

## "I WILL NOT ERASE HIS NAME FROM THE BOOK OF LIFE" (REVELATION 3:5)

J. William Fuller\*

In the minds of many Christians, the possible loss of one's salvation lurks menacingly behind the enigmatic promise applied to the "overcomer" in Rev 3:5: "I will not erase his name from the book of life." The implication of the verse seems to be that those believers who do not overcome will be blotted out of the book and hence lose their "salvation." This article will seek to establish the intention of the perplexing statement of this verse, an intention that, we shall see, does not include the loss of what is normally meant by eternal salvation.

### I. PRESENT VIEWS OF THE PASSAGE

The average reader is supported in his fears by many commentators, who do indeed find the potential removal of the Christian's eternal life in the background of the verse. Beasley-Murray appears to hold this position when he writes of the book of life in the OT:

To have one's name blotted out from the book is to die . . . . Extension into final destiny is made when the registry of the citizens is understood as that of the eternal kingdom of God . . . . If the exalted Lord has power to strike out names from the book of life, this is because the book is his . . . . The symbol thus conveys the notion that alike election and redemption are in Christ and through Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Other commentators are more explicit. Caird writes: "Yet the predestination in which John believes is a conditional predestination. A man cannot earn the right to have his name on the citizen roll, but he can forfeit it."<sup>2</sup> J. M. Ford writes: "The book of life then meant the list of those destined for everlasting life."<sup>3</sup> She continues: "Inscription in the book of life would assure the nominees of salvation and removal from it would be associated with death."<sup>4</sup> Other commentators could be quoted,<sup>5</sup> but this position varies little in its details and repre-

\*J. William Fuller is pastor of Hope Union Church in Rosemead, California.

<sup>1</sup>G. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (ed. R. E. Clements and M. Black; London: Oliphants, 1974) 98-99; see also "The Contribution of the Book of Revelation to the Christian Belief in Immortality," *SJT* 27 (1978) 76-93, esp. 87.

<sup>2</sup>G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper, 1966) 49.

<sup>3</sup>J. M. Ford, *Revelation* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975) 409.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. L. H. Hogh and M. Rest, *IB*, 12. 392-394; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark), 1. 84.

sents the consensus among those whose theology is able to embrace it.

As implied in the above statement, many conservative scholars are understandably reluctant to commit themselves to a position that violates both the basic tenets of salvation apart from works and the doctrine of eternal security (positions that are, they believe, also the apostle John's—e.g., John 21:31). These scholars' theological unity does not, however, extend to an exegetical unity in respect to the solution to the theological difficulties raised by Rev 3:5.

John Walvoord suggests two solutions.<sup>6</sup> (1) This may be an instance of litotes.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the prima facie improbability of this suggestion, however, it entails the denial of the very probable view that "overcomer" comprises a special group of Christians, a denial that few commentators wish to make. That is, if all Christians are not overcomers, it follows that neither will all Christians inherit the promises made exclusively to this special type of individual. But if some Christians do not inherit the promise in Rev 3:5, which (as it is usually interpreted) is a promise of eternal life, they will be excluded from eternal life—a theological position that, *ad absurdum*, is excluded. It is this dilemma that confronts Lang's position, for example, but that he avoids.<sup>8</sup> Rightly rejecting litotes as the answer, Walvoord makes another suggestion: (2) The book may contain the name of every person before he is born, but if the person chooses not to receive Christ his name is blotted out. This position, however, contradicts Rev 13:8; 17:8, which indicate that the names are or are not written "from the foundation of the world." The names are either permanently present or absent, according to two very clear statements. Hence the second suggestion also lacks exegetical integrity.

Given only these two interpretations, one is probably better off suspending judgment, which is Mounce's choice: "Better to allow the text, even when difficult, to present its own picture."<sup>9</sup> There is, however, another option available to solve this exegetical and theological puzzle—a solution that emerges from the text when closely scrutinized. To solve it we must find the correct fitting for three exegetical pieces.

## II. THE "ONE WHO OVERCOMES"

The first piece to the puzzle is the identity of the "one who overcomes." In the drama of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3, the "overcomer" or "victor" figures as the hero or protagonist throughout. This is the Christian who is victorious over the threats to the spiritual health of him and his church by virtue of his resisting the pressures of persecution and enduring in faithfulness "until the end" (2:26)—whether the "end" comes in martyrdom (12:11), natural

<sup>6</sup>J. F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 82.

<sup>7</sup>A figure of speech that expresses less than what is intended. In this case litotes would imply that there is no implication about the eternality of the nonovercomer.

<sup>8</sup>G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London: Oliphants, 1945) 91-92.

<sup>9</sup>R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 114.

death (2:10?) or the return of Christ. The singular—"one who overcomes"—implies that the victory is made on an individual basis, that not all Christians attain it.

Indeed, the book of Revelation might well be described as one long war of both a cosmic and spiritual nature, so the challenge to remain in the faith given in each of the letters to the churches at the outset of the book is quite appropriate. Believers (both in the churches and in the tribulation period), John contends, did and will experience frightening opposition from spiritual forces that threaten physical danger and death for those who choose to remain faithful. This is why martyrs figure so prominently in the book (e.g. 6:9-11; 12:11; 20:4). It is also for this reason that special promises are made to those who do not renege on their commitment to follow Christ, who himself became an overcomer when he remained obedient to the Father in spite of death (3:21; 5:5). John indicates that to resist and remain faithful in this life, like Christ, results in a peculiarly close relationship with him in the next (2:17). That in essence summarizes the special promises made to this individual. The exclusivism of the title "overcomer" implies, however, that some believers—namely, those who do not remain faithful, who deny him under persecution—will not inherit those promises.

Some have argued, however, that the term "overcomer" applies to all Christians. While that is a more debatable interpretation in 1 John, it is not exegetically sound in Revelation, and it virtually eliminates each of the letters' respective motivations to remain faithful as well as the very need to urge faithfulness.<sup>10</sup> A command that everyone keeps is superfluous, and a reward that everyone receives for a virtue that everyone has is nonsense. Surely the burden of proof is on the shoulders of those who would argue that the warnings are not genuinely addressed to true believers as they seem to be and that the promises are genuinely addressed to all believers (as they do not seem to be). Hence the "overcomer" is the individual Christian who enjoys special benefits in eternity for refusing to give up his faith in spite of persecution during life on earth.

### III. THE "BOOK OF LIFE"

The second piece of the puzzle involves the book of life. What precisely is it, and what does it contain? As virtually everyone who comments on this passage notes, the book of life originated in the ancient Near East as simply a list of the members of the community. To erase one's name<sup>11</sup> was probably equivalent to condemning the person to death (e.g. Deut 29:20), since that person would then be denied the necessities and privileges enjoyed by the community.

The OT concept of blotting out the name may in addition refer to something other than or more than death. It could also involve the removal of the memory of a person, as in the case of Amalek (Exod 17:14; Deut 25:19). This in Semitic

<sup>10</sup>It seems likely that this interpretation, which has no exegetical support in Revelation, originates from a theological position that embraces the view that no true Christian ever denies the faith. Again, however, this view cannot be derived from a study of Revelation.

<sup>11</sup>Ford (*Revelation* 409) writes that erasing the name "probably means that the parchment was immersed in water so that the name would actually be blotted out."

thought was really worse than death, since one's memory or reputation was regarded as part of oneself that lived on.<sup>12</sup> To erase one's name was to exclude a person from his historical existence after death.<sup>13</sup>

In this same vein Ford writes: "The book or books may be identical with the book of remembrance in which were recorded the deeds of those who feared the Lord; Mal 3:16; cf. II Cor 3:3, Luke 10:20, Heb 12:23 (also Rev 4:4, 6:11)."<sup>14</sup>

In the NT the term is conveyed both by *biblion tēs zōēs* and *biblos tēs zōēs* without any apparent distinction. Further, the NT concept of the book of life is exclusively spiritual and functions as a metaphor<sup>15</sup> for God's memory of the righteous and their deeds.

That deeds are also contained in the book is probable not only from the likely identity of the book with the OT book of remembrance (as Ford noted above) but also from the events of the judgment described in Rev 20:12-15. Though it is possible to unravel the meaning of the latter passage in such a way as to exclude works from the book of life (i.e., the "books" contain everyone's deeds, while the "book" contains only names of the elect), this view seems unlikely. It is first of all clear that in Revelation deeds figure prominently in the believer's eternal destiny (cf. the recurring phrase "I know your deeds" in the letters to the churches, as well as the special treatment of martyrs in Rev 20:4 and elsewhere)<sup>16</sup> so that the inclusion of believers at this judgment of works is not unlikely.<sup>17</sup> Further, based on the extreme dichotomy between the righteous and the wicked throughout Revelation, it is attractive to imagine that the names and deeds of the elect are in the "book," whereas the names and deeds of the nonelect are in the "books."<sup>18</sup> Neither of these views can be dogmatically maintained, of course, and the simple fact is that little can be definitely known of the contents of the "book" from the Bible. It is interesting in this connection, however, that in every passage in Revelation where the book of life is treated except 3:5 there is a contrast between the nonelect and the elect, so that the simple presence or absence of one's name is the only factor necessary for John to make his point in those respective passages. No elaboration of the other (possible) con-

<sup>12</sup>A. R. Johnson writes in this connection: "Hence the extermination of the name is regarded as the greatest disaster which can befall man"; *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1961) 3.

<sup>13</sup>For a good treatment of this subject in the OT see S. B. Frost, "The Memorial of the Childless Man," *Int* 26 (1972) 437-450. He observes that the need for a memorial in the case of the childless man points out the great need Israelites felt for extending their historical existence beyond the grave.

<sup>14</sup>Ford, *Revelation* 409.

<sup>15</sup>More specifically, the figure is hypocatastasis; cf. E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1968) 744-747.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Charles, *Revelation*, 1. cxv-cxvi.

<sup>17</sup>Mounce supports this view as well (*Revelation* 365).

<sup>18</sup>While apparently sensing this, Mounce hesitates to state with certainty the relationship between works and the book: "The relationship between the record of men's deeds and the book of life is not clear" (*ibid.*, p. 366).

tents of the book is necessary if all that is needed is to know whether one's name is there, making absolute certainty of the complete contents of the book elusive.

In summary, the book of life appears to contain the names and deeds of the elect, the former (at least) having been inscribed there from eternity past.

#### IV. THE "NAME"

The final and most important piece of the puzzle is the correct understanding of *onoma*. Bietenhard concisely lists four uses of *onoma* in the NT<sup>19</sup>: (1) the name of a person; (2) "name" representing one's reputation; (3) "name" for "person"; (4) prepositional combinations. Assuming the comprehensiveness of his list at this point in the argument, the problem quite simply is to determine which of these uses is represented in Rev 3:5.

All commentators assume that use (1) represents the particular meaning of the word in the above verse, justifying that view from Exod 32:32. In that passage Moses asks God to blot him out of his book, which does indeed appear to be a clear use of meaning (1).<sup>20</sup> It is probably true that the basic Biblical idea of the book of life in the NT finds its origin in such passages. In fact Exod 32:32 probably influences Rev 3:5 since, as Kraft insightfully points out,<sup>21</sup> there are some fairly subtle parallels between the situation of the Church in Sardis and the situation of Israel at Sinai. However, to assume that because Exod 32:32 has influence on Rev 3:5 it therefore totally informs the meaning of erasing one's name in the latter is an extremely precarious position.

First, unlike in Revelation 3 the people who sinned in Exodus 32 were not threatened with the prospect of being blotted out of the book of life. Rather, it was Moses alone who beseeched God to blot him out if God would not forgive the nation. The people were instead punished with physical death (Exod 32:28; 33:5) and with an unexplained punishment (32:35). These make the connection between Moses' request for himself and Rev 3:5, which is applied to the people of the Church, less precise.

Furthermore, the very act of recording names in the book of life has evolved significantly between the OT and the NT, as has the meaning of erasing the name, both at least partly due to the influence of apocalyptic literature. To mention only one development, there is the new idea of eternally ancient election (or perhaps foreknowledge) in connection with the recording of the names (cf. Rev 13:8).

Hence it seems unlikely that the Exodus passage completely determines the meaning of *onoma* in Rev 3:5. Rather, John seems to have adopted certain aspects of the Exodus passage for his own particular purposes, the latter necessarily functioning as the primary consultants in determining his intention. And when Johannine usage is consulted in this case it is clear that John's meaning differs from that of Exod 32:32.

<sup>19</sup>H. Bietenhard, "Onoma," *TDNT* 5 (1967) 270-271.

<sup>20</sup>Technically Exod 32:32 does not mention "name," but it is clearly implied (by synecdoche of the whole for the part—cf. Bullinger, *Figures* 635-640).

<sup>21</sup>H. Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT 16a; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1974) 75-78.

There is one final problem, however, with attributing use (1) to this passage, hitherto unaddressed. It also concerns Johannine usage—i.e., how can John write in Rev 13:8; 17:8 that one's name is either recorded in or absent from the book of life from the foundation of the world, and then in Rev 3:5 indicate that one's name can be present at one time and absent (i.e., erased) at another? These two positions—one emphasizing the eternal permanence of the *onoma* and the other the possibility of the temporal removal of it—are in extreme tension (if not actually contradictory) and indicate that another interpretation is necessary.<sup>22</sup>

In fact one of the things one notices as he begins a serious study of *onoma* in Revelation and attempts to categorize the term according to Bietenhard's list is that the evidence does not support the hard and fast semantic boundaries that his list delineates. In Rev 2:17, for example, the overcomer is promised a new *onoma*, which seems at first glance to perfectly conform to the first of Bietenhard's listed uses. But does it? In fact the new *onoma* is closely related to, and based on, the person's spiritual reputation in the sight of God. Indeed it is likely that the new *onoma* is really a description of the person's spiritual reputation, a use of the word that conforms closely (though imperfectly) to Bietenhard's second meaning.

This blurring of the semantic categories of *onoma* in Revelation can be clearly perceived when the following instances of the word are examined with a view to distinguishing between the relative strength of the translations "name," "reputation" and "nature." The *onoma* of the ashen horse is Death (6:8), that of the star, Wormwood (8:11), that of the angel of the abyss, Abaddon or Apollyon (translated "destruction," 9:11); the beast has blasphemous "names" (13:1; cf. 17:1, 3); etc. It is clear from these examples that the translations "name" and "reputation" or "nature" do not always maintain distinct semantic boundaries in Revelation.

There may be other instances, but the above examples illustrate the pattern. Bietenhard's first category is inadequate to describe many of the occurrences of *onoma* that seem at first glance to fit into it. It appears, rather, that categories (1) and (2) merge to form a hybrid, so that often *onoma* describes something of the nature of the individual in question (though "nature" as a translation has its inadequacies as well). This semantic idiosyncrasy is, interestingly, peculiarly Semitic, an observation whose significance will be expanded below.

It now seems appropriate to offer an alternative interpretation of Rev 3:5 based on our analysis to this point. It seems likely that in fact the blurring of semantic categories of *onoma* in Revelation has a direct bearing on the meaning of Rev 3:5, so that in vv 1 and 5 the term means more than just "name" and is actually in some sense descriptive of the person and his works (faithfulness). In the introduction to the letter to Sardis, where the basic problem of the Church is set forth, we read, "You have a name that you are alive, and you are dead"<sup>23</sup> (Rev

<sup>22</sup>It is of course theoretically easy to harmonize the two positions by suggesting that the danger in Rev 3:5 is simply an exception to the rule of permanence. That harmonization, however, while perhaps palatable to the theologian who seeks synthesis, is improbable when it is considered as an exegetical explanation of the two opposing views expressed in Revelation.

<sup>23</sup>NASB.

3:1). Here *onoma* clearly means more than just "name" and instead carries the meaning "reputation." This verse is in fact generally regarded as one of only three or four such instances in the entire NT,<sup>24</sup> though that assertion is probably overstated.

The problem of Sardis therefore was that their earthly *onoma* did not accord with the truth. Stated differently, their *onoma* on earth was quite different from that in heaven.<sup>25</sup> The public thought the Church was spiritually alive, whereas in God's eyes it was spiritually dead.<sup>26</sup>

To what degree does the meaning of *onoma* in v 1 influence the meaning of the word in v 5? It is quite likely, in fact, that the meaning of the word in v 1 strongly influences that in v 5. The Church has a false *onoma* (v 1), and the implied threat is that their *onoma* will be removed from the heavenly register (v 5). Although they may have preserved their earthly *onoma*, they are in serious danger of permanently losing their heavenly one. Hence "name" in vv 1 and 5 appears to be used, for all practical purposes, synonymously. Thus the critical spiritual appraisal of the Church by Christ at the commencement of the letter is related meaningfully to the implied threat expressed by him at its conclusion.

Another example of the meaningful relationship between thoughts in the letter is in v 4. "Walking in white," the reward for the faithful, is related by its opposition to "soiled garments," the description of those who are no longer faithful. In both of the above examples specific words, either a catchword (*onoma*) or antonyms (white garments, soiled garments), play important roles in identifying relationships between ideas.

Such interplay between thoughts is common to many of the letters to the churches and is a product of their well-known highly stylized form. In fact it would be very surprising, in the light of the above observation, to find that the indictment in v 1 is exegetically unrelated to the implied threat in v 5 since the two issues are such obvious theological partners.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "Name," *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia* 4 (1975) 365.

<sup>25</sup>Kraft, without picking up on the major points made in this article, nevertheless writes in *Offenbarung* 76: "'Before my God' stands in opposition to the name that the congregation has in public" (translation mine).

<sup>26</sup>The terms "alive" and "dead" virtually always refer to physical life in Revelation. In Rev 3:1, however, they are obviously metaphorical, though the precise implication of the figure is more elusive. Perhaps (as implied by the "soiled garments" figure in v 4) the intended meaning is pure versus impure Christianity or the absence versus the presence of foreign religious elements in worship. The statement seems to refer to the Church in general, though some individuals are excluded. If the problem of the Church was idolatry, as Kraft has forcefully argued on the basis of similarities with Exodus 32, then the Church's earthly reputation of "life" (= true Christianity) refers to the perspective of the general public, with whom they engaged in idolatrous practices. The Church no doubt compromised for the very reason of having a good reputation in the city. In comparison with filthy garments (the lostness of the general populace), the reasoning may have been, slightly soiled ones do not look too bad. The problem of course is that God does not compare soiled garments with filthy ones but with newly cleaned ones. He does not compare some deeds (the Church's situation) with no deeds (the city's situation) but with "completed" deeds (v 2).

<sup>27</sup>One might argue that the interrelationship between ideas in the letter is manifested in the "deadness" spoken of in v 1, which is then echoed in erasing the *onoma* since, as was previously noted, death was the

One final example of the phenomenon, drawn from another of the letters, should suffice to show the author's interest in supporting certain themes within a letter through the use of similar or opposite terms. In the letter to Pergamum (2:12-17) there is an interplay, like the interplay in the letter to Sardis, between a negative quality of the Church (eating things sacrificed to idols, v 14) and one of the rewards promised to the overcomer (the opportunity to eat God's manna, v 17).

To summarize thus far, Rev 3:5 indicates that the Church is in danger of losing their *onoma* "in the sight of God" (v 2), even though they have managed to preserve it among people.<sup>28</sup> If they are not careful, John says, their *onoma* will remain on earth after they have died and entered eternal life.

In addition to the contextual arguments in favor of this wider meaning of *onoma*, it conforms well with other uses of the word in the seven letters, especially 2:17; 3:12. In these passages the overcomer is promised a new *onoma* that conforms to his faithfulness, or, one might say, to his heavenly reputation. When he dies he will not leave his *onoma* among men but will find it preserved in heaven.

Finally, this wider interpretation of *onoma* integrates well with the anthropology of Revelation, unfortunately a neglected subject in Revelation studies. We have already noted the probability of the inclusion of works in the book of life, which is in harmony with John's general perspective on eternity. There is generally a very strong bond between one's earthly works and his heavenly identity. The thought sequence seems to be the following: One's good works (including faithfulness; cf. 2:2-3, 19) produce a good reputation in heaven (cf. the recurring phrase "I know your deeds" in Rev 2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15; cf. also 2:9, 13). The good reputation in turn results in receiving an honorable eternal identity (a "new name," 2:17; 3:12), which in Revelation is closely associated with rewards.

Further relationship between one's works and heavenly identity is found in the treatment of martyrs. In Rev 6:9-11 they are given white robes and in 20:4 they are given ruling positions. Hence their good works and their heavenly identities are closely associated. It is the above privileges and positions that those who deny or compromise their faith rather than their lives will lose, as implied in Rev 3:5.

The suggested interpretation also reflects an OT anthropology, which is an additional significant point in its favor since Revelation utilizes many Semitisms.<sup>29</sup> It is not at all unusual for the OT to use "name" in a wider sense than just a notation of personal identity. It would perhaps be appropriate to begin substantiating this point by observing that one finds a wider meaning of "name"

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natural result of erasing the name in the ancient Near East. This suggestion is however by no means excluded by the argument of this article. But it is questionable whether John would have been aware of that ancient connection. Further, it seems likely that he was influenced in his concept of the book of life more by apocalyptic literature than by ancient traditions.

<sup>28</sup>The contextual argument is what diminishes the importance of *onoma* in v 4 for explaining v 5. The thematic relationship between vv 1 and 5 demonstrates the more important semantic relationship between the occurrences of *onoma* in those two verses than in the former.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Charles, *Revelation*, 1. cxlii-cii.

in Exod 33:12, 17 following Moses' request to be blotted out of the book. His intimate relationship with Yahweh is described in terms of having been known to Yahweh "by name."<sup>30</sup> In a passage from whose seeds Rev 3:1-6 has grown, and from which many assumptions about the meaning of Rev 3:5 have been made, the mention of Moses' relationship with his God in Exodus 33 in similar terms to Rev 3:5 is noteworthy. Certainly the expression of his intimacy and special relationship to God in terms of his "name" being known supports the argument that *onoma* in our passage means more than a simple notation of identity.

Other passages also come to mind: Prov 22:1: "A good name is to be desired more than great riches" (Prov 22:1);<sup>31</sup> "To the eunuchs who hold fast my covenant, to them I will give in my house and within my walls a memorial . . . ; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off" (Isa 56:4-5).<sup>32</sup> In the Semitic mind "name" often meant more than just "name"; it was considered an extension of oneself and/or often a notation of the quality of one's life. Hence those who had a bad reputation or lifestyle were called "nameless" (Job 30:8).<sup>33</sup>

How then shall we translate *onoma* in Rev 3:5? The translation that seems to communicate most effectively is "title": "I will not blot his title out of the book of life." Another candidate is "nickname," which conveys the intimacy but is too informal. These terms capture many of the semantic notions behind the word, however.

Rev 3:5, like the OT verses cited above, promises that God will remember and preserve the *onoma* of the Christian who overcomes, implying a peculiarly close relationship between God and this believer. But the implicit warning is that the Christian who denies the faith will lose that privileged position and identity and relationship, even though that Christian will enter eternal life. The concept of an honorable name versus a shameful one is somewhat foreign to the western mind. The difference in perception, however, may be the very reason this verse has been misunderstood for so long.<sup>34</sup> Suffice it to say that John communicates to the Church in Sardis that there is at least to some degree a single and eternal psychological and ontological identity possessed by each Christian, whose quality of

<sup>30</sup>The figure here is probably metonymy of the effect (name) for the cause (intimacy). See Bullinger, *Figures* 564-566.

<sup>31</sup>NASB.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>These phenomena are well known to readers of OT anthropology; see Frost, "Memorial" 437-450; Johnson, *One and Many* 3; M. H. Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism* (ed. H. M. Orlinsky; New York: Ktav, 1970) 239-244. For an exhaustive bibliographic treatment of the subject see R. Singerman, *Jewish and Hebrew Onomastics: A Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1977).

<sup>34</sup>Yet while foreign it is by no means unknown. For certain modern observations relevant and irrelevant to this discussion see R. Slovenko, "On Naming," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 36 (1970) 208-219. Further, listen to Humpty Dumpty: "Certain names imply that their owners have specific characteristics," so said Humpty Dumpty to Alice. 'A name,' he suggested, 'implies an identity.' Alice asked, 'Must a name mean something?' Humpty Dumpty responded, 'Of course it must. . . . My name means the shape I am. . . . With a name like yours you might be any shape, almost'" (L. Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*). Finally, we hear in the soundtrack from the recent movie "Fame" a similar understanding: "I want to live forever/Baby, remember my name."

eternal life (not whether there will be eternal life) is essentially determined during that Christian's earthly life. Hence the same Christian who overcomes also eats of the hidden manna (2:17), rules with Christ (2:26-28), etc. It is this notion that makes the promise of Rev 3:5 truly wonderful and the implied threat of the verse truly awful.

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Most of the previous treatments of Rev 3:5 have focused too much on both Biblical and extra-Biblical word studies, rather than the context of the verse, to explain its meaning. As a result they have concluded with a soteriological interpretation that contradicts basic Johannine thought.

When the context of Rev 3:5 is honored, it is best understood not in soteriological terms but in the sense of promising the preservation of more than the faithful Christian's eternal existence: It promises a unique and honorable eternal identity. The unfaithful Christian, conversely, will find that even as he on earth was ashamed of Christ's *onoma*, Christ will in heaven be ashamed of his (Matt 10:33; 2 Tim 2:12). It is this promise and threat that makes endurance through the kinds of trials and temptations catalogued in Revelation 2-3 conceivable.

Finally, observe the following benefits that accrue to this interpretation: (1) The introduction of *onoma* in v 1 is permitted an appropriate amount of influence over the interpretation of the letter; (2) the theological difficulties posed by the potential loss of one's "salvation" disappear; (3) the conflict arising from John's indication of the eternal permanence of one's name in the book of life on the one hand (Rev 13:8; 17:8) versus that of the temporal removal of it on the other (Rev 3:5) disappears, since *onoma* is used in slightly different ways in each (i.e., in the former the word probably has its simplest meaning, "name"); (4) the unity of the letter to Sardis emerges in the light of the relationship between vv 1 and 5.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Special thanks to Dennis Hutchinson for reading and evaluating this paper.