

A Book or a Tree? A Textual Variant in Revelation 22:

19

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Erasmus

On or about October 28, 1466, a boy was born in Rotterdam to Roger Gerard and a woman we know only as Margaret, the daughter of a physician. His birth name was Gerard Gerardson after his father, but he later would take upon himself the name by which he is known to history, Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus. Erasmus was both the name of a saint and the Greek word meaning “desired.” Desiderius was simply the Latin equivalent of Erasmus, and Roterodamus was Latin for “of Rotterdam,” the city with which he would always be closely associated, although he only lived there for the first four years of his life.

Although he was born out of wedlock, he was loved and cared for by his parents until their untimely deaths from the plague in 1483; Erasmus was only a teenager. Now orphaned, he received from the Catholic Church the finest education available to a young man in his day. Not only did he become an outstanding Latinist, but he also managed to learn Greek by studying day and night for three years. He constantly begged his friends in his letters for books and for money to pay his teachers.

Erasmus was the first to publish the New Testament in Greek, something he did in 1516. (The New Testament had already been printed in Greek two years earlier as part of the *Complutensian Polyglot*, but that work was not actually published until 1520 because the editors had to wait for the Old Testament portion to be finished and sanctioned by Pope Leo X.)¹ Erasmus’s project began in 1512 when he undertook a new translation of the New Testament into Latin, declaring, “It is only fair that Paul should address the Romans in somewhat better Latin.”² Erasmus was a superb Latin stylist, and he knew it (only one with tremendous confidence in his Latin skills would dare to emend Jerome’s Vulgate, the established Bible at the time). In 1516 his translation appeared under the odd title *Novum Instrumentum Omne* (“All the New Teaching”). In addition to giving his new Latin translation, he included the Greek New Testament in a parallel column. Many have assumed that he included the Greek text because he was intent on beating the *Complutensian Polyglot* to publication, but there is no evidence for this. It appears, rather, that his motive for including the Greek was simply to make it easier for readers to check—and presumably admire—his Latin translation. His focus and interest were less on the Greek than on the Latin text, but he considered the two together to constitute the whole of the New Testament tradition (thus his use of the word *omne*, “all,” in the title).

The first edition was riddled with errors since, as Erasmus himself acknowledged, it was *praecipitatum verius quam editum* (“thrown together rather than edited”).³ Consequently, in 1519 he produced a corrected second edition, this time with the more customary title *Novum Testamentum Omne* (“All the New Testament”). Martin Luther used this edition to translate the New Testament from Greek into German. Together the first two editions sold 3,300 copies, while only 600 copies of the *Complutensian Polyglot* were even printed. A third edition followed in 1522, which edition became the basis for William Tyndale’s English translation of the New Testament and for Robert Stephanus’s 1550 edition of the Greek text, which was used by the translators of the Geneva and King James Bibles. Erasmus would go on to publish fourth and fifth editions (1527 and 1535), and these would be followed by a line of subsequent editions during the remainder of the century and beyond, all grounded in Erasmus’s publications.

The term *Textus Receptus* or “Received Text” comes from the publisher’s preface (a sort of advertising blurb) to the 1633 edition: *textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum, in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus* (“Therefore you hold the text, now received by all, in which we give nothing altered or corrupted”). The words for “text” (*textum*) and “received” (*receptum*) were changed from the accusative to the nominative case, *textus receptus*, “received text,” and this term was then applied retroactively to the entire line of printed Greek New Testaments that derived ultimately from the early editions of Erasmus.

The last six verses of Revelation

Erasmus drew his Greek text from seven late manuscripts from the Byzantine tradition. Only one of these manuscripts contained the text of the book of Revelation, and that manuscript happened to be missing the last page of text, a page that contained the final six verses of Revelation 22. Undaunted, Erasmus reverse-translated the final six verses of the Latin Vulgate into Greek to complete the manuscript for his first edition.

This famous story is included in every introduction to New Testament textual criticism. When I first heard it, I was flabbergasted. I thought to myself that if I were to look up the definition of *chutzpah* in a dictionary, I would find an account of Erasmus’s bold move. But what Erasmus did was not quite as unusual as it appears at first blush. Erasmus was engaged in producing strict consistency between the Greek and Latin texts. Today we might assume that this ideal consistency would always demand modifying the derivative Latin to conform to the original Greek. But the Vulgate had tremendous religious authority, and consistency as often as not meant revising the Greek to accommodate the Latin. Erasmus felt perfectly free to modify the Greek text to match the Latin if he preferred the reading of the Vulgate. The story of the last six verses of Revelation is only the most dramatic illustration of this tendency on Erasmus’s part; the reality is that he made similar moves throughout his work on the text.

All things considered, Erasmus deserves praise for his reverse translation. He did an outstanding job. If a third-year Greek composition student were asked to reverse-translate into Koine Greek six verses selected at random from the Latin Vulgate and to match as closely as possible the New Testament text, few would do nearly as well as Erasmus did. The *Textus Receptus* of these six verses contains 136 Greek words and the standard critical text 132, but there are only eighteen variations between them. That, to me, is rather remarkable.

Standard critical editions of the Greek New Testament completely ignore these variants. They are not reflected in the critical apparatus of either *Novum Testament Graece* (27th edition) or the United Bible Society’s *Greek New Testament* (4th edition), nor are they mentioned in Bruce Metzger’s *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. I suppose the rationale for this omission is that these variants were created in print rather than derived from pre-printing-press antiquity. Modern translations of the New Testament generally follow the standard critical text and so ignore these variants. Contemporary Mormons, however, continue to read the King James Version (KJV), translated from the *Textus Receptus*, and therefore understanding and deciding on the *correctness* of these variants is still a relevant task for us—even if we are somewhat unique in needing to do so.

Most of the variants in question affect the Greek text but would not be apparent in English translation. Erasmus spelled the name *David* differently and prefaced it with the definite article. He used a different verb for the word *come* in verse 17. But however he rendered the name *David* in Greek, we would still render it in translation as “David.” And whichever verb we follow in verse 17, it would still be best translated as “come” in English. In a few places the Erasmus variants would affect the English translation, but not drastically, adding an “and” here and a “for” there.

Only one variant substantially affects the meaning of the passage, and that is in verse 19. The KJV reads: “And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the *book*

of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (emphasis added). In lieu of Erasmus’s “book of life” (*biblou tēs zōēs*), the modern critical text reads “tree of life” (*xulou tēs zōēs*). This difference does have an impact on the meaning of the passage. How might we decide between these two readings?

A good place to start would be a survey of the two phrases—*book of life* and *tree of life*—in scripture more generally. What can we learn from scripture about the book of life and the tree of life?

Book of life

When I was young, I imagined the book of life like an old “book of remembrance”—one of those manufactured binders for genealogical records once popular among Latter-day Saints, with their long 8½” hard covers connected by expandable metal rods—engraved with the words *book of life*. (I imagined it much bigger than those binders.) Now, of course, people do genealogy with a computer, but I confess that I still imagine the book of life in that way, to some extent. My imagination aside, what do the scriptures teach us about the book of life?

Apart from the contested passage in question, Revelation 22:19, the expression *book of life* has the following distribution in the scriptures:

Volume of Scripture	Number of Occurrences	Citations
New Testament	7	Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27
Book of Mormon	1	Alma 5:58
Doctrine and Covenants	4	D&C 128:6–7 (3x); 132:19
Total	12	

Note that six of these twelve occurrences appear within the book of Revelation, and three of the occurrences in the Doctrine and Covenants appear in a commentary on the use of that expression in the book of Revelation. All in all, three-fourths of all instances of the phrase *book of life* appear in or in connection with Revelation. Obviously, these references should prove helpful in determining if the expression *book of life* in Revelation 22:19 is the better, or original, reading.

The main thing we learn from these passages is that names are written in the book of life—specifically, the names of those who are to inherit eternal life. (To continue with my childhood imagination, this sounds a bit like Santa’s “nice list.”)

First, for example, Revelation 3:5 affirms: “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.” This passage suggests that it is one’s name that is entered in the book of life. One’s name remains in the book if one “overcometh” (though what *overcome* means is not indicated), and a blessing parallel to this overcoming is being clothed with white raiment, which, the previous verse suggests, is an indication of worthiness. Revelation 13:8 suggests the converse: “And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him [the beast; see v. 4], whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” In other words, while those whose names are written in the book of life worship the Lamb, those whose names are not written in the book

worship the beast. Revelation 17:8 is of similar import, but Revelation 21:27 deserves individual attention: "And there shall in no wise enter into it [the New Jerusalem] any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life." The phrase *they which are written*, without any mention of names, may seem odd at first glance, but the idea that names were written in the book of life was so pervasive that "they which are written" is simply meant to be a short formation of "they whose names are written." It is only those whose names are written in the book who will enter into the New (or heavenly) Jerusalem.

Such references call to mind a particular adaptation of the judgment of the dead in the Hall of Maat as depicted in the vignette associated with chapter 125 of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The god Osiris, sitting upon his throne, presides over the proceedings while the jackal-headed Anubis, guardian of the underworld, leads the deceased forward by the hand to the scales of Maat, goddess of truth and justice. The deceased's heart is weighed against a Maat feather that represents truth: if his heart is heavy with misdeeds, it is promptly devoured by the demon Ammut, and the deceased ceases to exist; but if he lived a good life and his heart is light, he continues on his journey in the afterlife. The god Thoth stands by and records the results of the judgment in a papyrus book. This Egyptian scene was adapted by a Jewish writer in a first-century-ad text called the *Testament of Abraham*. In this version, Osiris is Abel, and the Egyptian gods weighing the dead man's soul are angels with new names: Dokiël, the righteous balance-bearer who weighs men's souls, and Purouël, who tries the works of men by fire. Two versions of this text, a long and a short one, are called Recensions A and B, respectively.⁴ In Recension A, one of two angels appears on each side of the scales. One records the righteous and the other the wicked deeds of the deceased. In Recension B, however, only a single scribe (like the Egyptian Thoth but identified as Enoch) records the results of the judgment.

Elsewhere I have written about this kind of Semitic adaptation of Egyptian sources and suggested that it may help us understand the explanations to the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham.⁵ I mention this here because, at least according to the Egyptian-Jewish author of the *Testament of Abraham*, this vignette actually illustrates the production of the book of life, in which the results of judgment are recorded.

These texts collectively suggest that the expression *book of life* works well in the context of Revelation 22:19. The passage, quoted above, records what biblical scholars call a curse formula. The scriptural theme of the book of life places such a high emphasis on the blessings associated with names being written in that book that the threat of being removed from it is real and forceful. Moreover, the parallel of having one's name removed from the book of life as a punishment for removing words from the book of the prophecy of Revelation reflects a certain ironic justice. All of this is suggestive.

What, though, of the tree of life?

Tree of life

The expression *tree of life* has the following distribution in the scriptures:

Volume of Scripture	Number of Occurrences	Citations
Old Testament	7	Genesis 2:9; 3:22, 24; Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4
New Testament	3	Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14
Book of Mormon	16	1 Nephi 11:25 (2x); 15:22–36 (3x); 2 Nephi 2:15; Alma 5:34, 62; 12:21–26 (3x); 32:40; 42:2–6 (4x)
Pearl of Great Price	4	Moses 3:9; 4:28, 31 (2x); Abraham 5:9
Total	30	

These passages are grouped in several distinctive tranches, each of which deserves individual attention. First are the references to the tree of life from the well-known creation story (see not only the references in Genesis, but also those in Moses, Abraham, 2 Nephi, and Alma). This tree of life was in the midst of the orchard of the Garden of Eden, as was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Once Adam and Eve had partaken of the fruit of the latter, God was concerned that they would partake of the tree of life and live forever. He therefore caused cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to be placed at the eastern entrance to the garden so that Adam and Eve could not reenter the garden and partake of the fruit of the tree of life.

Second and less familiar are the four references to the tree of life in Proverbs. On the surface, the meaning of the tree of life in these passages is unclear; in context, the tree of life seems to stand simply for “a good thing.” Thus, Proverbs 15:4 sets forth the following antithetic parallelism:

A wholesome tongue is a tree of life:

but perverseness therein is a breach of the spirit.

I suspect that these references to the tree of life pertain to Wisdom and, as such, might be read as oblique allusions to our Mother in Heaven. As scholars have begun to realize in recent years, the Hebrews of ancient Israel worshipped a heavenly mother figure named Asherah. Over time, a reform movement attempted to suppress such worship, but rather than being eliminated completely, Asherah was simply absorbed into various characteristics of Yahweh. One such characterization is Lady Wisdom (in Hebrew, *chokmah*), a prominent figure in the book of Proverbs.⁶

The third set of references to the tree of life comes from the vision of the tree of life Lehi and his son Nephi experienced—and from passages in which Nephi interprets the tree, whose fruit is precious and desirable above all and is a symbol of the love of God. (In addition to Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions, the Book of Mormon also preserves later commentary on this theme, particularly in chapters 5 and 32 of Alma.) As it turns out, this third group of passages may be related to the second. Daniel Peterson has written a remarkable study entitled “Nephi and His Asherah” (a play on ancient Near Eastern inscriptions that mention “Yahweh and His Asherah”), in which he surveys the extensive body of non-LDS Asherah scholarship and outlines how this scholarship may help us better grasp the text in 1 Nephi 11.⁷ Nephi is shown the virgin mother and the babe in her arms. An angel then asks him if

he understands the meaning of the tree, and he responds that he does (though he had responded in the contrary before seeing mother and child). Why would a vision of the mother of the Son of God make the meaning of the tree of life clear to Nephi? Peterson, in a brilliant exegesis that places the passage squarely in its ancient Near Eastern context, points to the profound tree symbolism related to Asherah, the mother of the gods, in ancient Israel.

The fourth and final group of passages is in the book of Revelation itself. These passages all have to do with the presence of the tree of life in the New (or heavenly) Jerusalem and thus deserve, given their proximity to Revelation 22:19, individual attention.

The first appears early in the book as part of the letter to the church at Ephesus: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). Note that the fruit of the tree is said here to be given to “him that overcometh,” phrasing similar to the passage in Revelation 3:5 in which the one whose name is to remain in the book of life is “he that overcometh.” This similarity of language suggests an interchangeability of *book* and *tree* in Revelation 2–3. There is also a blurred distinction between the tree of life from Eden and the tree of life to be found only in the New Jerusalem: the tree is described ambiguously as being “in the midst of the paradise of God.”

The description in Revelation 22:2 is much more elaborate: “In the midst of the street of it [the city of the New Jerusalem], and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” Here we encounter predictable number symbolism revolving around the number twelve (twelve months? twelve tribes?), but it is very difficult to visualize, based on this description, what the tree is supposed to look like or how it is positioned in relation to the other features of the New Jerusalem. Nonetheless, its proximity to Revelation 22:19 might be suggestive in certain ways.

The final occurrence of “tree of life” in Revelation outside our contested passage appears in Revelation 22:14: “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.” Interestingly, the KJV rendering of “they that do his commandments” is in error; the correct wording here would be, rather, “they that wash their robes.” Here again there seems to be a certain connection with Revelation 3:5, which describes those whose names remain in the book of life as those who are “clothed in white raiment.” Once more, the images of tree and book seem to come together. At any rate, Revelation 7:14 states that those who “[wash] their robes” are blessed with a right to the tree of life after passing through the gates of the New Jerusalem.

All these references to the tree of life are just as suggestive as those to the book of life, and there is even some evidence of a certain blending of the two images. Certainly, references to the tree of life are just as compatible with the curse-formula setting of Revelation 22:19 as those to the book of life. Being forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of life is as much a curse as having one’s name removed from the book of life. What other evidence, then, might be brought to bear on the interpretation of this text?

Textual evidence

Turning to textual history, one might be surprised to learn that some evidence exists for the reading “book of life,” although it is not overwhelming. Obviously, since it was from the Vulgate that Erasmus produced his Greek text, “book” is found in a number of Vulgate manuscripts, but it also occurs in one Greek miniscule (no. 2067, dating to the fifteenth century) and is reflected in the Bohairic Version (an important translation in a Coptic dialect). The word also occurs in a number of the church fathers: Ambrose and Bachiarus (both late-fourth century), Primasius (mid-sixth century) and Haymo (ninth century). Most of the textual evidence, however, and particularly that of the

earliest Greek witnesses, clearly supports “tree.” And it is certainly significant that the church fathers who attest to the variant reading all wrote in Latin.

Another, still more compelling reason suggests that the variant arose in Latin and not in Greek. The Latin for “tree” here is *ligno*, while the Latin for “book” is *libro*, much closer to one another than the Greek terms (*biblou* and *xulou*). Apparently the copy of the Vulgate Erasmus used for his reverse translation had the word *book* (*libro*) in the text, though it is possible that Erasmus himself, whether intentionally or unintentionally, independently replaced *ligno* with *libro* as he translated the verse. But was the change—whether Erasmus inherited or reinvented it—necessarily a *mistake*? The fact that textual evidence exists at all for “book” suggests that something more than a bad translation is at work here.

The lead-in wording to the curse formula of Revelation 22:19, “God shall take away his part out of the [X],” is awkward. (Further note that the words *his part* occur nowhere else in the New Testament.) Regardless of the textual evidence, the wording of the text arguably works better with “book of life” than with “tree of life,” especially since it is the curse imposed on those who themselves remove words from the book of prophecy. If “book of life” were original, the expression would simply be an awkward way of saying that God would blot out the offender’s name in the book of life. If the original expression were indeed “God shall take away his part from the tree of life,” the text would be at least as awkward as, if not more than, its alternative, apparently meaning something like “God shall bar him from partaking of the fruit of the tree of life.”⁸ The awkwardness of the wording, in either case, may suggest—as many scholars have in fact suggested—that the curse formula is, ironically, itself a later addition to the original text.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence adduced in the last section and from a purely text-critical perspective, the original reading would most likely have been “tree,” not “book” as reflected in the King James Version (and in the Textus Receptus on which that translation was based). Thus, if our sole concern is with the original text, the question asked at the outset of this study has been answered.

But before rushing to embrace this answer, we might pause for a moment to reflect on what can be learned from the apparently nonoriginal variant. After all, the Latin variant *libro* is in a sense both a book and a tree. That word is the ablative case of the lexical form *liber*, which (as we might guess from such English derivatives as *library*) came to mean “book, parchment, paper” but which originally referred to the bark of a tree. Perhaps more important, the Prophet Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible (often referred to as the Joseph Smith Translation) may motivate interest in the nonoriginal version of the text. His translation was in large measure a midrashic commentary on the KJV text (rather than a restoration of the original text).⁹ In that very Mormon spirit of investigation, we might consider what we can learn from the nonoriginal variant before discarding it.

The reading “book of life,” as has already been noted, makes excellent sense in the context of the curse formula of Revelation 22:19. Indeed, one could argue that “God shall take away his part out of the book of life” is, as was just pointed out, easier to understand than “God shall take away his part out of the tree of life,” thus making the latter the *lectio difficilior*, or “more difficult reading.”¹⁰ As we have seen, the book of life is a register for the recording of the names of those who will enter the New Jerusalem and therefore inherit eternal life. Those whose names are recorded in the book worship the Lamb; those whose names are either not recorded in the book in the first place or recorded but subsequently blotted out worship the beast. Joseph Smith developed a particularly acute interest in this theme in his final years, suggesting a richness in it that remains to be exhausted. At the same time, the usage of “book of life” and “tree of life” in Revelation is in several respects almost synonymous. Each is a symbol for entry

into the New Jerusalem. Each is achieved only by overcoming. Those registered in the book of life are clothed in white raiment, while those approaching the tree of life are they that “wash their robes.”

But while “book of life” makes excellent sense in the context of the curse formula, the original reading, “tree of life,” has rich implications as well. The four tranches of “tree of life” in the scriptures represent a sort of chiasmic ordering. The inaugural usage referring to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden at the dawn of creation is paralleled by the usage in Revelation, both at the end of the Bible and at the end of days, in which the tree of life is the most prominent feature of the New or heavenly Jerusalem, a mirror of the original tree of life in the center of the paradise of God. Between these two groupings of texts representing the beginning and the end are two other groups of texts that seem related: the Proverbs passages and the Book of Mormon passages featured in the visions of Lehi and Nephi. Explicitly, the Book of Mormon tells us that this tree represents the love of God, but both groups of texts can be read as references to Divine Wisdom, either a characteristic of God the Father or a representation of God the Mother. This latter possibility would of course be a distinctively Mormon reading, and it is one I find intriguing. On this reading, when we finally pass through the veil and enter the heavenly Jerusalem, we will be reunited not only with our Father and his Son, but also with our Mother, as well as our own family from this mortality.

That would be the paradise of God indeed.

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NOTES

1. This volume took its name from the city in which it was produced (Alcalá de Henares, Spain, or *Complutum* in Latin). *Polyglot* indicates that the text was presented in multiple languages.
2. Letter to Pierre Barbier, November 2, 1517 (letter 695). See Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 594–841*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 172.
3. Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 136.
4. These can be read, along with a helpful introduction by E. P. Sanders, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983–85), 1:871–902.
5. See Kevin L. Barney, “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 107–30.
6. The title of a major study of this subject by Bernhard Lang expresses the basic point well; see Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: A Hebrew Goddess Redefined* (New York: Pilgrim, 1986). I have discussed these issues

elsewhere at length in Kevin L. Barney, "How to Worship Our Mother in Heaven (without Getting Excommunicated)," *Dialogue* 41/4 (2008): 121–46.

7. Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–243. See also Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 16–25.

8. If that is the original reading, then the intended antecedent is Revelation 22:14, just five verses earlier. God removing "his part" from the tree of life should probably be interpreted in light of the "right to the tree of life" described in that verse. Hence, the rendering in the New Revised Standard Version: "If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."

9. For the concept of much of the Joseph Smith Translation constituting a midrashic commentary on the text, see Kevin L. Barney, "Isaiah Interwoven," *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 379–85.

10. All else being equal, textual criticism holds that the *lectio difficilior* is more likely to be the original reading. This may seem counter-intuitive, but the fact is that scribes tried to make texts easier to read over time, not harder, and thus the more difficult reading is more likely to be the earlier reading.