

The “book of life” (Psalm 69:29)¹ - a question of life or death?

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ABSTRACT

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*The image “book of life” is mentioned **expressis verbis** in Psalm 69:29a. The supplicant appeals to God to erase his enemies from the “book of life”. The aim of this paper is to elaborate on this image. Quite varied notions can be distinguished in this regard: firstly, the idea of the lists of the citizenry and secondly, the image of the heavenly book. Furthermore, three types of “heavenly books” can be distinguished, namely (1) the book of fate; (2) the book of works; and (3) the book of life. The conclusion is drawn that “life” here implies “life” under the protection of God which is sustained by his righteousness (69:28). The supplicant’s enemies will be excluded from this privilege when God erases them from the “book of life”. This reference to life is primarily a reference to ordinary earthly life.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Psalm 69:29a commences with a jussive in the passive voice (“may they be erased”). The supplicant’s enemies - who are fellow Jewish brothers (69:9ab) - are the subject of this verb. By means of this jussive form of the verb the supplicant expresses a wish directed towards the deity to let justice ultimately be brought about. He hopes that God will finally act in solidarity with him (“connective justice”³): God should reciprocate the

1 Psalm 69:29ab read as follows: “May they be erased from the book of life, and with the righteous may they not be inscribed”.

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3 The theme of the doctrine of divine retribution functions as the hermeneutical key in order to understand the strophic unit 69:23a-30b, to which 29ab belongs. Following in the footsteps of Jan Assmann (2001) retribution in ancient Israel can be defined in terms of “connective justice” (*iustitia connectiva*). This idea could be explicated with the ancient Egyptian concept Ma’at, which represents the principle of solidarity, reciprocity and retribution. This issue has been dealt with more extensively in another publication (Groenewald 2002:657-74). See also Groenewald (2003) - this publication is simultaneously handed in as dissertation which was completed under the supervision of Prof dr Ulrich Berges at the University of Nijmegen (the Netherlands) and under the co-supervision of Prof dr G T M Prinsloo (University of Pretoria, Republic of South Africa).

enemies' injustices by erasing them from the book of life. The verb ("may they be erased") is followed by the prepositional object ("from the book of life"). 29b links syndetically to 29a and is a negative request: the vetitive occurs in the final position ("may they not be inscribed"). This jussive is, likewise, in the passive voice, with the enemies as the subject. God is thus once again requested to act in solidarity with the supplicant. The vetitive ("may they not be inscribed") is preceded by the prepositional phrase "with the righteous" occurring in the first position.

The image $\mu\psi\upsilon\lambda\iota$ $\rho\psi\sigma$ ("book of life") is mentioned *expressis verbis* in Psalm 69:29a. The aim of this paper will be to elaborate on this image. It is, however, not an easy undertaking since quite varied notions can be distinguished in this regard⁴. Wildberger (1965:157-8)⁵ justly remarks that the derivation of this image causes some difficulties. With regard to this image Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:278) infers as follows: "Ob der Psalm hier an das himmlische Buch denkt, in dem Gott zunächst alle »Lebendigen« einträgt und dann die Sünder bei großer Schuld aus diesem Buch austreicht (vgl. Ex 32,32; Ps 139,16; Dan 12,4; Mal 3,16), wobei entscheidend ist, daß im Endgericht nur gerettet wird, wer in diesem Buch Gottes verzeichnet ist, oder ob hier die Vorstellung von »Bürgerregistern« (vgl. Ps 87,6; Jes 4,3; Jer 22,30) im Hintergrund steht, ist schwer zu entscheiden". Firstly, the idea of the lists of the citizenry will be elaborated on and secondly, the image of the heavenly book.

2 LISTS OF THE CITIZENRY

The idea of heavenly lists of the citizenry was closely dependent on the existence of secular lists of the citizenry (Hossfeld & Reuter 1999:339). Ezekiel 13 attests the existence of these specific lists. In the prophetic words directed against the false prophets we encounter, among others, the following reading: "They will not be in the council of my people and they will not be written down on the list of the house of Israel" (Ezk 13:9). According to Zimmerli (1969:293) this "list of the house of Israel" in the first instance could actually have indicated the nation's tribal scrolls which were drawn up during the census held by David, according to 2 Samuel 24:2, 9. Zimmerli (1969:293) furthermore infers as follows:

"im Munde Jahwes klingt dabei das Tiefere mit, daß es über die Stammrollen hinaus, die auf Erden in den Händen der Verantwortlichen Israels sind, die auch jenes Irdische bestimmende

4 Welten (1981:274) infers as follows: "Die Vorstellungen sind nicht einheitlich, entsprechend auch die Ableitungen umstritten".

5 Cf also Schottroff (1964:303).

Aufzeichnung bei Jahwe gibt, die dann als Buch Jahwehs (... Ex 32,32f.) oder "Buch des Lebens" (... Ps 69,29, vgl. auch Jes 4,3) oder einfach als "das Buch" (... Dn 12:1) bezeichnet werden kann".

Jeremia 22:30 witnesses to the existence of such a list of the citizenry in the pre-exilic time. This text considers the case of Coniah and writes off his future⁶. Because his future will be destroyed, he is therefore registered as stripped of any position and title. Carroll (1986:440) infers that Coniah's entry in this register represents him as stripped of all legitimate claims to which any native-born man is entitled to. Ezra 2:62 illustrates the significance which registration in the genealogical records had for the returning exiles. Those who were not registered in the genealogical records were excluded from the priesthood as unclean.

According to Isaiah 4:3, which forms part of the early post-exilic announcement of salvation in Isaiah 4:2-6⁷, the remainder in Zion, and whoever is still left in Jerusalem, will be called holy, as well as everybody who is written down for life in Jerusalem. Wildberger (1965:158) interprets this text as follows: "der Rest in Zion (ist) als die Schar der von Gott in einem Akt der Erwählung zum eschatologischen Heil Ausgesonderten zu verstehen. Das Heil beruht auf göttlicher Prädestination". Berges (1998:86), however, takes a different stance with regard to the interpretation of this Isaian text. He infers that a glance at the citizenry lists in Ezra 2:62; Nehemia 7:5,64; 12,22f. proves that the "written down for life" has to do with much more than just the mere proof of judahite respectively priestly descent, and namely with ethical behaviour. It is therefore not as such a case of divine predestination at all, as claimed by Wildberger⁸, but rather a question of cultic cleanness and uncleanness.

When considering the lists of the citizenry it is inevitable not to call Psalm 87 - one of the so-called Zion Psalms - to mind. This Psalm portrays Yahweh as composing a list of his devotees on mount Zion. It is, among others, said that he (Yahweh) records, as he registers the peoples (87:6). In verses 4-6 the "birthright" of all the pilgrims of Zion coming from the world of the nations (verse 4) is documented as they are entered into the lists of the citizenry. Zenger (2000:132-4)⁹ infers the

6 Jer 22:30 reads as follows: "Thus says the Lord: record this man as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days; for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David, and ruling again in Judah". Cf also Herrmann (1974:8).

7 Cf Berges (1998:83) in this regard.

8 Cf also Duhm (1914:30): "... und hat mit der Idee der Prädestination nichts zu tun ...".

9 See also Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:556).

verses 4-6, forming the middle portion of this psalm, are throughout characterised by the image of Yahweh who grants the members of the different nations the civil rights of his godly city. The final literary composition of this psalm is without doubt post-exilic, but the fundamental motives of the Zion theology reach as far back as the pre-Israelite era¹⁰. In this context it is, however, important to notice that this act of God - that is to say, the composing of a list of the different nations - is closely connected with Zion, which is both the city of God and the mountain of God. To be listed here implicates "life" (Zenger 1972: 102)¹¹. Psalm 87 thus formulates the important fact that neither Zion nor the children of Zion have to be protected from the nations anymore; on the contrary, the nations are saved through Zion (Hossfeld & Zenger 2000:551)¹².

3 THE IMAGE OF THE HEAVENLY BOOK

The idea that the deity in his/her relationship to the world and the human being conducts a heavenly bookkeeping was known to all religions in the Ancient Near Eastern as well as other ancient religions (Koep 1954: 725)¹³. In the background we can even imagine the picture of the divine bookkeeper who keeps record of the good and the bad of every human being. The concept of the heavenly book is thus an anthropomorphism: earthly institutions and customs were assigned to God and his heavenly realm, i. e. "man stellt sich Gottes Herrschaft über Himmel und Erde so vor, daß er wie ein irdischer Herrscher seines Amtes walte" (Koep 1952:1). According to the image of the heavenly book God writes the

10 Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:556) formulates these motives as follows: "Mit Zion und Jerusalem verbinden sich für die Religion Israels wichtige Vorstellungen, deren Wurzeln bis in die vorisraelitische Zeit zurückreichen. Als mythischer Weltberg ist Zion die kosmische Mitte der Welt, wo die vier mythischen Weltströme entspringen (vgl. Gen 2,10-14) und wo die Menschenschöpfung stattfand. Als »Berg Gottes« und »Stadt Gottes« ist Zion/Jerusalem Königssitz und Thronstätte des höchsten Gottes. Von hier aus hält er das kosmische Chaos nieder ... Der auf dem Zion residierende und regierende Gott gibt den in seiner Stadt wohnenden oder sich dort bei ihm versammelnden Menschen Schutz und Rettung". Cf also Prinsloo (2000:137) and Zenger (1999:246).

11 According to Sperling (1991:199-200) "das hier genannte »Buch der Völker« sei streng an den Gottesberg Zion gebunden und bedeute für die in diesem Buch Aufgeschriebenen »Leben«. Diese Vorstellung sei aus dem irdischen-politischen Bereich in die mythisierende oder metaphorische Sprache übertragen werden".

12 This theme concurs especially with the view of the book of Isaiah which is to be regarded as the prophetic book *par excellence* in designating Zion as the goal for Israel and for the nations (cf Berges 1999b:129-136 and Berges 2000a:184-95).

13 Cf also Lanczkowski (1981:270).

names in this book and therefore only he can erase them; but in the long run not simply the living, but only those who are predestined for real life are registered in it¹⁴. The heavenly book - or rather the concept of the heavenly book - was especially connected with the concept of divine creation of the world, the divine governance of the world and the divine jurisdiction of God over the world (Koep 1954:725). According to Hossfeld & Reuter (1999:339)¹⁵ one can distinguish between three types of "heavenly books", namely (1) the book of fate ("Schicksalbuch"); (2) the book of works ("Büch der Werke"); and (3) the book of life ("Buch des Lebens"). These three types of books will now be elaborated on further.

3.1 The book of fate

The concept of a "book of fate" originated in Mesopotamia, where the references to these "tables of fate" are found in quite different contexts. In these tables the gods recorded the predetermined lives of the human beings. The Sumerian deity Enlil was in the first instance regarded as custodian of the tables of fate, and he was later on succeeded by the Babylonian deity Marduk (Lanczkowski 1981:270). Except perhaps for Psalm 139:16, this idea is not found in the OT. Psalm 139:16 reads as follows: "Your eyes saw my embryo, and in your book are all written down days that were formed before any of them occurred". This text refers to the entry of a divine decision with regard to the future destiny of the pious respectively the impious (Schottroff 1964:303)¹⁶. The psalmist's days, the whole period of his life, is known to Yahweh. This devout psalmist thus believes that every one of his days has been written providentially in God's book. Accordingly, divine insight is matched by foresight. In this regard Kraus (1979:184) infers as follows: "Vom Ereignis der Schöpfung her ist das ganze Leben des Menschen für den Schöpfer offen und durchsichtig". It is thus not surprising that Von Rad

14 The reference is primarily to ordinary earthly life. Therefore, this term "real life" should not be muddled up with the image of "eternal life" which is strictly speaking derived from the NT and as such a concept, which developed much later than the OT concept (Wildberger 1965:157). We should thus be careful not to transfer the meaning of the NT image to the OT concept. This does, however, not take the fact away that this image in the NT could have been influenced by this specific image from the OT - it could even have been the roots of this specific NT idea. Without doubt the NT gave this image a totally new meaning, that is to say, it added a new substance to it which makes it a very loaded term. We should preferably conceive of "life" in this specific context as "Leben unter Gottes Schutz und getragen von seinem Segen" (Wildberger 1965:158).

15 Cf also Koep (1954:725).

16 Cf also Allen (1983:262).

(1970:361) depicts this text as explicitly deterministic. Terminologically it belonged to a circle of traditions which had clear deterministic conceptions.

3.2 The book of works

Together with the idea of the divine judgement, quite varied views concerning the heavenly registers of human works (“book of works”) are encountered. What is, however, sure is the fact that all human deeds, good or bad, are registered here; even sins of the mind. This will be used during the divine judgement; during this process the book will be opened and the content will be revealed. Good works serve as a defence and bad works serve as accusation (Koep 1954:726). This notion resonates in the OT, for example in Isaiah 65:6-7, Daniel 7:10 and Nehemiah 13:14. These texts read as follows: “see, it is written before me: I will not keep silent, but I will repay: I will indeed repay into their laps their iniquities and their ancestors’ iniquities together, says the Lord” (Is 65:6-7 - NRSV); “the court sat in judgement, and the books were opened” (Dn 7:10 - NRSV); and “remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service” (Neh 13:14 - NRSV). This notion seems to have developed from Egyptian traditions and religion, where it is best articulated and in all likelihood came into the other Mediterranean religions (Hossfeld & Reuter 1999:339).

3.3 The book of life

The “book of life”, which is mentioned *expressis verbis* in Psalm 69:29a, is the third type of heavenly book. It is closely associated with the preceding, namely the “book of works”. According to the image of the “book of life” there were heavenly registers of those who will be spared from judgement; they are those who constitute a holy remnant, those who are predestined for real life (Hossfeld & Reuter 1999:339). This idea occurs in a few OT passages. In the later redaction of Exodus 32:32f. (R^P) the idea of a heavenly book was included and it was used in the service of one of the most important themes in the post-exilic era, viz the relationship between the righteous and the unrighteous at God’s judgement (Hossfeld & Reuter 1999:339-40). In verses 32-33 it is eye-catching that Moses’ proposal, namely his request to be punished on behalf of the sinful, was not accepted by Yahweh at all. Verse 33 reads as follows: “but Yahweh said to Moses: ‘whoever has sinned against me I will erase him out of my book’”. Yahweh’s reply, contrastingly, formulated the basic principle, namely the fact that Moses’ intercession on behalf of the sinful was rejected and instead the individual responsibility of the sinner was emphasised (cf Haag 1995:380). This short dialogue underlines one of the dilemmas or issues which, according to

biblical evidence, was of great importance during as well as after the exile, namely the question of God's treatment of the individual in so far as he punishes the evil-doer and rewards the pious (cf Dohmen 1985:119). It is thus not remarkable that the supplicant of Psalm 69 requests Yahweh to "erase" his enemies - fellow Jewish brothers (69:9ab) - from the "book of life", as only the righteous have the right to be registered in it (cf Alonso-Schökel 1997:229-30). The fact that he has presented himself as a servant of Yahweh (69:18a) implies the existence of a special relationship with Yahweh; "to be a servant" is a legal title which compels Yahweh to act on his behalf (Berges 1999a:22).

This image of the "book of life" also resonates in the book of Daniel, namely in chapter 12 verse 1. This verse reads as follows: "At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book" (NRSV). According to this text a time of trouble is predicted. Every nation has its representative in the heavenly court who fights all its legal and military battles (Goldingay 1989:309). Michael is the one fighting for those in Israel who resist the pressure of Antiochus and the reformists. He therefore fights against Antiochus's heavenly representative; a victory in the heavenly court over him leads to Antiochus's defeat on earth, as well as that "your people shall be delivered". Michael takes up their cause and reveals that their names are "found written in the book"; that is to say a list of those who belong to God's people, the citizenry list of the true Jerusalem (cf also Nötscher 1970:162).

This notion furthermore reverberates in the book of Malachi where we encounter the "book of remembrance" (Ml 3:16). This text reads as follows: "then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name" (NRSV). Smith (1984:338)¹⁷ postulates that the custom the Persian kings had to record incidents in their scrolls may form the background for this reference to a "book of remembrance". According to the book of Esther, Esther's uncle Mordecai discovered a plot on the king's life. The men who planned the plot were hanged, but Mordecai was not rewarded. Nevertheless, the incident was written in the king's book (Es 2:23). Later the Persian king read about the incident and rewarded Mordecai (Es 6:1-3). In this specific text in Malachi Yahweh hears the words of those who fear him and who value his name. Their names will be recorded in this book, and they will be his special possession on the day of his decisive

17 Cf also Horst & Robinson (1954:274).

intervention, which will all happen when the distinction between the righteous and the wicked will be clearly disclosed (Ml 3:16-18)¹⁸.

4 CONCLUSION

This outline of the image “book of life” will now be concluded. The preceding outline has disclosed that this image is too complex to make a final decision whether it is a reference to either the concept of citizenry lists, or the concept of a heavenly book (Hossfeld & Zenger 2000:278). It is, in all probability, a combination of the two. Whatever it may be, the fact remains: according to the supplicant, God should make the fact known that his enemies (fellow Jewish brethren) are unjust and that he - a zealot for God - is just and is suffering because of his righteousness. It is, however, certain that the concept “book of live” is a late concept (post-exilic) which was used to symbolize the loyalty and homogeneity of the true faith community (Gerstenberger 1997:10). The request to blot out the supplicant’s enemies from this book can therefore only refer to acts of purification within the Judaeen cultic community. Therefore God - who claims to be a righteous God - should act in solidarity with the supplicant (“connective justice”) and let justice be done. He should reciprocate the enemies’ injustices by erasing them from the book of life. As has already been said, “life” here implies “life” under the protection of God and “life” which is sustained by his righteousness (28b), that is to say his redemptive salvation and presence on Zion. The supplicant’s enemies will thus be excluded from this privilege when God erases them from the “book of life”¹⁹.

It is evident from these cola (69:29ab), as well as the preceding cola, that the deed-consequence-nexus has become quite an unbearable burden to the “suffering righteous”, thus causing him to struggle with his deepest convictions, that is to say God²⁰. The origin of this crisis is to be

18 Blenkinsopp (1990:15) and Kühlewein (1997:813). Cf also Schottroff (1964:303): “Denn als Antwort auf das Murren der Frommen (Mal 3,14f) über die Wertlosigkeit der Jahwefurcht ergeht ein Entscheid Jahwes (V 17), der den Gottesfürchtigen das Heil für den Tag Jahwes zuspricht”.

19 Cf also Schmid (1968:151): “... Ps 69,29, wo darum gebeten wird, daß die Feinde getilgt würden aus dem Buche des Lebenden und nicht gezählt unter die $\mu\eta\sigma\delta\chi$ (V. 28) - und damit nicht der $h\eta\sigma\delta\chi$ Jahwes seines Heils teilhaftig würden”.

20 According to Berges (2001:243) “de overtuiging van de bijbel dat God voor armen en achtergestelden een betrouwbare helper en pleitbezorger is, brengt de leidende rechtvaardige, en juist hem, in een onpeilbare crisis”. Cf. also Reventlow (1986:183): “Der Beter aber befindet sich in einer Lage, in der dieser Lehre [Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang] scheinbar nicht aufgeht: er weiß sich als unschuldig und ist trotzdem im Leid. Deshalb ruft er zu seinem Gott und fleht ihn an, die unverdiente Not zu beenden”.

sought in the conviction portrayed in the OT, namely that God is the benefactor and advocate for those who suffer (unjustly). The figure of Job, who like no one else experienced a life full of contradictions, struggled intensely with this burden laid upon him by his contemporary theologians. Berges (1994:306) formulates this struggle as follows: “diese Widersprüchlichkeit wird durch das biblische Credo eines gerechten und rettenden Gottes nicht aufgehoben, sonder nur noch verschärft”²¹. In spite of this crisis Yahweh remains the only way for the supplicant to escape this burden. It is thus no wonder that in 69:28ab he calls on God to thoroughly register the wrongs of his enemies in order that they cannot enter into his (God’s) saving righteousness (cf also Schreiner 1991:325). The cola 29ab go a step further: the enemies’ names should even be erased from the “book of life respectively of the living”, because only the names of the “righteous” should remain written in this book. The whole issue of the righteousness of God is once again to the fore; in order to prove it only the “righteous” should be listed in the “book of life” and the names of the supplicant’s foes - fellow Jewish brethren - should be erased from it. They should thus be excluded from the privileges one obtains by being part of the cultic community, i. e. the community of the faithful.

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21 Cf also Berges (2000b:106-8); Dohmen (2000:116) and Steins (2000:96-9).

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