

February 2024

Frank W. Nelte

REVELATION 22:19 ... “BOOK OF LIFE” OR “TREE OF LIFE”?

For some of you in your Bible this verse 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. (Revelation 22:19 AV)

And for others of you in your Bible this verse reads:

and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part **from the tree of life**, and out of the holy city, which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:19 ASV, also Darby, EMTV, ERV, Noyes, NRSV, ESV, etc.)

So which expression is correct for Revelation 22:19? Will God take away someone's part “out of the book of life”, or will God take away someone's part “from the tree of life”. Only one of these two options can be correct, because the tree of life is not at all the same as the book of life.

Let's start by comparing the transliterated Greek texts for this verse in four ancient Greek manuscripts.

ANCIENT GREEK MANUSCRIPT TEXTS FOR THIS VERSE

Greek Text Erasmus 1516 = Textus Receptus (TR)

kai eitis aphaire apo ton logon biblou tes propheteias tautes aphairesei ho theos to meros autou **apo biblou zoes** kai poleos hagas kai ton gegrammenon en biblio touto

Greek Text Stephanus 1550 = Stephanus TR + Beza's 1598 edition

kai ean tis aphaire apo ton logon biblou tes propheteias tautes aphairesei ho theos to meros autou **apo biblou tes zoes** kai ek tes poleos tes hagas kai ton gegrammenon en biblio touto

Greek Text Codex Sinaiticus

kai han tis aphele apo ton logon touton tou bibliou tes prophetias tautes apheli ho ths to meros autou **apo tou xulou tes zoes** kai ek tes poleos tes hagas ton gegrammenon en to biblio touto

Greek Text Byzantine/Majority Text (2000)

kai ean tis aphele apo ton logon tou bibliou tes propheteias tantes apheloi ho theos to meros autou **apo tou xulou tes zoes** kai ek tes poleos tes hagian ton gegrammenon en to biblio touto

The Greek expression “biblou tes zoes” means “book of life”, and the expression “xulou tes zoes” means “tree of life”. So we have the following situation:

The Textus Receptus (i.e. Antiochian text base) reads “**book of life**”. And Codex Sinaiticus (i.e. Alexandrian text base) reads “**tree of life**”.

The above are ancient **Greek** language texts of the Book of Revelation. But let’s also look at an ancient **Latin** language text for this verse.

A **Latin text of Ambrose (4th century A.D.)** titled “De Paradiso, Book 1, chapter 12”, as recorded by Jacques Paul Migne in Patrologia Latina, in volume 14, page 320, reads for Revelation 22:19 as follows:

“et qui demperit de verbis his prophetiae hujus, delebit Deus partem illius **de libro vitae.**” (4th century Latin text of Revelation 22:19)

Translated this reads:

“and whosoever shall take away from these words of this prophecy, God will erase his part **from the book of life.**” (Translation of Latin text of Revelation 22:19)

(Jacques Migne was born in France in 1800 and died in 1875. In 1836 he opened a publishing house near Paris, that produced vast collections of religious works at popular prices, including the above-quoted work.)

Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest known surviving text of the Bible, is dated to the 4th century. That was the time when Ambrose was alive in Italy, and when he quoted the above Latin text. This makes the Latin Text quoted by Ambrose just as old as, and possibly even older than, Codex Sinaiticus.

Another old manuscript, **Codex Vaticanus**, which is also from the 4th century, originally did not contain the Book of Revelation. But a 15th century supplement to Vaticanus (i.e. the manuscript with Gregory number 1957) includes the Book of Revelation, and for Revelation 22:19 it reads (translated) “**book of life**”.

Manuscripts were hand-written. And they all contain vast numbers of mistakes, like spelling mistakes, omitted words, changed words, added words, etc. For example, for **Codex Sinaiticus** Tischendorf himself counted 14,800 corrections that had been made on around 700 manuscript sheets, or about **20**

corrections for every page of the manuscript. And Codex Sinaiticus is the text that the majority of scholars today appeal to as the supposedly most reliable text available.

Next, the **Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament** is an eclectic text based primarily on Codex Sinaiticus, and composed by the German biblical scholar Eberhard Nestle (1851 - 1913), and later further updated by the German scholar Kurt Aland (1915 - 1994). The official title is Novum Testamentum Graece, which is Latin for “New Testament in Greek”. Many scholars also attach great credibility to this Nestle-Aland text.

Now an “eclectic text” is not found in any one specific manuscript. Rather, it is a text constructed from bits and pieces from many different manuscripts, based solely on what the editors themselves believe the text should be. **They pick and choose whatever texts they like**, from whatever source document they like. So an eclectic text has no real credibility for any one specific statement; it is nothing more than someone’s smorgasbord selection and interpretation of what that person or those persons believe the biblical text should be saying. We need to be aware of this, because so many “scholars” place considerable importance on this Nestle-Aland Greek text.

Having been regularly updated by the Institute for New Testament Textual Research, and published by the German Bible Society, the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament is now in its **28th edition**. It is commonly referred to as **NA28**. This text is used, for example, in the **English Standard Version (ESV)** translation, where our verse reads as follows:

and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in **the tree of life** and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (**Rev 22:19 ESV**)

The point here is that many modern “authorities” accept the “tree of life” translation for this verse, based on Codex Sinaiticus and on NA28.

A SOURCE FOR SCRIBAL ERRORS IN MANUSCRIPTS

Let’s consider that a handwritten Greek text, written in many cases by professional scribes who themselves did not understand any Greek, could also very easily be corrupted. The over 14,800 corrections to the Sinaiticus text make clear that mistakes were very common indeed. So consider this:

In biblical Greek the word for “book” is “**biblou**”, and the word here used for “tree” is “**xulou**”. The last three letters in both words are the same, i.e. “...**lou**”. Now the handwritten Greek letters “**beta**” in “**biblou**” and “**xi**” in “**xulou**” could look quite similar with their diagonal strokes.

Furthermore, the common use of **crasis** in the Greek manuscripts compounds the potential difficulty for scribes, who themselves were not fully conversant with the Greek language, to misunderstand what they were copying from an older manuscript. Crasis is the practice of **merging two words into one word** by contracting two vowels into a new vowel or diphthong. For example, the words “kai ego” are written as

“kago”, meaning “and I” or “but I”. Another example is “kan”, which is the crasis for “kai ean”, meaning “and if”. These merged words in handwritten form might not always be clear to a scribe, who himself did not understand Greek.

Another common practice found in Greek manuscripts is the use of **elision**. Elision is the shortening of a word for easier pronunciation, or to make it sound nicer. Typically this involved **dropping a vowel at the end of certain words**. A common example of this is writing the preposition “kata” as “kat” or as “kath”, depending on the letter with which the next word starts. Other examples of elision are “ep” and “eph”, both for “epi”.

These grammatical features commonly found in the Greek manuscripts are easily recognized by people fully conversant with biblical Greek manuscripts. But for European scribes in the Middle Ages, who in many cases themselves did not understand Greek, and who made their living by copying any written material that was presented to them in a number of different languages, these features could create confusion regarding the words they were supposed to copy.

Consider this in terms of us looking at handwritten English words, where the writers had learned to write either in America or in some European country or in Asia or in Africa. The typical handwriting in all these countries is slightly different, and we might not recognize certain letters in English language words written by someone from a different part of the world.

But even when we are looking at the handwriting from someone in our own country, think of the handwritten letters “r, n, m” in English words, or the letters “n” and “u” in handwritten documents, where there can easily be some ambiguity. In such cases it is only because we recognize the letters in the rest of those words, that we can correctly identify whether the one letter we are looking at is supposed to be an r or n or m or u. But if all the other letters in those words are covered over, we might struggle to identify such a letter correctly. The same thing applies to the handwritten Greek manuscripts, where one scribe’s handwriting is different from that of another scribe, sometimes making it difficult to identify certain letters correctly.

While this is not the case for computer-generated fonts for the Greek alphabet, in the handwritten manuscripts of Greek language New Testament books there is the distinct possibility of mistaking the letters “**bib**” in “biblou” with the letters “**xu**” in “xulou”, especially since the last three letters of those two words are the same (i.e. “lou” in both words).

It is quite possible for a scribe to have unintentionally changed the word “biblou” to “xulou, because he had already written the expression “**xulon tes zoes**” five verses earlier, in **verse 14**, although he had also just a few verses before that written the expression “**biblio tes zoes**” in **Revelation 21:27**.

The fact is that there are thousands of mistakes found in the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. In most cases it is still fairly easy to establish the correct text that is intended. The same is true for us in English. When people make spelling mistakes in the things they write, we can almost always still establish the correct text those people intended to write. So in most cases spelling mistakes don’t confuse the intended meaning.

But sometimes a wrong word is not picked up easily. Let me give you an example in English to illustrate this point. Consider the following English sentence.

“The helicopter crash was due to a failure of the .otor”, where there is one difficult-to-read letter in front of the letters “otor”.

Theoretically the correct word here could be either **“motor”** or **“rotor”**. For us non-helicopter pilots the more serious problem might seem to be a failure of the motor. But for a helicopter pilot the more serious of these two options is a failure of the rotor. The point here is: either option (motor or rotor) would make sense in the above sentence. So if the word “rotor” was switched for the word “motor” (or vice versa) in the accident report for our sentence, then such a switch might go unnoticed.

That’s somewhat like our problem in Revelation 22:19. Because in the preceding 20 verses there is one reference to “book of life” and one reference to “tree of life”, therefore a switch (even if it was a genuine unintended mistake) in the actual phrase used in verse 19 might escape detection by most people.

WHY THE OLD LATIN TEXT IS MORE LIKELY TO BE CORRECT

We in the Church of God did not preserve the text of the New Testament. The New Testament was preserved by the “Christian Church” of this world. And here we find something interesting.

The Greek Church did not accept the Book of Revelation as a part of the New Testament canon **until 397 A.D.** at the Council of Carthage. That’s why Codex Vaticanus (produced in the Eastern Church, although preserved by the Western Church) did not originally contain the Book of Revelation. Vaticanus was written before the Council of Carthage. The Greek “church fathers” of the **4th century** (e.g. Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, etc.) were reluctant to recognize the Book of Revelation as a valid part of the New Testament.

By contrast, **the Latin “church fathers”** of the **2nd century** (e.g. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, etc.) already readily recognized Revelation as a part of the New Testament canon. So they were making copies of the Book of Revelation, along with all the other books in the New Testament, about 200 years before the Greek Church accepted Revelation as a valid part of the New Testament.

So the Latin text quoted by Ambrose, referred to above, is likely older than any Greek text for the Book of Revelation. And that Latin text reads (translated) **“the book of life”**.

And that is the correct text. That is what Jesus Christ actually said. So much for technicalities regarding the manuscripts for Revelation 22:19. Now let’s take a look at the actual meaning of this verse.

EXAMINING VERSE 19

Here are the two theoretical options for this verse once again. When we examine the context and the meaning of this verse, then the correct answer becomes obvious.

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. (Revelation 22:19 **AV**)

and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away **his part from the tree of life**, and out of the holy city, which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:19 **ASV**)

The Greek words translated as “**his part**” are “**to meros autou**”. And these Greek words are the same in the different Greek texts for this verse. So whether it says “the book of life” or whether it says “the tree of life”, in both cases “his part” is a translation for “to meros autou”. In this expression “autou” is translated by the possessive pronoun “his”.

Now consider this:

In order to understand whether something is taken away from either “the book of life” or from “the tree of life”, we first need to establish **what is actually being “taken away”**. That determination will lead us to the correct answer.

We need to recognize that some things which can be “taken away” from a book cannot be “taken away” from a tree. And some things that can be taken away from a tree cannot be taken away from a book.

There is a very big difference between “a book” and “a tree”. It follows that you can’t “take away” the same things from those two objects. So when we establish **what** is in danger of being taken away, then it will also become obvious whether God (i.e. Jesus Christ Himself said these words) is referring to a book or to a tree.

Now both versions are agreed that what is in danger of being taken away is “**his part**”. Implied is that someone has “a part” in something, and that “part” is in danger of being taken away. So the Greek word translated as “part” holds the answer to our search. And that Greek word is “meros”.

THE GREEK WORD “MEROS”

The Greek noun “meros” is used 43 times in 41 different verses in the New Testament. Let’s look at a number of the places where this Greek noun is used. This will make clear the meaning of the word “meros”. In each verse I have bolded the translation of “meros”.

And shall cut him asunder, and appoint *him* **his portion** with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:51)

Here the “evil servant” of verse 48 has a share in what will happen to hypocrites. He is **a part of that group**.

And straightway He entered into a ship with His disciples, and came into **the parts** of Dalmanutha. (Mark 8:10)

The area they came to was **a part of that territory**.

If your whole body therefore *be* full of light, having **no part** dark, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle does give you light. (Luke 11:36)

This is a reference to **no part of the body** being dark.

And the younger of them said to *his* father, Father, give me **the portion** of goods that falls *to me*. And he divided unto them *his* living. (Luke 15:12)

Here the younger son wanted **a part of the goods** that made up the total inheritance.

And they gave Him **a piece** of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. (Luke 24:42)

Here they gave the resurrected Jesus Christ **a part of a cooked fish**.

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments, and made **four parts**, to every soldier **a part**; and also *His* coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. (John 19:23)

The soldiers divided Jesus Christ’s **clothing into four parts**, with each part consisting of some clothing items.

Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and **in the parts** of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, (Acts 2:10)

Some Jews had come from **certain parts of the country** of Libya.

From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of **every part**, makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:16)

Here it refers in analogy to **every part of the body**.

Blessed and holy *is* he that **has part in** the first resurrection: on such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Revelation 20:6)

He that has **a part in the first resurrection** will reign with Jesus Christ.

But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have **their part** in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death. (Revelation 21:8)

These individuals will be **a part of those who will die** in the lake of fire.

We've now looked at ten verses where "meros" is used. And what becomes very obvious is that this Greek noun "meros" always applies to **a part of something that is bigger**. "Meros" does not refer to something that is on the outside. No, "meros" always represents a small part of some greater entity.

So note:

It is impossible for any human being "to have a part in the tree of life".

For someone to have "a part" in the tree of life implies that **the person must actually be a small part of that tree!** The above ten Scriptures show this application of "meros" quite emphatically.

But that is impossible. No person can ever be a part of a tree. And no "part" of the tree of life can possibly be taken away. Therefore the statement in Revelation 22:19 cannot possibly read "his part from **the tree** of life". God has not offered anybody "a part" of the tree of life. Rather, what God is offering is **access to the fruits produced by the tree of life**. But that's not the same as having "a part of the tree".

Furthermore, if, theoretically speaking, any "part" of the tree of life were to be removed, then **the tree of life itself** would be damaged in some way. A part of it would be missing. And that is not possible.

On the other hand, all those who truly repent have "a part in **the book** of life". They (we) have "a part" in the book of life because their (our) names are entered into the book of life upon genuine repentance. And for God to take away a person's "part" out of the book of life means that God removes that person's name from the book of life. Something is actively taken away from the book of life, a specific person's name.

For the first resurrection only (i.e. this does not apply to the people who will live during the millennium) God is looking for a very specific number of names to enter into the book of life. That number is 144,000. And if any of the names intended to be a part of those 144,000 are “taken away”, then God will find a replacement for every name that is taken away. At the time of Jesus Christ’s second coming there will be exactly 144,000 names in the book of life.

For the first resurrection the total number of names in the book of life is fixed. That number will not be decreased for any reason. The identity of many of the names in that book is at this point in time already fixed (e.g. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, etc.). But there are also already other names in the book of life (e.g. our names) that at this point in time are not yet fixed. They are there, but they are still capable of being removed, depending on how we conduct our lives.

And if for the reason stated in verse 19 some of the names in this category are removed from the book of life, then those removed names will be replaced by other names. In that way the total number of names in the book of life at Christ’s second coming is fixed.

Revelation 22:19 should be seen in reference to Revelation 20:6. Those who have a part in the first resurrection also have their names in the book of life. And anyone whose name God takes out of the book of life will also not be in the first resurrection.

Revelation 22:19 is the very last statement of instruction in the whole Bible. The following two verses (verses 20-21) represent a brief conclusion, focusing on Jesus Christ who gave this information to His servant John. And that very last instructive statement of the Word of God spells out that the absolutely most important thing in our interaction with God is that our names must be in the book of life.

The book of life is what is important. The tree of life, by comparison, only highlights one of the “fringe benefits” for those who will be in the first resurrection, those whose names will be in the book of life. Attempting to conclude the Bible with a reference to “**the tree** of life” detracts from the more important matter of making sure that our names will be in **the book** of life.

Yes certainly, the tree of life is very important in God’s plan. But the book of life is more important, because it presents **the foundation** on which access to the tree of life will be established. People whose names will not be in the book of life will also not have access to the tree of life.

And, as mentioned already, it is impossible for any person to have “**a part**” of the tree of life.

So the correct text for Revelation 22:19 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. (Revelation 22:19 AV)

IN CONCLUSION

In one sense I could have just limited this article to this explanation of the Greek word “meros”, showing that it is impossible for any person to have “a part” in any tree. The book of life consists of the names that are written in it. If there are no names at all, then there is also no book! A book requires content, which content can be removed or added to. And “the book of life” is the only possible correct option for Revelation 22:19.

But restricting this discussion to only the explanation of book vs. tree would have left open the argument: “yes but **the oldest Greek manuscript** says tree of life”. To respond to that line of reasoning I have shown that the oldest Greek manuscript (Codex Sinaiticus) is riddled with 14,800 corrections, and that the Greek Nestle-Aland text is of modern origin, and it does not represent any specific preserved text. So neither of these two Greek texts is a reliable source document.

There is no reason to assume that this change from “book of life” to “tree of life” involved any ulterior motive, since this change does not advance any specific teaching. It is safe to say that this change represents a genuine mistake by scribes who did not understand the meaning of the original text, scribes who could not understand that in this sentence “tree of life” doesn’t make any sense. It represents a genuine mistake. And therefore the old Latin text that has been preserved becomes an important witness.

Consider also:

As small children we develop the dexterity to correctly form every letter of the alphabet. By the time we are adults that skill has been well established. Now with the ability to correctly write every letter of the alphabet, we could in fact become scribes, who manually copy documents in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, etc., without knowing any of those languages. We just have to copy the letters of every word in the source document. If we are copying a text written in a language that is foreign to us, we don’t have to understand the meaning of what we are copying. We just faithfully copy every letter and every word from the source document.

But in the process of copying dozens of pages in a language that is foreign to us we can easily make a mistake here and another mistake there. And then it will be very difficult for us to spot those mistakes later when we do the proofreading. That is because we don’t actually understand the text we are proofreading, even though we ourselves have written it.

That was the situation for scribes in the Middle Ages, who made copies of Greek manuscripts. In very many cases those scribes could not actually read what they were writing. They had simply developed the skill of correctly forming every letter of the alphabet, without understanding the meaning of what they were copying. And so modern scholars have found great numbers of mistakes in the manuscripts that have survived.

And with this being the case, I have pointed out how easy it is for the handwritten expression “the book of life” to totally unintentionally be changed to “the tree of life”. Handwriting styles have always varied greatly, making some handwritten statements difficult for other people to decipher correctly.

So understanding that in Revelation 22:19 the expression “the tree of life” simply doesn’t make sense, and that the expression “the book of life” makes perfect sense, is the important part in our examination of this verse. And the examination of the manuscript evidence is simply supplementary material that further supports the correct understanding.

Frank W Nelte