book of Revelation, Revelation 3:5 says,

⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

MSH: Revelation 13:8 and Revelation 17:8 are kind of close in what they say, close conceptually, but 13:8 says,

⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

MSH: And then in Revelation 17:8 says,

⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

MSH: A few more these, Revelation 20:12 says,

¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

MSH: Later on in that same passage, in verse 15, it's says,

¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

MSH: And lastly Revelation 21:27 says,

²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

MSH: So this final vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, we have another reference to the book of life. Now there are more than these. They're actually a number of these kinds of things in the Old Testament, and we're going to be getting to them, but what I want to do is sort of start with the Ancient Near East and work our way into the Old Testament and then a little bit into the Second Temple Period then we'll come back to this point in the New Testament and talk about this sort of language, conceptually how all this would've been parsed, what it means for our interpretation. So to start off in the Ancient Near East, this idea actually does have a very ancient precedent.

There are a couple of scholars who made studies of this. One such article just to pick one at random here, Shalom Paul wrote a book in the Columbia University Ancient Near Eastern Society Journal called the Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life. And what Paul's article talks about are Sumerian and Mesopotamian parallels or I should say precursors to what we'll see in the Old Testament and what you see later on. So in the Ancient Near East in the Sumerian Mesopotamian material, their notion of this was that the gods were considered the determiners of peoples' destinies. That's not really a foreign idea, not something that would be unexpected, but the gods would write their decisions for someone's destiny on what the cuneiform material refers to as "tablets of destiny". So the idea here is not so much, at least in most of the references, not so much a pre-destined life in terms of the specifics. You'll get up. You'll eat breakfast.

You'll turn left and turn right and go to work and this and that'll happen. Rather the idea is how long a person's going to live, the length of their life, when it will end. So the tablets of destiny idea in the Ancient Near East is really focused on that kind of thing, length of life, how long you'll live, so on so forth. It gets a little more granular because there's also a record of what you do, good and evil, good or evil, so there are tablets that record misdeeds, errors, crimes, oaths that you break, and also good things that you do. So the gods are recording what happens during your life. But there's also this idea that the gods have sort of determined how long you're going to live. If we could think about it, we have this notion now. There's nothing theologically aberrant about it. We say God knows how long I'm going to live. God knows when it's my time. God knows when my time is going to be. Well, of course he does, so that idea is not unfamiliar. But the notion that that is sort of recorded or written down somewhere is very, very ancient, even prior to what we think of, what we have as our Old Testament.

The issue that isn't so clear is while the gods know how long you're going to live and they record, notice I'm using these terms deliberately, they know how long you're going to live, when you're going to die, and they record what you're doing. How do those things accord or not with the notion of predestination? Honestly, that is not so clear, even in the Ancient Near Eastern material. There's another thing to say here that in the Ancient Near East, this idea, at least in terms of anything that's really specific, is sort of focused on kings. This isn't surprising because most of the Samarian Mesopotamian literature that was written that has survived is about the gods and about the people that the gods install as kings because the kings are the ones that pay the scribes and the scribes, royalty is the patron of the scribe, the scribal trade. You don't get scribes running around Mesopotamia recording everybody's life or tablets of destiny stories about them, but it's really focused on the destiny of the king and what the king does or not, which in Mesopotamian thinking is going to determine whether the gods are happy or not, whether that king's dynasty is going to survive and bad things happen to the kingdom and so on so forth.

So a lot of the material that you get from the Ancient Near East is focused on the royal figure. I want to read an excerpt is that as an example. This is from Andrew George's article. Andrew George might be familiar to some listeners. This is the guy who produced the latest critical edition of the Gilgamesh tablets. You can buy his translation in the Penguin Classics series, his English translation of Gilgamesh. But George in an article in the Iraq Journal entitled 'Sennacherib and the Tablet of Destinies' writes about a particular text labeled K. 6177 and K. 8869. Those are the tablet numbers, and he writes this,

"The Tablet of Destinies, the bond of supreme power, dominion over the gods of heaven and underworld, and kingship of the Igigi and Anunnaki, the secret of the heavens and the netherworld, (5) the link of the Canopy of Anu and Gansir, the leash of the [multitudes(?),] which Assur, king of the gods, took in his hand and held [at his breast]-a representation of his form, the replica of his proper appearance, [(is depicted)] on it: he grasps [in his] hand the leashes of the great heavens, the bond of the [Igigi] and Anunnaki. (10) [In] front of the representation of Assur, his lord, he (Sennacherib) stood a representation of Sennacherib, king of the entire world, king of [Assyria,] who fashioned the images of Assur,

Anu, Sin, Samas, Adad, Beletili and !Star of the Bit Kitmuri temple, the shepherd who makes humble obeisance, the agent of Assur, his lord. (15) [O Assur, father(?)] of heaven, king of the gods, determiner of destinies, you alone hold in your hands the Tablet of Destinies of the gods: look after the reign of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, and determine(?) as my destiny a fine destiny, a destiny of good health(?) (and) kingship! Exalt my head among all who reign, and (20) let the base of my throne be secure as a mountain for long days to come! For me, your provisioner, from east to west subject [all the foreign lands(?)] to my yoke! Let the human race beseech [you that my sons,] my grandsons, my dynasty (25) [and my descendants(?)] endure among humanity [for all] eternity!"

MSH: So Sennacherib is appealing in this text to this particular god, Assur in this case, asking the determiner of destinies to give him a good destiny. So there's a bit hear in this text in terms of the king of asking that something be done is this predestination or not. Well, sort of but if it was predestined, wouldn't it already exist? Here we have Sennacherib asking for a good destiny. You could also read it that he's asking for help and the gods are up there thinking well, okay, do we like this guy or not? In other words, it wouldn't be predestined if you look at it that way. And the reason I'm getting into the whole predestined or not is the idea behind these tablets or these books in heaven we're going to go into the Old Testament and on through, but it is the idea of a pre-destined account or a predestined fate. Is that what these tablets or books are about intrinsically or not? As we're going to see, the contexts vary just because these books exist and are referred to.

I'm not arguing that we get to heaven someday and we're taken to a big library and God pulls a book. Here's your record. This is a metaphor for the fact that God keeps track and God knows what our destiny is. God knows what we do. So the easiest way in an ancient culture, whether it's biblical or pre-biblical, is to convey that idea. The easiest way to do it is the scribal trade because that's what scribes did. So when we see these things mentioned in Scripture, the overarching point that the biblical writers want us, want's the readers to get is that there's nothing that you do good or bad that goes unnoticed by God. He is omniscient. He knows all things. He knows what you're doing, what you didn't do, what you should have done, all that sort of stuff. And he knows the extent of your life. In some cases it's clear that he knows your birth. He knows when you're going to die. Is that just knowledge that God has or does that knowledge require the idea of predestination?

Now for those who've read Unseen Realm, you know, I can't remember exactly what chapter it is, 5,6,7, something like that. I refer people to passages like 1 Samuel 23 where it's very clear that the fact that God foreknows something does not require that that thing was predestined for the simple fact that in that chapter, you have two things God foreknew that never happened. By definition, foreknowledge did not necessitate predestination. Now it can. There are passages like that obviously in the Bible as well but it's not a foregone conclusion and that same ambiguity is going to apply with respect to the idea of heavenly books. And actually it is present in even earlier material with heavenly tablets. So in some cases, there might be some predestination going on, in other cases there's not, and it's not parsed out for us. Now the

fundamental ideas here that enter into this are concepts of sovereignty, foreknowledge, omniscience, so on so forth. Now a lot of Christians who are listening to this, a lot of people who are listening are not Christians sort of have a preconceived idea or way that they think of sovereignty.

And what I've already said to this point might even be in conflict with that, and in fact, it probably is because we sort of assume that foreknowledge requires predestination but it doesn't. We want to be cautious and allow for sort of both directions as we proceed through the text that I'm going to bring up here. And as they play out, especially in the Second Temple Period, you're actually going to get the idea used in a variety of contexts and not all of them require predestination or even have predestination or anything like that in view. So let's just proceed here with some Old Testament passages. I think the variety here will become apparent. The concept is a lot wider than God predestinating something. So let's just start in Exodus 32:32. This is a passage that probably will occur to many people listening to this. We have Moses saying to God in response to God's anger against Israel,

³² But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”

MSH: There's this notion that Moses' name is in a book. It's not called the book of life here but we can sort presume that it is because in the context, it's a life or death issue, its annihilation versus not being annihilated by God in his anger. So Moses is sort of offering to trade places. Annihilate me. Get rid of me rather than this people. And we can go back to the passage and Moses has some other things to say about why, God, why you shouldn't do this, because what will the nations say and that sort of thing. But for our purses here, this is referenced to a book, this book that's written. We see it in Isaiah 4, we read,

³ And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem,

MSH: Now earlier in Isaiah, the book is going to be about the impending exiles, plural. So we have this notion of God knows who's going to be left alive in Jerusalem. So there's this book, there's a record of it. It's a metaphor for the fact that God knows this stuff. Isaiah 65:6-7,

Behold, it is written before me:

“I will not keep silent, but I will repay;

I will indeed repay into their lap

⁷ both your iniquities and your fathers' iniquities together,
says the LORD;

because they made offerings on the mountains
and insulted me on the hills,

MSH: So here we have a reference to a “book” or a person's sins being written down, the idea being that God knows what you did and you're going to be held accountable for it. Jeremiah 17:13 we have this,

O LORD, the hope of Israel,
all who forsake you shall be put to shame;
those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth,
for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.

MSH: What's odd about this is this phrase, written in the earth. There's a reference to writing those who turn away from you shall be written but in the Earth, what does that mean? Well, interestingly enough, this is another verse and if you've read Unseen Realm, you're going to be familiar with this idea that I'm going to talk about here. The word earth here is *erets*, which can also, it's one of the words used for the underworld, the realm of the dead. So if you look at it that way then the verse makes sense. Those who turn away from you shall be written in the bad place, in the underworld, the realm of the dead. It would be a reference to people being left in Sheol as opposed to the righteous whose hope was to be with the Lord. Those who turn away from the Lord, nope, they're going to go to the realm of the dead and that's where they're going to stay. So it's a negative thing but for our purposes here, it deals with this sort of written account. Psalm 69:28,

Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

MSH: So now we get a book called the book of the living, and let them not be enrolled among the righteous, So there's a record of the righteous versus the unrighteous. Daniel 7, this is going to be a familiar passage to a lot of listeners. This is Daniel's vision known mostly from the appearance of the Son of Man coming with the clouds and so on so forth. But the scene is a Divine Council meeting where the fate of the beasts that are described in Daniel 7 is going to be determined and pared out. But we read this in verse 10, describing God's throne,

A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.

MSH: God has this record. We get a similar idea in Daniel 10:21. This is the chapter with Michael and Prince of Persia, the Prince of Greece, Michael, the Archangel, the Prince of Israel. We read in verse 21,

²¹ But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince.

MSH: So we get this reference to a book, heavenly book. Daniel 12:1, another one,

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since

there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”

MSH: Malachi 3:16,

¹⁶ Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name.

MSH: Psalm 56:8,

You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book?

MSH: And lastly here for the Old Testament, Psalm 87:5-7,

And of Zion it shall be said,
“This one and that one were born in her”;
for the Most High himself will establish her.
⁶ The LORD records as he registers the peoples,
“This one was born there.” Selah

⁷ Singers and dancers alike say,
“All my springs are in you.”

MSH: So it's this reference to a record of who's going to be in Zion or who's associated with Zion and who's not. Now all of these references refer to some type of book, some type of record, things being written down. What I'm suggesting to you is that this is a very I think powerful metaphor for the idea that God does keep a record in his head or whatever because he's omniscient. He's not going to forget something but God knows our destiny. He knows the course of our life. He knows what we do, good and bad, all that sort of thing. This is not unfamiliar theology. In fact, it's very familiar but it's actually associated with this sort of record keeping idea. Now in the Second Temple Period, there are a number of references to the same idea of heavenly recordkeeping and whatnot, specifically in books like 1 Enoch and the Book of Jubilees, things like that. I'm just going to read a few references to this idea. In the Book of Jubilees 19:9, we read this.

“He did not say a word concerning the rumor which was in the land that the Lord said he would give to him [**MSH: talking about Abraham and Sarah**] and to his seed after him, but he begged a place there so that he might bury his dead because he was found faithful and he was recorded as a friend of the Lord in the heavenly tablets.”

MSH: If you remember this episode from the Old Testament, Abraham buys a field and cave from the Hittites there to bury his dead. It becomes the ancestral burial place. There's no reference to heavenly tablets in the Old Testament account. But here in the Book of Jubilees commenting on that episode we get this phrase, he was recorded as a friend of the Lord. Now, that comes out of the Old Testament, Abraham being the friend of God. But here we have he was recorded as a friend of the Lord in the heavenly tablets so you get a reference to this idea that there is this heavenly record so to speak. So Jubilees 30 we get another reference to this idea. Jubilees 30 we'll start around verse 19 or back to 18, this is about Levi by being chosen for the priesthood.

“The seed of Levi was chosen for the priesthood and Levitical orders to minister before the Lord always just as we do. And Levi and his sons will be blessed forever because he was zealous to do righteousness and judgment and vengeance against all who rose up against Israel. And thus a blessing and righteousness will be written on high as a testimony for him in the heavenly tablets before the God of all. And we will remember for 1000 generations the righteousness which a man did during his life in all of the appointed times of the year. And it will be written on high and it will come to him and his descendants after him and he will be written down as a friend and a righteous one in the heavenly tablets.”

MSH: Again, a very clear reference to the tablets idea. In 1 Enoch, let's just get one from Enoch here. In 1 Enoch 47, we'll just start at the beginning and read what it says there.

“In those days, the prayers of the righteous ascended into heaven and the blood of the righteous from the earth before the Lord of spirits. There shall be days when all the holy ones who dwell in the heavens above shall dwell together. And with one voice they shall supplicate and pray, glorifying, praising, and blessing the name of the Lord of the spirits on behalf of the blood of the righteous ones which has been shed. Their prayers shall not stop from exhaustion before the Lord of the spirits. Neither will they relax reverent until judgment is executed for them. In those days, I saw him, the antecedent of time, while he was sitting upon a throne of his glory and the books of the living ones were open before him and all his power in heaven above and his escorts stood before him. [**MSH: sounds very similar to Daniel 7**] The hearts of the holy ones are filled with joy because the number of the righteous has been offered.”

MSH: So a pretty clear reference to the heavenly book idea. But you get the idea there are some references to heavenly tablets and books in this material. Now I picked those references for specific reason because they convey different ideas. There are actually more references to heavenly tablets and books in Second Temple material so if you read through that material, you're going to find a lot more than these. But a lot of the references that you find in Second Temple Jewish material actually refer to the tablets. So the Jews had this idea, at least one stream of Judaism had this idea that the Torah, the tablets of the Law were sort of eternal and

they occupied space in heaven before they were given to Moses and then they went back to heaven and that kind of thing.

So excluding those references and that idea, what I want to focus on here are passages like the ones I just read to you where there's some recordkeeping of our lives going on. Now in Jubilees 19:9, let's just think about some of the things that we just read. If we go back here, back to our Jubilees reference to pick up or just allude to or comment on a few things. In Jubilees 19:9, we have Abraham was recorded as a friend of the Lord in the heavenly tablets. In the context, it reads as though it's after the fact. So you couldn't read, I suppose it could be forced in there, but the most sort of natural reading of this is that Abraham lives his life, does these things, obeys God, responds properly to what God wants him to do, and then it's recorded in this book that he was a friend of the Lord. So this is sort of a reference to recordkeeping and not predestination.

There's no hint really that this is sort of predestined but it's recorded after the fact that Abraham was a friend of God. He was a good guy, that sort of thing. And you get the same feel for what was said about Levi in Jubilees 30. So we don't have to have the notion of predestination going on either in Old Testament references, Second Temple references, and we're going to take this eventually to the New Testament and talk about what we see there. Let's go back though before we hit the New Testament and think about a few of the passages that I read in both the Old Testament and I'm going to try to sort of make some categories here of what's being talked about and how we can see this in the Old Testament. It's going to be reflected in Second Temple material, and then when we get to the New Testament, some of the same categories are going to apply. So in the Old Testament, there were some clear references to the idea that there's a heavenly record of good and evil, and probably the most obvious reference for that was the one we read from Isaiah 65:6-7,

Behold, it is written before me:

“I will not keep silent, but I will repay;

I will indeed repay into their lap

⁷ both your iniquities and your fathers' iniquities together,
says the LORD;

MSH: So there's this written record of iniquity and God says you're going to get repaid, the idea being, I know what you've done. I know the iniquities of this case, Isaiah's audience. God knows all about the idolatry, all about what has caused the whole situation that either has brought or will bring the exile. So that's one category, that's one notion. God knows good and evil. There was an accounting. There's a record, some memory might be a better way to say it, of human good and evil. In Malachi 3:16 and Psalm 56:8, there's a slightly different idea. Malachi 3:16 says,

¹⁶ Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name.

You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book?

MSH: So this idea is not so much a record of good and evil as it is sort of a memory of human life, of the things that happened to us in our life, an account of suffering, an account of good things, an account of things that trouble us. The theological messaging here is that God knows what's happening to us. God is fully aware of this. None of it is going to happen that will escape his attention. That's the larger theological point. We move from that to passages where God clearly knows destiny. And so the question is, do we have God knowing destiny or pre-determining destiny? Let's look at a few of the references in the Old Testament. Jeremiah 17:13,

O LORD, the hope of Israel,
all who forsake you shall be put to shame;
those who turn away from you shall be written in the *erets*,

MSH: So this sounds like it wasn't predetermined but everyone who does forsake, you will be recorded or will be allotted or assigned, the memory of being forsaken, God remembers that this XYZ person forsook him, disloyal, rejected the offer of salvation, rejected the notion of worshiping the true God, that's going to be remembered and then the records sort of will be made and sealed as to their fate. So you can certainly read that in a non-predestination sense. I'm not saying you have to but you certainly can. Psalm 69:29 though we get this reference to being blotted out of the book of the living. Now that one could certainly be read as though there was a sort of predetermined register. But even this, though, doesn't have to be read that way. In other words, the idea of being blotted out of the book of the living, does that mean, here are three possibilities.

Is it a reference or colorful way of saying to be killed, in other words, once you're dead, you're no longer among the living. Now you're among the dead and so your category sort of changes. You're no longer alive, you're dead. So is it a reference to just losing life, to just being killed? Is it a reference, number 2, to being disqualified from being with the Lord? Or is it a reference, number 3, to being removed from a record that had preexisted? The short answer is we can't really be sure. All three of these are possibilities. Let's just go to this passage. We have here in Psalm 69, let me just read the wider passage here. I had verse 29 referenced but let's just go back and sort of pickup with more of the context. The psalmist is talking about evildoers and he says,

²² Let their own table before them become a snare;
and when they are at peace, let it become a trap.

²³ Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see,
and make their loins tremble continually.

²⁴ Pour out your indignation upon them,
and let your burning anger overtake them.

²⁵ May their camp be a desolation;
let no one dwell in their tents.

²⁶ For they persecute him whom you have struck down,
and they recount the pain of those you have wounded.
²⁷ Add to them punishment upon punishment;
may they have no acquittal from you.
²⁸ Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

MSH: Now, is what the psalmist describing saying simply kill them off? That's number one. Blot them out of the book of the living. Get rid of them. Kill them. Is this sort of imprecation, imprecatory Psalm that just goes no further than that? The psalmist wants their lives to end. Is he saying let them be disqualified from the afterlife from being with you? Let them not be enrolled among the righteous. Let them be disqualified. Is that what he's saying? Or is he saying let them be removed from a record that already exists, in other words, it was a predestined idea? I would suggest to you, you can look at that passage and go any of those directions with it. You're going to get other passages that have the same sort of ambiguity. Let's go back to Daniel 10:21,

²¹ But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince.

MSH: Now, is this book of truth a sort of pre-extant plotting out of human history that, let's go look up and see what's going to happen. Or is it a record that's made as things happen? There's some ambiguity there. Psalm 87, look at that again,

And of Zion it shall be said,
“This one and that one were born in her”;
for the Most High himself will establish her.
⁶ The LORD records as he registers the peoples,
“This one was born there.” Selah

MSH: So is the record happening in real time, so to speak, as people are born a record is made, in other words, God sees and will remember permanently? Or does it refer to predestination? You could go either way. There's ambiguity to it. Daniel 12:1 on the other hand seems a little stronger,

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”

MSH: That language, that verb tense makes it seem like all the names were written in there previously. You can certainly read it that way. What I'm getting to is that there is ambiguity in the Old Testament texts. We talked about the same thing happening in the wider Ancient Near Eastern world where we can't really nail it down. And the answer's probably both. It just depends on the passage, on the context, both can be true. And for those of you have read Unseen Realm, you know that I'm comfortable with that because that's ultimately sort of where I land in the book.

Since foreknowledge does not necessitate predestination, we can't assume that foreknowledge requires it but we also can't dismiss it. So in other words, things that do happen, some of them can be predestined, some of them aren't predestined. It could go either way. And this is the reflection of how sort of life works in relationship to God's knowledge. God can do what he wants. He can predestined things if he wants but we can't conclude that everything that happens was predestinated because there's no necessary link here.

And so you get these references to things being recorded and written, people being enrolled in or blotted out. Some of those passages actually are ambiguous as to this whole question of, is it a record that preexisted or is it a record being made "in real time"? It's hard to tell. As an example, I think you have both things going on in the book of Daniel. Let's just go back to Daniel 7:10 and I'll try to illustrate both ideas being present in the same book. So if you go back to the Divine Council scene,

the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.

MSH: Now, does that mean that they're being judged according to a record of the badness that they've already done and now we're going to judge them? Well, if you go back early in the chapter and if you correlate Daniel 7 with Daniel 2, this is actually speaking of future empires so there's this ambiguity in that well maybe this had already been recorded in the mind of God before these empires even existed. But the alternative is also possible, that God knows what they will do and so that is why there's a record, not that God forced them to do what they did or predestined them to do what they did but that God knows it. So we don't have a terribly strong link. But on the other hand, earlier in the book of Daniel in chapter 4 when the holy ones, the watchers, one of them comes to Daniel and gives Daniel the ability to understand this dream that Nebuchadnezzar had about Nebuchadnezzar's impending insanity, there you do have a specific reference to, this is a decree of the watchers, of something that is going to happen.

It's a little stronger. You don't have to read predestination into it but it feels a little stronger because you have this decree sense, decree of the watchers, and later on in chapter 4 its also called decree of the Most High. So it seems like God has planned and predetermined something to happen to Nebuchadnezzar for a specific reason, to humble him. So it's just hard to tell. Now let's take this and go into where we started, the New Testament idea, and see whether we have one idea or a few ideas that are possible. So what are sort of categories we have at this point? We have heavenly tablets, heavenly books as just being a record of good and evil deeds. God knows what people do. We have tablets that sort of record the circumstances of life. God knows all the things that happen to you. He's not surprised or unaware and that's a good thing because when we pray we expect God to understand and be sympathetic and be responsive and whatnot. And then we also have ideas of book of destinies, either things that are happening in real time or that will happen. And the possibility exists of some sense of pre-destiny as well. So let's go back to the New Testament and just look at a few of these. Luke 10:20 we read this, keeping all this in mind,

²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

MSH: The question comes up, when were they written down? Were they written down when they responded to the call of Jesus and embraced him as who he said he was, the Messiah, or was that all predetermined? We're not actually told in the verse and the concept, here's the point. The concept of this being recorded or known in heaven doesn't require based on these earlier references in the Old Testament. It doesn't require that we read Luke 10:20 in an exclusively predestinated sense. You could but there's nothing in the text that requires it and there's nothing in Old Testament antecedents to this idea that requires it. It's a possibility but that's all it is, it's a possibility. It's an interpretive option. It's not a required perspective. Philippians 4:3, let's go back to this one. We have here Paul writing and he says,

³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

MSH: The same question, are the names in the book of life because that was predestined or were they recorded "in real-time" when they believed? We're just not told and we know from earlier antecedents, earlier examples that you could go either way with that. Revelation 3:5, the reference to the whole blotting out, the same idea. The two most I guess difficult verses, if you recall from the way we began the episode, Revelation 13:8 and 17:8, these verses are often used for a really hard and fast predestinarian perspective. But let's just go back there and read them, Revelation 13:8, talking about the image of the beast, verse 8 says,

⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

MSH: So you look at that and we have a reference here to before the foundation world. That sounds predestinarian. And Revelation 17:8, let's just go there quickly, has very similar language.

⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

MSH: Now here's the question. Is the phrase, from the foundation of the world, does that refer to the book that exists? Does it refer to the memory of God, which exists before the foundation of the world, or does it also refer to the act of writing the names? You might think, well, that's splitting hairs. Actually it's not. These are legitimate questions because if this is a metaphor for God knowing things, well then God always noticed things. He knows all things real and possible and he knows what's going to happen, what could happen. He knows all this. But the fact that he foreknows everything, an event that will happen versus an event that won't happen, by definition you can't have a hard and fast line to predestination there because of the things that don't happen.

The things that do happen, they could be predestined, some of them, some of them maybe not. It could go either way. So when you read a verse like Revelation 13:8, Revelation 17:8, just the fact that there is a record mentioned, that doesn't require predestination because you have to ask yourself well, if all this refers to God's memory, it has to be around before the foundation of the world. So then the second option, the second question becomes important. Is this also a reference to a person's destiny in eternity past, so to speak, or is God making a record when things happen, because we've seen from other passages that that is the feel you get for this recording idea when things happen. Then things sort of get entered into the book or they become part of the basis for how God is going to judge you. It's hard to know. Even in a passage like this that has this qualifying phrase, before the foundation of the world, we can't necessarily tell what precisely it refers to, especially if this is a metaphor for God's knowledge because the fact that God does something ahead of time doesn't require that be predestined but it could mean that. So we're sort of left with this ambiguity.

Last thought with respect to these two verses, those whose names are not written before the foundation of the world, does that statement refer to all people who have ever lived or does it refer to the people in view in this passage? In other words, when these events start playing out with respect to the beast and the image of the beast and taking the mark of the beast and all that sort of stuff, what's written here in Revelation, does it refer to those people at that time, in that place, in that circumstance? It has to at least refer to them. But does it refer to anyone who's ever lived? Well, you can read it that way and many have. But the question arises does it have to be read that way? The answer to that is no. It doesn't have to be read that way. So we're left with a bit of ambiguity going on there. But to wrap up, let's just go to Revelation 20:12, which is the passage we sort of think about this,

¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

MSH: Now, there are some who read this passage and say this teaches that you get to heaven or not based upon your works. We don't have to read it that way and frankly, we shouldn't read it that way because of a hundred other passages in the New Testament that talk about salvation by grace through faith and not of works. If you actually look at the passage and think about some of the Old Testament precedents for this,

¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

MSH: Look who's judged. I'll read it again. The books were opened, books plural, then another book was opened, which is the book of life. The ones who were judged are actually being judged not by the book of life. They're being judged on the basis of the books, plural, what was written in the books and that is a record, as we seen from Old Testament precedent, that's a record of their sin. God knows your sins. So it's true that those who are not written in the book of life are

going to be judged on the basis of their sin. Why, because salvation is by works? No, they're judged on the basis of their sin because their sin has not been covered. Their sin has not been erased. Their sin has not been removed. Think about what Paul says in Colossians 2:14. This is the reference where Paul talks about the canceling of the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

This Jesus, God, set aside, nailing it to the cross. If you don't have the benefit of, I'll use just sort of an evangelical aphorism or phrase, if you don't have the benefit of having your sins covered by the blood, then they are still outstanding. That record has not been canceled. That record still stands. And that record is the record referred to here in Revelation 20:12 because the books, plural, that are there are the ones that are used to judge the dead and the dead do not go to everlasting life with the Lord. Those who are in the book of life have that destiny but the ones who are not in the book of life, the ones who are in the other books, the record of their sins and those sins have not been taken care of, then we know their destiny. And so that's the idea. It's not that we're saved by works after all. It's that no, if your sin has not been dealt with because of your response to the gospel, then that record still stands and God will not forget it.

So to summarize the whole concept of the heavenly books, the books of life, heavenly books provide the basis for negatively not having eternal life. In other words, the sins are recorded. It's a metaphor. God knows that you sin. God knows what we do and therefore, because he knew that, he sent Jesus. This is the whole reason for the gospel, maybe not every reason. The significant major reason is that this has to be taken care of. They will always be on your account until the cross cancels your debt and the only way that can happen is by embracing the gospel. So the book of life, the heavenly books idea reinforces the believer's destiny in one direction and the unbeliever's destiny in the other. Secondly, I would say the metaphor also reinforces the point that God does indeed watch. God does indeed watch and take note, not like God's a heavenly accountant, good deeds and bad deeds, but as we read in one passage in Psalm, God sees all the circumstances of our life. He can emphasize with our suffering because he does know the things that we endure.

He knows the things that we enjoy. He knows the things that cause us suffering. He knows all of it. And so the whole concept of the heavenly books, the book of life, is bigger than tallying sins that can still be held in the unbeliever's account. It's bigger than that. It's that God knows everything and a God that knows everything is able to respond and sympathize with us. It's not just that God's a cold calculating detached accountant that knows your story, not just a record of little individual acts that you do or things that you failed to do. It's bigger than that. And third, our ultimate destiny, I think that this whole idea tells us, our ultimate destiny is in God's hands. And frankly, we read one passage that expands to the nations, actually read a couple of passages that expands the whole idea to God knowing what goes on on a geopolitical level, if we can use that term, on a national scale, a nation scale. In other words, nothing happens whether to the individual person or to people en-masse. Nothing happens that is beyond the reach of his own acts and his own decisions, his own judgment, and his own sympathy. So all of these things need to be factored into how we think about this notion of a record and have this whole idea of heavenly books.