

Overwritten, Written Elsewhere: Names, Books, and Souls in St. John's Apocalypse

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Two images from the closing chapters of the book of Revelation are central to this paper: (1) having the name of God written on one's forehead and (2) having one's own name written in the Lamb's book of life.

In Revelation 22:3–4, John recounts that once heaven and earth have been made new, “there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.” This image resonates with the account in Exodus 28:36–38 of how Aaron, the Lord's high priest, should “make a plate of pure gold,” “grave upon it. . . Holiness to the Lord,”¹ and then bear this name upon his forehead as part of his temple clothing.

The image is also repeated elsewhere in the book of Revelation. For instance, in Revelation 7:2–3, an angel “cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, saying, hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of God in their foreheads.” In Revelation 9:4, these same instructions are repeated, but with a negative twist: “They should hurt not the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have *not* the seal of God in their foreheads” (emphasis in original). Revelation 14:1 also recounts how the Lamb of God shall stand “on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads.” Finally, it is important to note in this connection that, conversely, the mark of the beast is also to be found on the foreheads of those who bear the beast's name: “And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: and that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or name of the beast, or the number of his name” (Revelation 13:16–17).

The second image, having one's name written in the Lamb's book of life, while not as visually striking, is equally important. In Revelation 20:11–15, John recounts how he

saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. . . . And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

Similarly, in Revelation 2:17 we're told that “to him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.” Or, as Revelation 3:5 puts it: “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.”

Closely related to this image, the opening verse of Revelation 5 also recounts how John saw “a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals.” Section 77 of the Doctrine and Covenants suggests that we ought to understand these seven seals as containing “the things of the first thousand years, and. . . also of the second thousand years, and so on until the seventh” (D&C 77:7). Here, in brief, the seven-sealed book is a kind of compendium of human history. In a final connection with the image of the book, John describes how, as instructed,

he “went unto [an] angel, and said unto him, give me the little book. And he said unto me, take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey” (Revelation 10:9).

In relation, then, to these two sets of images—one set centered on having the name of God written on one’s forehead and one set centered on having one’s name and history written elsewhere in a book—I want to reflect on two basic questions:

- 1. What does it mean to be written on with someone else’s name?**
- 2. What does it mean to have one’s own name written elsewhere in someone else’s book?**

Or, in short, my question is: What does it mean to be *both* written on and written elsewhere?

The soul: Decomposed and distributed

My thesis is that these images, especially when conjoined, tell us something essential about the nature of a soul and what it means for a soul to be saved. But before returning to the images themselves, I’d like to reflect for a few moments on the nature of the soul.

What is a soul?

Laying aside classical and medieval speculations on the topic that would have us understand the soul as an invisible, immaterial, nonspatial, and indivisible substance (though the continuing influence of these speculations should not be underestimated), I’d like to begin instead with section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Here, in verse 15, the soul is described in the following way: “And the spirit and the body are the soul of man.”

This passage, though compact, has deep implications for how we answer the question, what is a soul? According to this verse, the soul should be understood as a composite of two distinguishable things: the spirit and the body. When joined, spirit and body constitute a soul. This, then, is the first crucial point. Souls are not single and indivisible. Souls are split and composite. A soul is a conjunction whose existence depends on the little *and* that joins “the spirit *and* the body.” An additional, related point is that souls, as composite, aren’t localizable in either the spirit or the body. Rather, souls are distributed throughout their composite spirit/body. A soul is a complex, composite, and distributed entity.

A third point: souls are material. We will return in a few moments to the description in section 131 of the Doctrine and Covenants of how spirit is itself material, but even without this information the materiality of the body and the soul’s distribution into its fleshy corporeality is sufficient to identify the soul as deeply material. Even if spirit were immaterial, the soul, as the composite of an “invisible” spirit and a material body, would still be rooted in the spatiality and temporality that is characteristic of matter.

These three strikingly untraditional points, then, characterize the soul: a soul is composite rather than simple, distributed rather than discrete, and material rather than immaterial.

The body of the soul

How deep does this composite, distributed materiality go? Consider, for a moment, the nature of the body. In the course of our daily lives, we treat bodies as if they were simple, discrete unities. But this is not actually the case. In the same way that souls are composite and distributed, bodies are themselves composite and distributed.

It may be helpful at this point to introduce a bit of technical terminology. When, in the course of things, a composite and distributed process is treated as if it were a simple, discrete, and stable unity, let's refer to it (following Bruno Latour) as a "black box."² When we are unconcerned with or unaware of the composite nature of a thing, it appears to us as a black box. For instance, my laptop, though it is obviously composed of many parts and though its functional identity is obviously distributed among its parts, is generally for me a black box: I don't know what many of its parts are, I don't know how they all fit together functionally, and when I use it or carry it around I treat it as if it were a simple unity. (In this sense, we might say that, traditionally, Christianity treats the soul as a black box.) To the degree that something is treated simply as a black box, we will fail to see it as it actually is.

Again, then, in this sense, we typically experience our own bodies as a black box. But if we lift the lid off this black box and look more closely, we're greeted by an astonishing level of multiplicity and complexity. The body is an interpenetrating weave of semiautonomous but deeply interdependent organs, systems, and processes. It is a massive, distributed tangle of heart, lungs, nerves, veins, skin, eyes, tongue, hair, brain, bones, muscles, blood, saliva, acid, cells, DNA, mitochondria, cartilage, bile, teeth, nails, respiration, circulation, digestion, reproduction, sensation, cogitation, and who knows what else—all pulsing in time as one huge semi-stable and quasi-autonomous feedback loop.

In general, however, the human body is a black box.

Of particular importance here is the way in which the body is revealed as an *open* system—once the lid of the black box has been lifted. Nothing in the body is self-sufficient. Everything requires a constant, never-ending, and open engagement with the surrounding environment. Bodies need to breathe, eat, taste, touch, defecate, hear, smell, and feel. At the cellular level, the body is, from moment to moment, perpetually dying and being reborn.

In a crucial sense, then, the body is not only distributed among its parts, it is similarly distributed beyond itself and into its environment. The body, despite its independent motility, has no clean edges, no hard lines. Instead, it bleeds out beyond this fragile, porous shell of skin and hair into the fabric of the world around it, just as the world around it simultaneously bleeds back into the flesh, fiber, and blood of the body itself through constant respiration, digestion, and sensation. Disconnected from air, food, water, and sensation, a body is *not* a body. As a result, to successfully resurrect a body, one would have to successfully resurrect a world.

A final, important point about the nature of the body: the body is not only a composite system that is distributed beyond itself in space; it is also distributed in time. Bodies have (and are) histories. As a composite of processes distributed over a span of time, bodies are constantly in motion. At any given moment, the flesh of the body could be read as a text that tells the story of where that body has been, what it has done, what it has eaten, what it has breathed, what it has thought, and whom it has loved.

But the body bears with it a more deeply distributed history as well, a history that bleeds out beyond the edges of its own birth and death and into the bodies and lives of its parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. We bear this history as the sum total of a biological inheritance that is inscribed in a matrix of genetic and epigenetic processes and that recedes into the mists of deep time and evolutionary history. Everything that a body is, at any given moment in time, is an interwoven composite of many different descending lines of biological inheritance and material history, funneled down, down, down to this particular, narrow configuration given in this particular slice of time. Think of the body at any given moment as a single narrow point of passage where thousands of independent but converging lines of material, ecological, biological, and familial history briefly intersect before they are spun off along new vectors and trajectories of distribution.

The spirit of the soul

It is more difficult to speak of the spirit than the body. Nonetheless, in my view, we know enough to be able to draw a firm line that, at the very least, points in the right direction. First, taking section 131 of the Doctrine and Covenants as our guide, we ought to resist the temptation to think of spirit as entirely different from body. Rather, in order for body and spirit to compose a soul, it makes sense to assume that, despite relative degrees of autonomy, they share enough for their interpenetration to be deep and substantial. Doctrine and Covenants 131:7–8 states bluntly that “there is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; we cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter.” Spirit, then, whatever else we might say about it, is material.

But if spirit is not different from the body with respect to materiality, then in what way is it different? These verses suggest that spirit differs in terms of granularity; it is “more fine or pure.” What kinds of material things are finer, purer, and harder to discern?

We might pose the question this way, When we speak of spirit, what do we understand it to be capable of discerning that the body, on its own, cannot? When Spirit speaks to spirit, it speaks, as the Lord tells Oliver Cowdery in section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants, to minds and hearts: “Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation” (D&C 8:2–3). The stuff of mind is thought and the stuff of heart is feeling. Whatever else spirit may be, we experience spirit as an interpenetrating weave of thoughts, ideas, judgments, feelings, passions, desires, and aversions. Though rooted in the body, this weave of spirit involves a dimension of looped awareness and reflexivity that is finer and harder to discern than those that belong to the body itself.

To say that a spirit is material is to say that, like all material things, it too is distributed and composite. However, like the body, we often treat spirit as if it were a simple, discrete unity. Or, in other words, as with the body, we often treat spirit as a black box. But when we lift the lid on this box, we see clearly that spirit is itself manifest as a complex network of interconnected but semiautonomous processes of thought and feeling. In particular, spirit is manifest in those patterns of desire that combine judgment and feeling in particular orientations toward the world and our experience of it. Our thoughts, actions, goals, dispositions, attitudes, opinions, emotions, and reactions are shaped in profound ways by these complex patterns of desire and aversion.

Further, spirit, like body, is an *open* system. When we watch what is going on in our hearts and minds at any given moment, we find a dizzying array of ideas and feelings arising, receding, competing, converging, and passing—all of their own accord. Ideas from our conversations with other people, from the class we just attended, or from the scriptures we recently read all share time with a snatch from the song we just listened to on the radio, the billboard we just passed, or the movie we recently watched.

Spirit, like the body, is dependent upon and constantly traversed by the ideas and feelings that compose it, ideas and feelings that, like our cells, are born, reproduce, arise, and pass away. A freestanding, self-enclosed spirit would be a contradiction in terms. Just as bodies are the flow of air, food, and sensation that pass through them, spirits are the flow of ideas, emotions, and desires channeled by them. Mind and heart bleed out into the world and the world bleeds back into our hearts and minds. This raw and mutually constitutive interpenetration of spirit and world are what hearts and minds are for.

A final note about spirit: just as the body is not only distributed in space but also in time, spirit is distributed in history as well. Spirit too bleeds out beyond the edges of its own birth and death and into the lives of its parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. The ideas and feelings that shape my heart and mind are inherited—with

an endless array of variations, mutations, inversions, and extrapolations—from, above all, my parents and, in turn, their parents and their parents.

The ingrained patterns of desire and aversion that shape my every waking hour, from my choice of a profession to my choice of a dessert, unfold in time as a consequence of the lines of desire that gave birth to the heart and mind that are mine. At any given moment, one might read my spirit as a text that inscribes a genealogy of desire and a lineage of dispositions that recedes backward from me, through my parents and grandparents, and into the mists of deep time and evolutionary history. Think of spirit, at any given moment, as a single narrow point of passage where thousands upon thousands of independent but converging lines of opinion and desire intersect before they are spun off along new vectors and trajectories of distribution in my own life and in the lives of my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Overwritten

I would like to return, now, to the two questions I posed at the outset:

- 1. What does it mean to be written on with someone else's name?**
- 2. What does it mean to have one's own name written elsewhere in someone else's book?**

First, the issue of being overwritten. The basic image to which this phrase refers is having the name of God (or, alternatively, the mark of the beast) written on our foreheads. I propose that we read this image as referring to the way that as human beings we are inevitably overwritten by a name (or names) that are not our own.

When we ask, who am I?—when we look carefully and deeply at ourselves to see what our identity consists of—we may be surprised to find only the names of others. We may be surprised, at least at first, to see how our bodies are shaped by and overwritten with genetic and material histories that we did not choose. “This is my father’s nose,” we may say, “these are my mother’s eyes, this my grandfather’s laugh, this my great-grandmother’s diabetes, these my uncle’s two left feet.”

We may be surprised, at least at first, to see how our spirits are overwritten with thoughts, feelings, and patterns of desire that are not our own. “This is my father’s habit,” we may say, “these are my mother’s songs, this my grandfather’s unfulfilled desire, this my great-grandmother’s frugality, this my aunt’s taste in clothes.”

If we look closely, we will see how their outside is written on our inside, how the names, genes, and habits of those nearest to us are inscribed in our own flesh.

And, if we look closely enough we will doubtless find, as John’s apocalypse so beautifully describes, that the sum of this soul is overwritten with the name of God. Having gathered the courage to look into our own eyes, we will find God’s name inscribed in what we had (mistakenly) taken to be a face that was singularly our own.

There is no escaping this. To be human is to be overwritten. If we are not overwritten by the name of God, then we will be overwritten with the mark of the beast. To borrow an image from Freud, human beings are palimpsests, records whose contents have been overwritten (and, likely, overwritten again) in such a way as to simultaneously bear traces from layers of different texts. Whatever a “pristine” or “original” document would be—if such a thing were even possible—it would not yet be a human being. The humanity of a human being is constituted by this overwriting, overwriting that is not an act of desecrating vandalism that we ought to lament, but the very process that allows a human soul to emerge as such.

Written elsewhere

But this is only part of the story. We must also consider the second image: having our own names written in someone else's book—in particular, having our names and histories written in the Lamb's book of life. Just as we are overwritten with names that are not our own, those near to us (in particular, our children) are overwritten by names that are not their own (in particular, ours). Here, we have a double distribution of names: overwritten by the names of others, our own names are written elsewhere. Bearing the name of the Father on our bodies, the Son bears our names in the flesh of his book. Indeed, as Isaiah describes it, our names are irreversibly graven on the palms of his hands (see Isaiah 49:16).

My son may one day be surprised, at least at first, to find words coming out his mouth that are not his own, but his father's. He may one day be surprised to find that his hairline is mine, that his desire to teach is mine (as mine is my father's), that his son's eyes are my own. My son may one day be surprised to find that my name—though I do not bear this name myself—is the name written in *his* book.

But this distributed complexity is, by its very nature, a fragile thing. As John warns, if we do not overcome, if we do not find some way to lay down the burden that is our pride and vanity, then our names will not be found in the Lamb's book of life. If we do not wear out our lives in the service of God and in the service of others, if our lives are not spread like seed over the face of the earth, then our names will not be found elsewhere. To pull back into ourselves, to refuse the suffering and resistance of life, to scurry from petty pleasure to petty pleasure hoping to avoid whatever we do not happen to prefer—to do these things will leave us a rootless branch. Having never inscribed the substance of our lives elsewhere, we will suffer the loneliness of it.

Mark of the beast

It is in light of this second image that the difference between the name of God and the mark of the beast is most plain. We have the name of the Father written in our foreheads only when our names are also written elsewhere in the Son's book of life. If our names are not written elsewhere, if our souls are not willingly distributed into the lives of others, then we will become untethered, condemned to wander the face of the earth bearing only the mark of the beast. Not having our names written elsewhere, we will fail to be human. Failing to be human, we will be only beasts.

What is the difference between the "name" of God and the "mark" of the beast? Where the name is intelligible, the mark is an empty signifier. Where a name distributes meaning beyond itself through a complex network of references, the mark blankly refers only to itself.

In this sense, then, we might say that the name of God and the mark of the beast are identical. We bear this name on our foreheads, but only when the complex and distributed nature of this name is understood does it meaningfully refer to anything beyond itself. Only when the name points beyond itself is it salvific. Otherwise, the mark fails to function as a name and it remains (like an idol) empty, mute, and powerless.

Or again: the name of God is the mark of the beast when that name is received as a black box. Having never inquired into the nature of things, having never lifted the lid off this box to discover its distributed complexity, we treat the soul as if it were a single, autonomous, and indivisible thing. We treat our lives as if they were not overwritten and as if they did not need to be written elsewhere. Treating the soul as a black box, we treat the mark on our heads as if it were our *own* name and as if it pointed no further than the skull on which it is inscribed.

Further, as a black box, reduced to the mark of a beast, the name of God is inevitably and emptily circulated as a kind of currency. John is very clear on this point. The mark of the beast is good for only one thing: buying and

selling. “And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: and that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or name of the beast, or the number of his name” (Revelation 13:16–17). Do we sell the name of God for money? Or do we hold it sacred? Is that name, for us, only a mark—a black box, a token of our emptiness, self-regard, and ignorance—that we spend on trinkets and baubles in the hope of being distracted from the distributed difficulty of being human? Or does it in fact name the way in which we—that is, our souls—are not our own?

Money, accumulated, is the universal medium for our pursuit of our “selves” and our own happiness. It is the means we employ in a vain attempt to recover ourselves and have our *own* names written on our *own* foreheads. But if our names are not written elsewhere in the lives of others, then the name with which we are overwritten is an empty signifier without content or vector of redistribution. Having only the mark of the beast, the sign of the natural man, we are overwritten with a meaningless, reference-less name that does not lead us back to someone else in whom we would find our own name inscribed.

The tree of life

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on the image of the tree of life as presented in Revelation 22:2. John’s lengthy description of the heavenly city in these final chapters culminates in the following somewhat puzzling image:

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, 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. (Revelation 22:1–2)

What is potentially puzzling about this image? In this passage, John describes the tree of life as being “in the midst of the street, *and* on either side of the river” (emphasis added). How can the tree of life be on both sides of the river? How can it be in the middle of the street *and* on both sides of the river? Is the tree one or many? Is it single or composite? Is it localized or distributed?

Taking a cue from the redescription of “eternal life” in the Doctrine and Covenants as, in fact, consisting of “eternal lives” (D&C 132:24), we might apply the same emendation to these verses. Here, the tree of *life* (singular) is revealed as the tree of *lives* (plural). The tree of lives is both here and elsewhere, both conjoined and distributed, both root and branch. To be a human being, to be alive, is to be like the tree of lives: ambiguously (and mercifully) distributed.

Finally, we might also note that John describes this tree as bearing “twelve manner of fruits.” Clearly, these twelve fruits refer, at least in part, to the twelve families of Israel. The tree of lives is, in this respect, the family tree common to all human beings. Through all the Lord’s nurturing, grafting, transplanting, digging, dunging, and pruning, this tree has continued to grow and divide. All the tree’s branches, veins, and roots continue to be intertwined in complex patterns of support, dependence, and inheritance. In this tree of lives, the material sum of human history bears fruit—with each of the branches overwritten by the roots, and with each of the roots having their names written elsewhere in the branches.

To read the vast genealogical text of interdependence and variation that this tree is would be to read the Lamb’s own book of life.

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NOTES

1. This quotation appears in full caps in the KJV Bible.
2. See, for instance, Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2–3.