

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.

1. To begin with, Genesis 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 Genesis 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 Genesis 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 Genesis 2:7 and of the meaning of the OT Hebrew word “nephesh” or the Greek word “psyche” in the New Testament.

2. The second problematic verse that has long been misunderstood is Matthew 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.”

3. 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 (1 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. Such passages...are nonetheless brought on to a rather different level by biblical tradition, basic eschatological insights, and the Christian experience of faith 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.”

4. 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 “lives,” “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 Revelation 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’ (2 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 to 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.”✧