

Focus on the Kingdom

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FAQ

If, as you maintain, angels cohabited with human females in Genesis 6, why does Jesus say that angels do not marry nor are given in marriage?

This question gives us an opportunity to examine our method in the study of the Bible.

First, it is important to start with an open mind. To help with this, start by asking yourself: what view of this issue did I learn from earliest times and/or what view is held by my friends in the faith? Then make appropriate allowance for your natural prejudice in favor of those long-held views or the views of your immediate Christian colleagues. There may be no fixed view one way or the other. In that case fair evaluation is made easier. One thing is certain: What you have always believed, especially if you learned it from trusted teachers when you were young, will tend to seem right. That factor must be consciously allowed for.

Next, take the passage in Genesis *in its own Old Testament context first*. Do not imagine that it is right to begin by imposing upon it a New Testament text, written thousands of years later. The New Testament does not have to use words like “Son of God” in the same sense as the Old Testament. Start with the *Hebrew context* in which Sons of God in Genesis 6 appears. What does this expression mean there? Does the passage say that a particular section of human males married some particular human females?

It does not. It says that the Sons of God saw the daughters of *men*. There is a contrast here between human females in general and Sons of God.

The context also speaks of a time when *man* began to multiply. Again, man — not a section of humanity.

What is the meaning of the *exact* term “Sons of God” in the Hebrew/Aramaic Bible? The heavy evidence is this: “Sons of God” (*Bney Elohim* and *Bne Elim*) occurs here in Genesis, twice in Psalms, twice in Job and once in Daniel. On *every occasion* the word means angels, never human males. The LXX translation in one strand of manuscripts actually translates the word as *angelloi* (angels). The standard Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible, recognized as a monumental authority for the study of biblical Hebrew, defines the word “sons of God” in Genesis 6 as angels (*Brown, Driver and Briggs*, p. 43).

What light does the New Testament shed on this matter? Jude 6 speaks of angels who committed fornication as did Sodom and Gomorrah: “Like the angels Sodom and Gomorrah committed fornication” (Jude 7, NEB).

That tells us plainly that angels were guilty of unnatural and unlawful sexual practices. Peter found this extraordinary episode worthy of mention, since it presents a terrible warning to humans also in regard to deviant sexual practice. “Angels, namely those who sinned...” (II Pet. 2:4).

So then what of Jesus’ statement that angels do not marry? This is not *the primary evidence* on which to make our decision in Genesis 6. Jesus is talking not about fallen angels at all, but about the *holy angels* (cp. I Tim. 5:21) and their likeness to the saints in the future resurrection. The saints will be immortal as are the good angels. That one verse does not carry the weight of a whole theology of what *fallen* angels might do. Jude 6, however, does. It says that wicked angels committed fornication. The *immediate context* of Genesis 6, the exclusive meaning of *Bnay Elohim* in all of its Old Testament occurrences and the commentary of Peter and Jude are the decisive factors here, not Jesus’ one reference to holy angels.

The Genesis account is more than clear, and the early Jewish commentary on this episode as well as the earliest Christian commentary echoes the teaching of Genesis 6 — that the Sons of God are not human beings but supernatural creatures who departed from their God-given province and wreaked havoc in the human biological chain.

How can you advocate freedom from Sabbath (Saturday) keeping, since we know Jesus did not abolish the Law?

This question raises one of the most fundamental biblical issues. What is the difference between the two covenants, the Old and the New? Jesus, while conducting his historical ministry on earth, did not reveal the totality of the Christian faith. He himself

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announced to the Apostles: “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 12:16) He then promised that the Spirit of Truth would guide them “within the sphere of all the truth.” For the first time in Acts 8 and 10, the Gospel became available to the Gentiles. Much of the New Testament letters of Paul deal with the issue of bringing the two types of Christians, converted Jews and converted Gentiles, into unity. Paul experienced constant pressure from a Jewish Christian element who tried to insist that Gentile converts to Messiah should “be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:1). This “Jewish” tendency Paul resisted at all points. It is true that for reasons of diplomacy and conformity to Jewish custom he allowed Timothy (who was of Jew-Gentile parenthood) to be circumcised “*because of the Jews*” — note that the text does not say “because God had commanded this”! (Acts 16:3)

As pressure from the Jewish party increased Paul became more adamant that circumcision for Gentiles was actually a dangerous idea. “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold, **I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.** And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is under obligation to keep the whole law. You have been **severed from Christ**, you who are seeking to be right with God **by law**; you have fallen from grace.”

These are strong, impassioned words, and they give us an opportunity to point out that the Bible must be handled with wisdom and care. You have heard the old joke about proving anything you like from the Bible: By combining “Judas went out and hanged himself” with “go and do likewise,” comic results can be obtained! But one can fall into just the same error on the question of the Christian’s obligation to God’s commands. In Genesis 17 we find an explicit command from the God of Israel that *only the physically circumcised*, native-born and foreigner, may benefit from the covenant. This covenant was said to be “everlasting” (Gen. 17:13). An uncircumcised person was to be cut off from the covenant (v. 14).

Now note this: Paul spends much time in Romans, Galatians and Ephesians to convince us that Gentiles can be **fully part of the covenant of the promise made to Abraham** *without being circumcised*. So we have this interesting situation. While in Genesis 17 one is threatened with expulsion from the covenant if one is *not* circumcised, in Galatians 5:4 Christian recipients of the same Abrahamic covenant will be cut off from Messiah if they *do* become physically circumcised!

All of this simply demonstrates that we dare not pull verses out of context and thus *obliterate the radical differences between the requirements of the Old Testament and the requirement of the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus, the Messiah*.

The Bible does not contradict itself. But God is not bound to deal with all human beings at all times in exactly the same way. It may come as a shock to Bible readers to know that Paul compares the Sinai giving of the Ten Commandments (including the weekly Sabbath command) and the rest of the Law to bondage and slavery! (Gal. 4:21-31). He here pronounces Judaism — adherence to the Old Testament without belief in Jesus as the Messiah who has come and has been raised from the dead — as no better than bondage. The “present Jerusalem” — the Jerusalem of Paul’s day which had refused her Messiah — is enslaved. Paul, along with the whole New Testament, is committed to the very simple idea that there is no freedom, no right standing before God, for any human being *apart from believing Jesus* — believing the Gospel as Jesus preached it, as well as in his death and resurrection. And believing, be it noted, means believing in the Jesus who spoke also through the holy apostles, Peter, Paul, John. It creates a fundamental confusion, therefore, if someone maintains that they believe in Jesus but is troubled by Paul! Jesus revealed his will and commands through Paul. To question the apostleship of Paul is to question the authority of Jesus and of Scripture. It is to put oneself outside the covenant in Messiah, the only covenant which now has value for salvation. Paul was used by God and the risen Jesus to declare the divine will for believers.

One of those express commands of Jesus through Paul is that physical circumcision, when acquired with the idea that it has religious significance of any sort, is a threat to one’s faith in the Messiah.

There are two contrasted systems of belief in the Bible. The Law of Moses was “added as a custodian until faith, i.e., the Messiah, came...*but now we are no longer under that custodian*.” The whole passage in Galatians 3:15-29 is a lucid account of the mind of Jesus to us all through Paul. He warns that reverting to the old system, the Sinai system revealed through Moses, means a departure from the right standing which comes only through believing and obeying Jesus.

Obviously this new freedom in Messiah to which the God of the Bible invites us was particularly difficult to grasp for those trained under the Mosaic Law. That is why whole tracts of the New Testament are devoted to the new constitution of the New Covenant in Christ, which involves vast changes of procedure. There is a

brand new Priesthood. The old has gone. “The one covenant has been annulled by the Messiah in order to establish the second” (see Heb. 10:9). The old had shadows, including not only the whole system of animal sacrifices (Heb. 10:1) but also the whole system of Sabbaths, annual, monthly and weekly (Col. 2:16). It is therefore a very serious retrogression to make an issue at all over what day of the week to celebrate as holy! It is a recipe for division. It is a wrongheaded mixing of two covenants and it impedes the freedom which Christians are to enjoy in Christ. This freedom also attracts others to the faith. Modeling a half-Old Testament and half-New Testament system of faith hampers effective evangelism.

Current practice makes a Sunday worship service, in whatever setting one chooses, available to all. Sunday is *not* the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. Nor is it true that Constantine initiated the notion of worship on Sunday! The day of the resurrection, as a day on which Christians gathered, was instituted long before Constantine, as any history of Christianity will tell us. We know this from the extant letters of believers who lived long before Constantine.

The Old Testament forbids any but the **physically circumcised** to take part in the festival of Passover (Exod. 12:48, 49). Jesus in the New Testament bids all his followers to take part in a New Passover. It was the Passover which he celebrated just before he died (Luke 22:15, etc.). But Jesus changed the form of the ceremony to suit the history which he was about to make. It made no sense to go on offering a lamb annually, once that shadow had passed and the “lamb” Messiah had died. In view of this, then, Jesus made changes appropriate to the New Covenant. He commanded that bread and wine be drunk “as often as you drink it” (I Cor. 11:25). Those are the words of Jesus as recorded by Paul, Jesus’ agent. And how often is this? Certainly not once a year. Paul has just shown that “as often as you do it” corresponds to the regular meetings of believers in church (I Cor. 11:18-20). The Passover has now become the Lord’s Supper and this was in accordance with the instructions given by Jesus himself.

This is only one among many changes brought about by the Messiah and the New Covenant inaugurated in his blood.

While believers study these issues of New Testament Christian practice, tolerance of different stages of understanding is essential. One believer may consider a particular day of the week special for himself and to God. Others may make no distinction. Conviction comes with maturity and understanding.

One may serve alcohol as Jesus did at the Cana wedding. For others various factors in their training may make this freedom difficult to accept. None should be pressured. But each should study these questions and become strong. Above all, freedom in Christ is the goal of every believer.

A return to the Jewishness of Jesus and his “Jewish roots” is commendable, in view of the widespread neglect of the Christian Gospel as “the Gospel preached beforehand to Abraham” (Gal. 3:8). Whole sections of the New Testament are misunderstood because many readers do not know what is assumed by the New Testament writers. It is a mistake to think that Paul can be understood, in his preaching of the Gospel, if one does not understand the underlying key to the New Testament — which is that the land and seed promises to Abraham are the equivalent to the Kingdom promises in the New Covenant. The Gospel is based not on promises of “heaven” for disembodied souls. The Gospel promises immortality in the coming Kingdom of God on the earth renewed. A believer is one destined to manage the new world order, the Kingdom of God, the royal empire of Jesus which will be inaugurated at his return (Rev. 11:15-18). (Our tape “What Good Is Jesus without his Gospel?” is available by request.)

Preparation for this destiny is not a matter of obeying the Law of Moses. Paul was convinced as a Jew and Christian that “nothing is unclean of itself; all things are clean” (Rom. 14:14, 20). “Clean” is the word which describes those foods which in Leviticus 11 were permissible under the Law. It is perfectly clear that Leviticus 11 categorizes other foods as forbidden, “unclean.” Note what Paul, speaking for the risen Messiah Jesus, has declared: “All things are clean!” (*katharos*, the opposite of *akathartos*, unclean, Lev. 11:4ff). Paul and Moses are at odds here, as anyone can see. That is simply because the New Covenant is not the Old Covenant. Much unnecessary trouble and division is still being caused by zealous misunderstanding of Paul and the Messiah who speaks through him.

Paul’s great labor of love for the Messiah and his gospel was to eradicate “segregation” of Jew and Gentile in the church. The work must still go on. It is rather amazing to see how little progress we have made in nearly 2000 years! But the Scripture inspired by God through Paul can still bring freedom and unity in “the one new man” community of the church — if we can learn to listen and abandon our sometimes misguided and uninstructed zeal!

The following versions of Romans 7:6 summarize our point:

Romans 7:6, NIV: But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Romans 7:6, NLT: But now we have been released from the law, for we died with Christ, and we are no longer captive to its power. Now we can really serve God, not in the old way by obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way, by the Spirit. ✧

Everything Hinges on Your Understanding of “the Word”

“The word,” or “word of God” does *not* in the New Testament mean the Bible in general.

“The word” is almost always the saving **Gospel Message of the Kingdom** as Jesus preached it. “The word” is to the Bible as the core is to the apple. It is a serious misunderstanding to miss this important New Testament fact. We read constantly in the New Testament that people “received the word.” The average reader does not, however, grasp what is meant by “the word.”

This is rather like reading a novel about “the USA” without knowing what that means!

John 5:38, NLT: and you **do not have his message (word) [the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus preached it] in your hearts**, because you do not believe me — the one he sent to you.

John 5:38, NJB: and **his word finds no home in you** because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent.

Luke 8:12, NLT: The seed that fell on the hard path represents those **who hear the message [the Gospel of the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19]**, but then the Devil comes and steals it away and prevents them from believing and **being saved**.

Luke 8:12, NJB: Those on the edge of the path are people who have heard it, and then the devil comes and carries away **the word from their hearts** in case they should believe and **be saved**.

1 Thessalonians 2:16, NLT: by trying to keep us from preaching the Good News to the Gentiles [the Gospel of the Kingdom], **for fear some might be saved**. By doing this, the Jews continue to pile up their sins. But the anger of God has caught up with them at last.

1 Thessalonians 2:16, NJB: because they are hindering us from preaching to gentiles **to save them**. Thus all the time they are reaching the full extent of their iniquity, but retribution has finally overtaken them.

Romans 10:17, NJB: But it is in that way faith comes from hearing, and that means **hearing the word of Christ [the Gospel of the Kingdom as he preached it]**.

Colossians 3:16, NLT: Let **the words of Christ** [his Gospel], in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. **Use his words to teach and counsel each other**. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.

Colossians 3:16, NJB: **Let the word of Christ**, in all its richness, find a home with you. Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God.

John 5:24, NAB: Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever **hears my word [Gospel of the Kingdom] and believes** in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life.

John 5:24, NLT: I assure you, those who **listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life**. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.

For “word,” “message,” try substituting the phrase “Gospel of the Kingdom of God as Jesus and Paul (Acts 20:25) preached it.”

This will show how critically and crucially important it is to define the Gospel correctly — and how the Gospel of the Kingdom appears everywhere in the New Testament. ✧

Jesus and Paul: Read These Jewish-Christian Rabbis with Care

It is common for Bible readers to hinge everything on a single text. Proof-texting is not in itself wrong. Jesus and Paul used specific verses to make their point. And certain verses have a way of hitting home on a particular issue and summarizing a mass of material. Thus **“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs in accordance with the promises”** provides a brilliant and illuminating summary of the whole NT. To be a child of Abraham is not a matter of physical descent, but of spiritual kinship with Jesus. “Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? Those who hear the word of God [the Gospel of the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19] and do it,” or as Matthew reports the same saying, “Those who do the will of my Father” (Matt. 12:49, 50).

But proof-texting can also be disastrous. To think that one has understood what happens when we die by quoting half a verse out of one of Paul’s extended discussions about the future — “Absent from the body and present with the Lord” — is the epitome of poor method. Paul must be read carefully in context. The context of his remark about absence from the body and presence with the Lord is an extended lesson on the future resurrection. Paul introduces his topic in II Corinthians 4:14, “Just as God raised Jesus so He will raise us.” He then develops his lesson about how we can come into the presence of the Lord via resurrection at the coming of Jesus. Paul did not have in mind a disembodied existence in heaven prior to the resurrection at the return of Jesus. Paul was no Platonist and certainly did not subscribe to the doctrine of the “immortality of the soul.” Paul had already discussed the same subject in detail both in I Thess. 4:13-17 and I Cor. 15. To extract one half-verse from Paul’s discourse is to invite misunderstanding. Unfortunately churchgoers have been lured into such twisting of Paul by memorizing that half verse (II Cor. 5:8b) and presenting it as a complete theology of the post-mortem state.

A similar confusing proof-texting procedure occurs when Bible readers quote one verse from the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not imagine I came to destroy the Law. I did not come to destroy it but to fulfill it. Not a jot or tittle will pass from the Law....” “There we are,” it is confidently concluded, “Jesus mandates a minute following of OT Torah.” This will include, then, Sabbath and Holy Day observance, no “unclean meats,”

circumcision and the stoning of adulterers. That verse in Matthew 5 is then made to control the rest of the New Testament. The results are most confusing. Some, having anchored themselves in Matt. 5:17, conclude that Paul was a false prophet who contradicted Jesus flat! But Paul was the accredited agent of the risen Jesus. Paul does not promote the Law of Moses as the Christian standard. He speaks of himself as a minister of the New Covenant as distinct from the ministry of Moses as servant of the Old Covenant. That Old Covenant was fading and it is abolished (II Cor. 3; Heb. 10:9; Eph. 2:15). The arrangements made with Israel at Sinai are positively not the last word of God to man (Heb. 1:1-2). The contemporary concern to have the Ten Commandments displayed in public places is curious since Paul in Galatians 4 describes the legal system ordained through Moses as leading to bondage. The whole Law of Christ, by contrast, is summed up in the single word “love.” But it is a love born of divine Truth. And Truth in the Bible is communicated by the holy spirit, the spirit of the Truth. John can even say that “the spirit *is* the Truth” (I John 5:6). The spirit is not some “third person,” distinct from the Father and the Son. The spirit is the mind and activity of God and Jesus now available to us if we are willing to learn the Truth revealed to us by Jesus. The Spirit is the operational presence of God. Jesus came in fact to impart spirit and “preach the Gospel of the Kingdom” and to “give us an understanding [the power to reason soundly] that we might know God” (I John 5:20). Jesus does not save through his shed blood alone. **He “makes righteous” also “by his knowledge”** (Isa. 53:11). Christians are to learn the mind/spirit of Jesus (I Cor. 2:16), which is the mind and spirit also of his Father, the One God (I Cor. 8:4-6).

People are perishing, the prophet complained, for lack of knowledge (Hos. 4:6). The antidote is the supply of knowledge. Paul complained that Jews had a zeal for God, but not in accordance with the right knowledge (Rom. 10:1-2). The Jews, in fact, then and now, are busy establishing their own righteousness which will unfortunately not save them. Paul went about tirelessly trying to win Jews and Gentiles to the right, saving system of knowledge — knowledge based on the words and teaching of the Messiah (I Tim. 6:3; II John 7-9).

The words of Jesus, epitomized in his Gospel of the Kingdom, are *the* saving words. They are “spirit and life” (John 6:63) meaning that they are able to transmit the mind and character of God to us, the divine nature in which the Christian must participate (II Pet. 1:4). The words of Jesus impart to us the divine character and wisdom. The seed is the word of the Gospel about

the Kingdom (Luke 8:11; Matt. 13:19). That seed is nothing less than the spark and germ of immortality — a gift in the form of a downpayment of the divine life of God, who alone has immortality (I Tim. 6:16). ✧

Problematic Sections of Scripture about the “Soul”

(We are indebted to Richie Temple for much of the following):

If there were no ambiguities in certain biblical passages on “the soul,” there would be no conflict over these matters. People have, over the years, come to different conclusions based on the evidence. Therefore, four verses, or sections of Scripture, commonly used to prove the immortality of the soul should perhaps be examined. To begin with, Gen. 2:7: *The Lord God formed the man from the dust of ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (NIV).*

This verse has caused no end of confusion due to the KJV translation “and the man became a living soul.” The verse is known by heart far and wide in the Christian world. However, beautiful as it is, the KJV is misleading here as in many places — and the NIV is correct, as can be seen by consulting any modern translation or commentary. Commenting on Gen. 2:7 in his book *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, the Protestant scholar Bernard W. Anderson, Emeritus Professor of Old Testament at Princeton University Seminary, states,

“Human nature is not a dichotomy – a body of mortal flesh and a deathless soul, as in some philosophies, but rather a unity of body and spirit, an animated body...This view is expressed classically in Genesis 2, according to which the Lord God infused ‘spirit’ (life force) into a lump of clay and ‘it became a living being.’ The Hebrew word should not be translated ‘soul,’ if that means an immortal essence, but rather ‘person’ or ‘self.’ The self is a unity of body and spirit, a psychosomatic unity...In this view, death must be taken seriously...Death is a total event — there is no part of human nature, such as an immortal soul, that is untouched.”

This understanding of Gen. 2:7 can be confirmed by the celebrated Roman Catholic publication *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmeyer and Roland Murphy, p. 1295:

“In spite of the use of such words as flesh, spirit, and soul, the OT conceived of the human being as a unity and not as a composite of different principles. H. Wheeler Robinson observed in a classic remark that the Greeks thought of an incarnate spirit and the Israelites

thought of an animated body...**The Hebrew *nephesh* has usually been mistranslated ‘soul’ — introducing an idea that is foreign to the OT.** [Here we see the corrupting tendency of “orthodoxy,” as it imposed its own creed on the Bible.] When Yahweh breathes the spirit, the human being becomes a living *nephesh* (2:7). ‘Person’ or ‘self’ may be the basic, if not the primitive meaning of the word. The blood is sometimes said to be the seat of the *nephesh*; in such instances *nephesh* is not the self or the person, but rather life, which is poured out with the blood...**In none of these instances is there anything resembling the ‘soul’ of Greek and modern [pseudo-Christian] thought.** This difference has important corollaries in the biblical idea of survival after death.”

Many other commentaries can be consulted to confirm this understanding of Gen. 2:7 and of the meaning of the OT Hebrew word “nephesh” or the Greek word “psyche” in the New Testament.

The second problematic verse that has long been misunderstood is Matt. 10:28: *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot touch the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell (NIV).*

On the surface this verse seems to indicate that the soul is immortal, but when read carefully, it teaches just the opposite. From among many other commentators on this verse I quote the highly respected *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged Version*, p. 1349:

“Matt. 10:28 presents God as the one who can cast both body and *psyche* (soul, life) into Gehenna. **The saying posits the unity of the two and negates the idea of the soul’s immortality...**God alone controls the *psyche*, and for those who have true life with him he prepares a new body, just as he destroys both the body and *psyche* of those who do not have true life with him.”

The third example concerns the biblical language about “the salvation of your souls,” a commonplace in Christian thinking and speaking. Though the phrase is from Scripture, it must be understood in its Hebraic environment, not through the eyes of the pagan Greek world of thought. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, Vol. 3, “Soul,” pp. 685-6, explains the meaning of these verses in their biblical context:

“Although the Hellenistic term *psyche* appears more frequently in the later epistles of the NT than in other parts (I Pet. 1:9; James 1:21, 5:20), **it must not be imagined that this implies the concept of the soul as the real and valuable part of man, the eternal and**

permanent element. That would be a misunderstanding. This kind of thinking deduces the immortality and permanence of the soul from its own particular quality. This is just what the NT does not teach...no reference is intended to the immortal soul as guarantee or substance of eternal life. Although such passages show definite traces of Hellenism, they are nonetheless brought on to a rather different level by biblical tradition, basic eschatological insights, and the Christian experience in the risen Lord...**The soul is simply that area in which decisions are made concerning life and death, salvation and destruction.** Moreover, every statement about the psyche in the NT is linked in context with eschatological statements about renewal and resurrection. Outside such a context this line of thought is impossible. Part of this context of ideas is the teaching that God is judge, that his judgment determines whether the soul shall be saved or destroyed, and the fact that the salvation of the soul is always understood in connection with the resurrection of the body, i.e. a new embodiment of the soul.”

Finally, Revelation 6:9-11: *When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They cried out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait [rest, KJV] a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed (NIV).*

Based on a traditional Christian philosophical reading, this verse might be taken to promote the idea that immortal souls live and speak in some sort of intermediate state. But note: the translation “souls” is very questionable. This Greek word should be rendered “life,” “persons,” or even “bodies.” The Greek word *psyche* does not, as we have seen, mean what the average reader wrongly hears as “soul.” Secondly, these individuals are not in a state of perfection, nor are they in their final resting place, nor is it even said that they are “with Christ.” Instead, rather than being thankful that they have escaped the prison house of the body, they are looking forward to a future time of vindication and perfection. According to Revelation 20:4, that future time is the resurrection of the just. It is then that “those *persons* who have been beheaded will come to life and begin to reign with Christ for a thousand years.” (Immortal souls cannot be decapitated!)

Many scholars agree with our view of the “souls” under the altar, including the highly respected evangelical scholar G.E. Ladd. In his *Commentary on*

the Book of Revelation, pp. 103-4, he writes as follows on Rev. 6:9-11:

“In the present instance, the altar is clearly the altar of sacrifice where sacrificial blood was poured. **The fact that John saw the souls of martyrs under the altar has nothing to do with the state of the dead or their situation in the intermediate state;** it is merely a vivid way of picturing the fact that they had been martyred in the name of God. In the Old Testament ritual blood of sacrificial victims was poured out at the base of the altar (Lev. 4:7). The souls of martyrs are seen under the altar as though they had been sacrificed upon the altar and their blood poured out as its base. Christian thought often employs the language of sacrificial death. Facing death, the apostle Paul wrote, ‘For I am already on the point of being sacrificed’ (II Tim. 4:6). At an earlier date, also facing possible death, he had written, ‘Even if I am to be poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad’ (Phil. 2:17). Thus Christian martyrs are viewed as sacrifices offered to God. In fact, they were slain on the earth and their blood wet the ground; but in Christian faith, the sacrifice was really made in heaven where their souls were offered at the heavenly altar.”

The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 3, “Soul,” p. 686, echoes the same thought: “In Rev. 6:9 and 20:4 mention is made of the souls of those who have been slain, who are under the altar of God in heaven, i.e. under the altar in the heavenly counterpart of the temple. This imagery is probably based on the fact that the blood of sacrifice was poured out before or on the altar (Lev. 4:7). The martyrs who have shed their blood for Christ’s sake are compared with the sacrifices. That is why their souls are under the altar, since the soul, i.e. the life, is in the blood. The dominant thought is that the souls which have been won by God, which have been saved, which believe in him and sacrifice themselves for him, are preserved in his keeping; and they are inextricably bound up with the realization of God’s aims and place, in his heavenly world with its future destiny and its future appearance upon earth.”✧

Comment

“I recently purchased a copy of your book *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound* and have been captivated for the last week and a half. I am about halfway through it and am enjoying digging into your position and the scriptural references you quote.”

— Washington