Body and Soul in the New Testament

Dr. Michael Gleghorn draws on John Cooper's book Body, Soul and Life Everlasting to provide an overview of what the NT teaches about the body-soul connection.

The Teaching of Jesus

What does the New Testament teach about the nature and destiny of human beings? In a <u>previous article</u>, I discussed what the Old Testament has to say about these issues, giving special attention to the human body and soul. In this article, we'll consider what the New Testament has to say.

About 400 years separate the end of the Old Testament from the beginning of the New. During this so-called "intertestamental" period, Jewish biblical scholars, like the Pharisees, continued to teach and write about what God had revealed in the



Hebrew Scriptures. According to John Cooper, the Pharisees taught that when a person dies, the soul leaves the body to continue its existence "in an intermediate state, already enjoying or lamenting the anticipated consequences of God's judgment." [1] Interestingly, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul also seem to have held this view. [2]

Consider, for example, some of the last words spoken by Jesus just prior to His death on the cross. You may remember that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. While one of these men railed against Jesus, the other (aware of his guilt), asked Jesus to "remember" him when He came into His kingdom (Luke 23:39-42). Jesus responded by promising this man that he would join Him "in Paradise" that very day (v. 43). Paradise, in the Jewish thinking of the time, was understood to be a pleasant and refreshing place where the souls of the righteous

continue their existence between the death and resurrection of the body.{3}

The body, in other words, may die, but the soul, or person, continues to exist apart from their body. Although this criminal had only hours left to live, his elementary confession of faith in Jesus resulted in Jesus promising him that they would be together in Paradise that very day! This ought to encourage all of us who have put our hope in Christ for salvation. Our bodies may wear out and die. But when they do, we shall go to be with Christ, awaiting the resurrection of our bodies while enjoying the presence of the Lord!

But what about the other criminal, the one who mocked and insulted Jesus? Although we're not told what happened to him, we know from elsewhere in Scripture that the souls of the unrepentant also continue to exist after the death of the body. In the next section we'll take a closer look at the fate of the righteous and unrighteous dead.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

What happens to us when we die? Do we continue to exist in some sense? Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus appears to offer some answers to these questions (see Luke 16:19-31). The story concerns a rich man, who lacks for nothing, and a poor beggar, named Lazarus, who is laid at the rich man's gate (v. 20). The story implies that the rich man could have helped Lazarus, but never did so.

Eventually, both men died. Lazarus is said to be "carried by the angels to Abraham's side" (v. 22). Essentially, he is depicted as being with the Jewish patriarch Abraham in Paradise. Paradise, you'll remember, was considered a place of rest and refreshment for the righteous dead. By contrast, the rich man, his body having been buried, finds himself in "torment" in Hades (vv. 22-23). Seeing both Abraham and

Lazarus at a great distance, he pleads with them for help. Abraham, however, tells him that this just isn't possible (vv. 24-31).

What might this story teach us about the nature and destiny of human beings? Though we should perhaps be careful about reading the story too literally, it seems to teach that we will each continue to exist (in some sense) even after the death of our body. Moreover, this existence will be experienced as either joyful or sorrowful, depending on our relationship with God. Although the story seems to depict the rich man and Lazarus as if they still have bodies of some sort, John Cooper offers several reasons for believing that the story is using figurative language to describe a time in which these men exist apart from their bodies. {4} This would be the period between the death and resurrection of the body. What are some of the reasons that Cooper offers for this view?

First, at the time Jesus tells this story, He regarded the resurrection as a still future event (see Luke 20:34-36). It is thus unlikely that the story here concerns some sort of literal bodily existence. Second, the story locates the rich man in "Hades"—and this term appears only to be used of the intermediate state, between the death and resurrection of the body. {5} The story thus appears to depict the rich man and Lazarus as consciously existing persons between the death and resurrection of their bodies. And if this is so, then we are more than just our bodies (as we'll see more fully in the next section).

Paul's Heavenly Vision

Do you view yourself as *more* than just your body? Might you also have a soul? We've previously considered evidence for the human soul in the teachings of Jesus. In this section, we'll consider further evidence from the writings of the Apostle Paul. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts

an extraordinary experience which he had fourteen years earlier (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, 7). He describes being "caught up . . . into paradise" and hearing "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (vv. 2-4).

For our purposes, the most important element of this experience concerns a peculiar detail mentioned twice by the apostle. According to Paul, he was unsure whether he had this experience while "in the body or out of the body" (vv. 2-3). That is, Paul was unsure whether he had been "caught up into Paradise" (v. 3) in his body, or out of it. But why is this important? Because it shows that Paul regarded the "out of body" option as a genuine possibility. {6}

You see, many scholars have argued that Paul did not believe in any sort of conscious existence apart from the body. The great New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce claimed that Paul "could not conceive" of a situation in which he might exist and have experiences apart from his body. [7] Now you might be thinking, "Well wait just a minute. Didn't you say that Paul was unsure whether this experience had occurred while in the body or out of it? Maybe he remained in his body and the experience was just a *vision* of Paradise, occurring while he was in some sort of trance-like state on earth."[8]

Yes, you're right. That *is* possible (although it doesn't seem consistent with what Paul actually says). {9} And here's the thing: the very fact that Paul was unsure whether this experience occurred while he was in (or out of) his body, tells us that he regarded the "out of body" explanation as a genuine possibility. And if this is so, then contrary to what some scholars have said, Paul most certainly *could* conceive of conscious existence apart from his body. Indeed, he thought he may have had just such an experience himself.

But we can take this argument further. For as we'll see in the next section, Paul (like the Pharisees and Jesus), seemed to think that we'll continue to exist and have experiences

between the death and resurrection of our bodies.

Our Heavenly Dwelling

When I was a child, our family would occasionally go camping. Although we usually went in a camper, with air-conditioning and beds, I've also spent a few nights camping out in a tent. Most of us have probably had such an experience (though whether we enjoyed it or not is another matter). A tent is basically a portable structure that provides a temporary place to stay while we're away from our permanent home.

In 2 Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul has a fascinating discussion that touches on some of these issues (see vv. 1-10). The discussion is challenging, but if we consider it step by step, I think we can get a handle on what the apostle is saying. He begins, "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (v. 1).

When Paul writes of "the tent that is our earthly home," he is referring to our physical bodies here and now. If our body is "destroyed," and we die physically, "we have," says Paul, "a building from God . . . eternal in the heavens" awaiting us. According to John Cooper, this "building" can plausibly refer to one of two things.{10} It might refer to our future resurrection body. However, it may also refer simply to "being 'with Christ'." If the second option is meant, then Paul is speaking about going to be "with Christ" at the time of death, in which we are (as he later puts it), "at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8; see also Philippians 1:23).

Paul characterizes our present "earthly" state as one of groaning, "longing to put on our heavenly dwelling" that "we may not be found naked" (1 Corinthians 5:2-3). Although these verses are difficult to interpret, it is probable that "nakedness" refers to temporarily existing without a body when

we die. If so, then Paul is saying that when we die, we go immediately to be "with Christ." There we are "at home with the Lord," awaiting that day in which we will "put on our heavenly dwelling" (v. 2). This likely refers to our resurrection body. At the time of the resurrection, our souls will be united with a glorious new body, so that we might eternally enjoy life with Christ ad fellow believers in the new heaven and new earth. We will consider these issues more fully in the next section.

The Resurrection of the Body

The Bible envisions a future time in which all who have died will be raised from the dead into some sort of physical, bodily existence. The New Testament writers refer to this as "the resurrection of the dead" and it will include both believers and unbelievers. Hence Jesus, referring to His own unique role in executing divine judgment, claims that "an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29). Although evidence elsewhere in the New Testament suggests that different groups of people may be raised at different times, the key point here is that this event has not yet taken place. It's still in the future.

Paul says much the same thing in several of his letters. To cite just one example, he tells the Philippians that "we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:20-21). Elsewhere Paul tells us that our resurrection bodies will be "imperishable," "powerful," and glorious (1 Corinthians 15:42-43). It's incredibly exciting to contemplate the fact that the Lord intends to give his people marvelous new bodies, patterned after his own resurrection body, so that we might enjoy eternal life with him forever. When that day

dawns, our joy will truly be complete!

So how might we attempt to summarize our discussion in this article? First, both Jesus and Paul seem to have taught that human beings are (in some sense) composed of both a body and a soul. John Cooper describes the relationship of soul and body as one of "functional holism." Our body and soul function as a thoroughly integrated whole during our present earthly lives. But when our body dies, our soul continues to exist, awaiting the resurrection of our body at some future time. {11}

On that day, our soul will be united with our resurrection body, either to enjoy eternal life with Jesus, or face eternal judgment in hell. This, it seems to me, is what the New Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of humanity. In Christ we are offered a sure and steadfast hope for both our soul—and our body!

Notes

- 1. John W. Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Kindle Loc. 1208.
- 2. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 55, Kindle.
- 3. This becomes a bit complicated. John Cooper points out that Jewish thinking about the afterlife continued its development during the intertestamental period. While some Rabbis conceived of "Paradise" as a special place for the righteous dead within Sheol, others began to think of Paradise as outside Sheol altogether. Regardless of such differences, however, Cooper reminds us that "Paradise" was understood as the place "where the blessed dwell with the Lord" (see Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting, Kindle Loc. 1175-1200).
- 4. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1605; see also Loc. 1592-1607.
- 5. Again, see Cooper's discussion in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1592-1607.
- 6. Cooper makes this point emphatically in Body, Soul & Life

Everlasting, Kindle Loc. 1880-86.

- 7. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 313; cited in John Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1840.
- 8. This possibility is also mentioned in *Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1871.
- 9. Again, see Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting, Kindle Loc. 1872.
- 10. See Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1837.
- 11. See Cooper's discussion in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 699-712.

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Body and Soul in the Old Testament

Dr. Michael Gleghorn addresses how the Old Testament treats body and soul. What does it have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?

The Breath of Life

The worldview of Naturalism tells us that the natural world is all that exists. There is nothing "above" or "beyond" this. Space, time, matter, and energy, the sort of things studied in physics, are the only material entities. You are your body, and nothing more. You do not have an immaterial mind or soul that is (in some sense) distinct from your body. You are your body. And when your body dies, you will cease to exist.

But is this true? In this article we address body and soul in the Old Testament. What does the Old Testament have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?



Let's begin with the creation of Adam. Consider the way in which the Bible describes this event: "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Genesis 2:7). Note that Adam is created from two distinct elements: the dust of the ground and the breath of life. His body is composed of "dust from the ground." But he doesn't become "a living creature" until God takes the second step of breathing "the breath of life" into his nostrils. Although this description may well be metaphorical in certain respects, it seems evident that God must add "the breath of life" for Adam to become a living human being.

Here's another observation. Notice that Adam doesn't suddenly spring to life once the dust of the earth has been ordered in a particular way. Apparently, human personality does not spontaneously emerge once God has formed the dust of the ground into a human body. {1} Merely ordering the physical elements into a human body is not enough (at least, at this initial stage of human development) to get a human person. That second step, in which God breathes the breath of life into the already formed body, is also necessary.

So what are we to make of this? Does Genesis give us a picture of a human being as a body-soul composite? At this point, such a conclusion would be premature. We have not yet considered what a soul is, nor whether "the breath of life" in some way corresponds to, or produces, it. One thing seems clear, however. The Bible seems to suggest that human beings are more than just physical bodies. There appears to be an additional component to our nature, and we need to spend some time gaining a better understanding of what that is.

Surviving the Death of the Body

The book of Genesis briefly describes the death of Jacob's wife, Rachel, as she gave birth to their son, Benjamin. {2} We read that "as her soul was departing (for she died)," she named her son (Genesis 35:18).

How are we to understand the phrase, "as her soul was departing"? In Hebrew, the word here translated "soul" is the term *nephesh*. Part of the difficulty in understanding the phrase is that *nephesh* can be used in a variety of ways. According to the Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland, "The term nephesh . . . is used primarily of human beings, though it is also used of animals (Genesis 1:20; 9:10; 24:30) and of God Himself (Judges 10:16; Isaiah 1:14)."{3}

Depending on the context, the term might refer to a part of the body, like the neck (Psalm 105:18) or throat (Isaiah 5:14). It can also be used of the principle of life, as in Leviticus 17:11: "the life [that is, nephesh] of the flesh is in the blood." Strangely, however, it can also refer to a dead human body (Numbers 5:2; 6:11). Moreover, it can be used of various psychological aspects of human experience, like emotions or desires (Proverbs 21:10; Isaiah 26:9; Micah 7:1). Finally, there are also indications that the term can refer to what might be called the "soul"—the immaterial component of a human being in which one's personal identity is located. {4}

So when we read that Rachel's "soul was departing," does this simply mean that she was dying, that the "principle of life" (which had sustained her to this point) was departing? Or could it mean that her "soul," an immaterial component of her being encompassing her personal identity, was departing? In other words, is this verse merely telling us that Rachel's body was dying, or is it also telling us that, as her body was dying, her soul was leaving her body (possibly to continue its existence elsewhere)?

If we examine other passages of Scripture, we see evidence that the human soul continues to exist after the death of the body. Consider Psalm 49:15: "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." In Hebrew thought, Sheol was the place of the dead, somewhat like the Greek conception of Hades. [5] In this passage, the Psalmist expresses confidence that God will ransom his "soul" from the place of the dead and receive the Psalmist to himself. This view of the soul becomes even clearer when we examine what the Old Testament has to say about the afterlife.

The Place of the Dead

In the Old Testament the place of the dead is called Sheol. Of course, in some places the term simply refers to the grave. Nevertheless, according to John Cooper, "There is virtual consensus that the Israelites did believe in some sort of ethereal existence after death in a place called Sheol." [6] What sort of place was this?

Job describes it as a place of "ease," where "the wicked cease from troubling" and "the weary are at rest" (3:13, 17-18). That sounds pretty good! However, it's also described as a place of "darkness" and "the land of forgetfulness" (Psalm 88:12), a place where not much is happening. As the author of Ecclesiastes puts it: "There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going" (9:10). Hence, J. P. Moreland observes, "Life in Sheol is often depicted as lethargic and inactive." {7}

But there are exceptions. Consider the case of Saul and the medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28). The prophet Samuel had died, and Saul is preparing to go to war against the Philistines (vv. 1-4). After seeing the

Philistine army, however, Saul is afraid (v. 5). He inquires of the Lord, but the Lord does not answer him (v. 6). In desperation, Saul seeks out a medium at Endor, and asks her to

call up Samuel from the dead (vv. 7-11). Incredibly, the plan works, and Samuel actually makes an appearance (vv. 12-14).

Saul inquires of Samuel, but Samuel essentially rebukes Saul (vv. 15-16), reminding Saul of his prior disobedience. He tells Saul that Israel will be defeated by the Philistines and informs him that "Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me" (vv. 18-19). It's a fascinating story, but we must not lose sight of what (for us) is the main point.

Notice that Samuel, who had previously died, and whose body had been buried (v. 3), retains his personal identity in the shadowy underworld of Sheol. He still knows who he is, remembers Saul, and can function as the Lord's prophet. Although Samuel is pictured in the story as "an old man . . . wrapped in a robe" (v. 14), Moreland reminds us that the Bible often uses such imagery "in a nonliteral way to describe immaterial, invisible realities." {8} Regardless, the Old Testament teaches that human beings continue to exist after the death of the body. Moreover, the righteous express a hope that God will

rescue their souls even from Sheol.

Redemption from Sheol

The Old Testament pictures all those who die as going initially to Sheol, the place of the dead. However, it also intimates a hope for the righteous even "beyond the grave." As John Cooper notes, "Several Psalms read most naturally as confessing a steadfast if unspecified trust in God beyond death." {9}

Consider Psalm 49. The psalmist observes that all people die. Sooner or later each person's life ends in death (vv. 5-12). But for the psalmist that is not the end of the story. Though he knows that this life

will end with the death of his body, he nonetheless

confidently proclaims: "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me" (v. 15).

Or consider Psalm 73. The psalmist begins by confessing that he was "envious of the arrogant" and "wicked" (v. 3). However, as he contemplated that their end is "destruction," his hope in God was renewed (vv. 17-24).

Although the psalmist recognized that he, too, would die, he declares his hope in God: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (v. 26). After surveying such

material, one Old Testament scholar notes that before God "there is not only the alternative between this life and the shadow existence in the world of the dead; there is a third possibility—a permanent, living fellowship with him." {10} This third possibility was the confident hope of the psalmists.

Of course, if we're going to be fair, we must also agree with C. S. Lewis, who observes that throughout much of the Old Testament, belief in the afterlife held virtually no "religious importance" whatever. {11} What mattered to the ancient Israelite was life on this earth. It is here that we can enjoy fellowship with family, friends—and God.

So why did God reveal so little to the ancient Israelites about the nature of the afterlife? Lewis suggests that God may have wanted His people to come to love Him primarily as an end in itself—and not for any

rewards he might bestow in the afterlife. If one becomes friends with God in this life, then one will naturally fear to lose this relationship in death. And at this point, God can step in with the "good news" that friendship with Him can continue beyond death. {12} Indeed, God even promised to raise the bodies of his people from the dead, to continue their friendship with him on a new earth!

The Resurrection of the Body

The resurrection of the body is a doctrine that many believers rarely think about. Yet this doctrine is not only taught throughout the New Testament, it's even found in the Old Testament.

Consider Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." This verse is not denying a disembodied afterlife between death and resurrection. Rather, it is affirming that the souls of the dead, whose bodies appear to be asleep in in the "dust of the earth," shall be "awakened" and raised from the dead.

Notice that some are raised "to everlasting life," but others to "everlasting contempt." Cooper writes, "This verse . . . connects resurrection, judgment, and two eternal destinies."{13} The Old Testament suggests that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with their bodies for all eternity. As Moreland observes, "Old Testament teaching implies that the soul or spirit is added to flesh and bones to form a living human person (Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37) and that the resurrection of the dead involves the re-embodiment of the same soul or spirit (Isaiah 26:14, 19)."{14}

How might we sum up Old Testament teaching about the nature and destiny of human beings? First, human beings appear to be composed of both body and soul. When God created Adam, he first formed his body from the dust of the earth, and then "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). This at least hints at the possibility that human beings are a body-soul composite. The evidence for this is strengthened, however, when we consider Old Testament teaching about life after death.

Throughout the Old Testament we see evidence for continued personal existence, after the death of the body, in a place

called Sheol. An interesting example of this can be seen when Saul, with the help of a medium, calls up the prophet Samuel from the dead. We saw that Samuel continues to exist and retain his personal identity even after the death of his body (1 Samuel 28).

But this was not the end of the story. For the Old Testament also teaches that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with resurrected bodies, either to enjoy eternal life on a new earth, or to suffer

eternal shame and contempt. This, in a nutshell, is what the Old Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of human beings.

Notes

- 1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Loc. 727-39, Kindle.
- 2. See the story in Genesis 35:16-20.
- 3. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 45, Kindle.
- 4. The material in this paragraph is indebted to Moreland, *The Soul*, 45-46.
- 5. Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting, Loc. 810.
- 6. Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting, Loc. 783.
- 7. Moreland, The Soul, 51.
- 8. Moreland, The Soul, 52.
- 9. Cooper, *Body*, *Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 906. The preceding words, concerning hope "beyond the grave" are also taken from Cooper, Loc. 902.
- 10. Hans Walter Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament, 109; cited in Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting, Loc. 912.
- 11. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 36.
- 12. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, 36-43.
- 13. Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting, Loc. 916.
- 14. Moreland, The Soul, 53.

"Is There a Specific Reference to Heaven or Hell in the OT?"

Is there any specific reference to Heaven or Hell in the Old Testament or did this notion emerge solely as a result of the Persians' Zoroastrian influence on the Jews?

The OT contains numerous references to heaven. Many of these refer to the physical heavens (Gen. 1:1, Psalm 19:1, etc.). Nevertheless, there do also seem to be a number of references to heaven as the dwelling place of God (1 Kings 8:30, Psalm 11:4, etc.).

As for the term "hell," it depends on which English translation you consult. The KJV, for instance, translates the Hebrew term "Sheol" as "hell." The NASB, on the other hand, simply renders this term "Sheol." The NIV translates this term in a variety of ways: the grave, death, the depths, etc., depending on the context. Strictly speaking, sheol (the Hebrew term) does not refer to hell in my judgment. It might refer to Hades (i.e., a temporary place of punishment for the unrighteous dead between death and resurrection) in some contexts. But hell, as I understand it, is properly understood as the second death, the Lake of Fire, the place of eternal punishment. And this is not true of either Sheol or Hades (see Revelation 20:13-15). Thus, the Hebrew term Sheol can, in certain contexts, be used in a manner similar to the NT term Hades (e.g. Job 26:6; etc.), but I personally don't think it refers to hell (strictly speaking).

I do not think it's necessary to suppose that Zoroastrianism was solely responsible for the NT doctrines of heaven and hell. In the first place, the OT does refer to heaven as the dwelling place of God, distinct from the physical universe. For another, the OT concept of Sheol is often used to refer to the place of the dead (i.e., the place of the dead between death and resurrection). This actually parallels the NT doctrines of Abraham's Bosom or Paradise and Hades (see Luke 16:19-31). In the OT, Sheol was apparently a place for both the righteous and unrighteous dead. It may have been a place of rest for the righteous and a place of torment for the unrighteous. However, in the course of progressive revelation, we have been given a clearer vision of the afterlife (including the eternal state) in the NT. Thus, I think this can be easily explained in terms of progressive revelation, rather than as borrowing from Zoroastrianism.

In case you're interested, I have written a <u>previous reply</u> about <u>Zoroastrianism</u>. Although this reply is attempting to answer some questions other than what you've asked about, it may nonetheless be of benefit to you.

I hope this helps.

Sincerely in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn Probe Ministries