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The “Book of Life” in Country Music

Revelation speaks of a “book of life” that contains the names of those who will be saved from damnation or apocalyptic distress: Jesus says to the church in Sardis, “If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels” (Rev. 3:5).

John sees a vision of the beast and notes that “all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered” (Rev. 13:8).

John sees in his vision of the last judgment that

another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:12–15)

John sees a vision of the new Jerusalem and says, “Nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev. 21:27).

But Revelation is not the only book in the Bible to refer to this important volume. In his Letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul says that Euodia and Syntyche “have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.” Phil. 4:3).

The image has captured the attention of country music songwriters, especially those with a gospel or religious bent, including Chuck Butler, who wrote the lyrics of “Ballad of the Lukewarm” as performed by Country Faith; Steve Wiggins, who wrote the lyrics for “Personal Judgment Day” as performed by Big Ten Revival; and Terry Scott Taylor, who wrote the lyrics of “Wall of Heaven” as performed by The Lost Dogs. Richie Furay, founding member of Buffalo Springfield and Poco, even mentioned the “Book of Life” in an interview with me when talking about being inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame:

You go into that museum and they have this wall with all these names: Elvis and Ray Charles and John Lennon . . . and there’s my name—on the wall with the others! It gives me a thrill. But, you know, it’s nothing compared to knowing my name is written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.