

BODY, SOUL, AND HUMAN LIFE: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible by Joel B. Green. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008. 212 pages, index. Paperback; \$19.99. ISBN: 0801035953.

Reviewed by Scott B. Rae, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, La Mirada, CA 90639.

Joel Green, professor of New Testament studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, has produced what he calls a “progress report” on his years-long pursuit of the integration of biblical studies and the neurosciences. Though I commend him for taking up serious graduate study in an entirely different field (the neurosciences) in mid-career, the book is heavy on Green’s first language of biblical studies. Readers who are looking for substantive discussion of the neurosciences will be disappointed, but Green’s subtitle indicates his primary goal, which is to expound on human nature from the Bible. To be sure, his work is driven by his understanding of advances in the neurosciences, which, in his view, necessitates abandoning the traditional dualism that has been the consensus of biblical interpreters and theologians for centuries. The alternative that Green proposes—which fits with his reading of the Bible, and, in his view, does not require belief in anything immaterial in human nature, such as a soul—is that the functions attributed to the soul can be more plausibly explained by neuro-biological categories. Green’s work, thus, could be viewed as a biblical defense of Christian monism, or nonreductive physicalism, seeing human persons as unified, embodied wholes consisting of nothing more than their material “stuff.”

Green raises a number of important questions, which include the uniqueness of human beings, the grounding for human worth and morality, decision-making and free will, the focus of salvation, and views of life after death. In chapter one, he introduces his methodological approach which he admits draws heavily on the sciences, arguing that neuroscience should have a place in theological interpretation (pp. 22–8). Most chapters, except for the final one, begin with challenges to traditional theological views from the neurosciences, followed by lengthy, detailed, and well-documented explorations of biblical texts, attempting to demonstrate that his Christian monism is consistent with the Bible. Chapter two outlines his view of human nature, including the image of God. Chapter three

addresses the notions of sin and freedom, affirming moral responsibility but admitting that free will as traditionally understood is “overrated” (p. 75). Chapter four addresses the concept of salvation, conversion, and change. He then applies this to the mission of the church and argues that the church’s mission should reflect a holistic pursuit to minister to the whole person, not just his or her soul. The book concludes with an entirely biblical studies section on the resurrection of the body and the after-life, wherein Green argues that the correct reading of the biblical text does not demand belief in a disembodied or intermediate state, in which the believer maintains existence and identity prior to the final resurrection of the body.

Green pointedly observes at the beginning, when establishing his hermeneutical methodology, that it is worth inquiring whether a substantive view of the soul in Christian thought is a consequence of unadulterated exegesis (i.e., read out of the text) or a philosophical-scientific assumption read into the text (i.e., eisegesis) (p. 26).

His point in the book is to demonstrate the latter. But later, he puts the question a bit differently, when he asks,

If the “truth” about the human person were decisively determined by Scripture, what would happen were contravening evidence to surface from extrabiblical inquiry, particularly, scientific observation? . . . The better question is then, will we allow a particular scientific rendering of the voice of Scripture to masquerade as “timeless truth”? (p. 28).

Green is, in his words, *deliberately locating our interpretive work in relation to science* (p. 28). It seems that Green’s charges against the traditional view apply just as readily to his own thesis. By locating his interpretive work in relation to neuroscience, does he not run the same risk of which he accuses the traditional view—namely, reading a philosophical-scientific (emphasis mine) assumption back into the text? He seems to be attempting precisely that which he is critical of—to show that *his* particular scientific rendering of the voice of Scripture (Christian monism informed by the neurosciences) is the “timeless truth” about human nature. The method he follows in the chapters that form the substance of the book seems to suggest this, as he points out challenges from the neurosciences, then attempts to show that

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the exegesis of Scripture harmonizes nicely with such a scientific worldview. At the least, if the concern is to get at an “unadulterated” view of the Bible, he should come at it without the overlay provided by the neurosciences.

Of course, the neurosciences do not settle the matter of what constitutes a human person, nor is it at all clear that considerations from the neurosciences should drive the reinterpretation of the Bible. The sciences are inept at deciding what are fundamentally philosophical issues, as evidenced by the fact that three different Nobel prize winning scientists (John Eccles, a substance dualist; Roger Sperry, a property dualist; and Francis Crick, a physicalist) all are quite aware of the neurosciences, yet that field cannot settle the debate. In fairness to Green, he is not claiming that the sciences settle the question, but it is clear that his exposure to the neurosciences is what is driving his re-reading of the Bible. As I note below, Scripture does not demand his nonreductive physicalism, and I would challenge Green to point out a single discovery in the neurosciences that the substance dualist cannot accommodate.

Green seems to downplay the fact that biblical writers had the worldview they did, not by accident, nor by uncritically adopting the philosophical consensus of the prevailing culture. Rather, the biblical authors espoused/assumed a particular worldview (though not systematically developed, analogous to their theology and ethics) as part of their message. They espoused a metaphysical view of the world, a view of epistemology, a view of ethics, a view of history, and, significantly, a view of the human person. The teaching of the biblical authors was embedded in a consistent worldview, of which their view of human nature was a part. This, of course, leaves room for literary conventions such as a wide variety of figures of speech, poetic literature, proverbial sayings, and so forth. But just because the neurosciences call the soul into question, it does not follow that the biblical writers were writing uncritically out of the allegedly (according to Green) mistaken dualism of their day. Similarly, just because the current philosophical consensus on ethics calls into question the biblical notion of objective, universal moral absolutes, it does not follow that the biblical authors were simply writing out of their own allegedly erroneous cultural assumptions about objective moral absolutes.

Even if one were to adopt Green’s approach, it does not follow that if the neurosciences offer a plausible rendering of the functions traditionally attributed to the soul, then the “concept of soul as traditionally understood in theology as a person’s authentic self, seems redundant” and, thus, can be rejected (p. 45). Perhaps an analogy from sociology or religion fits here. Just because sociologists can offer a plausible rendering of religious experience, it does not follow that religious experience is not genuinely what it claims to be. Simply because sociology can account for a religious experience, it does not follow that the religious experience can be *reduced* to that explanation. Likewise, it does not follow that the functions of the soul can be *reduced* to neurology, even though the neurosciences can provide a descriptive explanation of some of those functions.

Though Green is clearly aware of the many varieties of dualism, sometimes it seems that he is aiming his criticism at Cartesian dualism with its separation of the body and the soul. For example, the substance dualist can readily accommodate his view of conversion, that it involves neurological change (pp. 115–6), since for the substance dualist, it is no surprise that the soul impacts the body and vice versa. Surely the dualist can affirm that conversion is embodied, without affirming “somatic existence as the basis and means of human existence, including the exercise of the mind” (p. 122, emphasis mine). Interestingly, Green uses the notion of “mind,” not the brain, to describe part of cognitive life, though for the physicalist, the notion of mind involves use of a category not available to him.

There are good biblical reasons why dualism has been the dominant view among theologians and the church for centuries. The commonsense reading of several key biblical passages seems unmistakably to point to dualism, in a way that precludes the monism that Green attempts to defend. In 2 Cor. 5:1–10, Paul affirms that one can be “absent from the body and at home with the Lord” (v. 8). Paul assumes here what he has already laid out in 1 Corinthians 15, which is a general resurrection of the dead (vs. 52–54), in which it is clear that for those who have died “in Christ,” there is some time that elapses prior to inheriting a resurrection body. The only way to make biblical sense of Paul’s teaching, that if he is “absent from the body, he is at home with the Lord,” is to posit an “intermediate state” in which

the believer lives “at home with the Lord” in a temporarily disembodied state. This strongly suggests that somatic (bodily) existence is *not* the basis of human existence, as Green insists (p. 122). Rather, it argues for the existence of a soul, which provides the essential continuity of identity. Of course, the reason why believers will live in eternity in embodied form is because bodies are necessary to actualize most of the capacities of the soul—though that is the norm, it does not follow that embodied existence renders the soul superfluous.

Green’s insistence that “the dualism with which (Paul) is concerned is eschatological rather than anthropological” (p. 177) is a distinction without a difference. Though it is eschatological in focus, there is no reason why an anthropological truth about human beings cannot be bound up in an eschatological point. And the reason why Paul does not use the language of soul/spirit to describe the intermediate state (p. 177) is that Paul understood that even though he was absent from the body, *he was still himself*, and thus it was entirely appropriate to refer to himself with first person pronouns, since he grounds personal identity in the immaterial soul.

Paul’s eschatology is best summarized by New Testament scholar and theologian N. T. Wright, who refers to the final destiny of the believer as “life after life after death.” (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, pp. 162, 168–9). This view best explains several other New Testament passages that suggest an intermediate state, such as Jesus’ statement to the thief on the cross, “today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42–43; see also Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, pp. 1857–8), and Paul’s statement that he “longs to depart (from this life) and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:21–23). Both passages strongly parallel 2 Cor. 5:8. And Wright has clearly demonstrated that for those living during the writing of the Bible, including the writers themselves, the intermediate state was a mode of nonphysical, spiritual existence.

Green admits that the grounding of personal identity through time and change is a mystery (p. 180; though to be clear, Paul’s “mystery” in 1 Cor. 15:51 concerns how the eternal transformation will take place, not how personal identity is grounded). It is only a mystery, however, for the monist—the dualist can provide an explanation that fits best with the biblical teaching. Green rightly

concedes that it is problematic for the nondualist to sustain identity in material terms—what philosophers call a property-thing, or a bundle, view of a person.

This is a serious problem for the physicalist, one that the dualist can easily resolve by grounding personal identity in an immaterial soul. And it will not do for the monist to suggest that personal identity can be grounded in terms of relationality and one’s narrative history (pp. 178–9), since those change as much if not more than our physical parts and properties. These disparate stands of our narrative history have nothing in themselves that remains the same through time and change. The unifying factor in the varied narrative strands of one’s life is *presupposed*, not supplied by those factors, in the same way that continuity of identity is presumed, not supplied by the physical factors available to the physicalist. The dualist has an explanation for this presupposition in the existence of an immaterial, substantial soul. But physicalists must either adopt a weaker form of personal identity that is not strict and absolute or else simply assert that there is no problem for physicalism.

Unfortunately, this latter view is problematic for several reasons, not the least of which comes from the sciences themselves, if taken as the whole truth about us: We are aggregates of separable parts standing in an aggregate of relation-instances (causal, spatio-temporal, or otherwise). If the parts or the relation-instances change, there is a different object. It is incredible to believe that persons are atomic simples lodged somewhere in the brain! The simple fact is that the persistence conditions for people and their bodies (and the aggregated parts of their bodies such as their brains) are different, and the dualist knows why—persons are simple, immaterial substances; bodies are not.

One final note that I cannot ignore, as one trained in social ethics, is what I think of as a cheap shot at dualists regarding social ethics (p. 138). Green cites two newspaper headlines that advance a dichotomy between the mission of the church to “feed the soul” or “feed the hungry.” Green then comments that “newspaper headlines like these make good sense in a world understood in dualistic terms.” To presume that the majority of dualists hold these views is just flat wrong. Though a handful of dualists do buy into this outdated pietism about the world,

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most do not. Substance dualists maintain that in the Bible, there is just as much hope for the body as for the soul. Dualists affirm the importance of the body, the earth, and embodied human life on this earth—as critical components of faithfully following Christ. In fact, my students routinely tell me that in their churches, the social mission of the church is so much emphasized that they are concerned that the evangelistic mission of the church is underemphasized! Concern for the whole person, the earth and the culture is in no way inconsistent with substance dualism. ↵

A Response, by author Joel B. Green, to Scott B. Rae's review of *BODY, SOUL, AND HUMAN LIFE: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (above)

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I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Scott B. Rae's assessment of my book, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*. In part, this is because Rae and I differ significantly on both how to read Scripture and how the natural sciences might be brought to bear on our theological understanding of humanity; given the importance of these questions, more interaction is only to be welcomed. Moreover, since Rae has not represented well the argument of *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, I am all the more pleased to be able to address readers of *Perspectives in Science and Christian Faith*.

The reader of Rae's review may be forgiven for imagining that my agenda was to reread the Bible in the light of contemporary evidence from the neurosciences. This is the claim that Rae makes, but this is not the case. As I demonstrate in chapter one of *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, during the last century, biblical scholars who have examined Scripture's witness to the human person have shown over and over—quite apart from any influence from the neurosciences—that the witness of the Old and New Testaments supports what we generally name as a monist portrait of the human person. I go on to observe in chapter two that, were we to presume that the New Testament writers worked within a

milieu that supported body-soul dualism, we might go on to imagine that the New Testament writers reflected this dualism in their books. Were we to do so, however, we would fail to take seriously either the degree to which even Greek influence in the first-century Roman world was monist in its view of the human person, or the degree to which the primary influence on New Testament writers was Israel's Scriptures rather than contemporary Greco-Roman philosophy. In short, from the perspective of the discipline of biblical studies, support for body-soul dualism is minimal. Accordingly, what I attempt in this book is not to reread the Bible through a neuroscientific lens. To the contrary, I demonstrate that those views of the human person which are consistent with what we are learning from the natural sciences present no fundamental challenge to biblical faith.

Numerous voices, both in and outside the church, urge that the findings of the natural sciences raise serious, even insurmountable, questions against traditional Christian theology. Taking seriously the witnesses of Scripture and natural science, I claim that "biblical studies and the neurosciences are paths characterized by convergence (in the sense that they reach similar conclusions, though coming at the issues in discrete ways), not competition or contrast" (p. 33). This is the essential burden of my study.

At the same time, Rae and I seem to have fundamentally different views with regard to the role of the natural sciences in theological discourse. Three issues surface here. The first is whether science has any voice. The view that I articulate in *Body, Soul, and Human Life* is that "theology" is a world-encompassing discipline; as such, nothing is outside its parameters, not even science. Because of our belief in God the Creator, we must take seriously the capacity of creation—and, thus, the study of creation via the natural sciences—to provide insight for theological inquiry. Given Rae's review of my book, I am unsure that he would agree—or, perhaps better, I am unsure what evidence could ever be counted as sufficient actually to influence theological thought. Some theologians (I refer to Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, among others) have observed already that data from the natural sciences urge us to rethink body-soul dualism. The evidence I survey, from the beginnings of "neurology" in the seventeenth century to the early-twenty-first century,

demonstrates the neural basis for all sorts of human capacities traditionally allocated to the “soul,” with the result that, if there is an ontological entity we might call a “soul,” it is difficult to know what purpose it might have other than an epiphenomenal one.

The other two issues are closely related – the one, hermeneutical; and the other, the nature of the Bible’s witness on issues of science. Rae seems to miss my basic point, which is that the composition and interpretation of the Bible have never been and can never be absent considerations of science. I note, then, that “‘what the Scriptures teach’ about the human person is always in dialectical relationship to the presumptions brought by the interpreter to the enterprise of interpreting those texts” (p. 28). Thus, Rae’s appeal to “the commonsense reading of several biblical passages” immediately raises the question, Whose sense gets to be “common”? Clearly, those who read the Bible from the perspective of body-soul dualism will agree with Rae’s “commonsense,” but this does not make such a reading congruent with the thought world of the Old and New Testaments.

Going further, Rae apparently wants to assert that biblical authors chose the correct viewpoints among the options of their day; does this mean that we should not question the science of the biblical writers? It is not difficult to show why this would be a fallacious position. Take, as one example, Jesus’ claim in Luke 11:34–35: “Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness.” This saying depends on an erroneous ophthalmology, prevalent in the ancient world, which viewed the eyes as a conduit of light not into the body but from within the body out to the external world. Whether the eyes were healthy or diseased spoke to whether the body was full of darkness or of light. Jesus’ saying makes perfect sense within ancient, flawed physiology. Similarly, Paul uses language for the resurrection body reminiscent of scientific speculation about the make-up of astral bodies. If earthly life recognized four elements (fire, wind, water, earth), heavenly life would require a fifth element, the *quintessence* comprising the stars. Paul’s concerns are clear enough, even if they are grounded in an outdated periodic table; he wants to insist that our present

bodies are outfitted for this world whereas our new bodies will be outfitted for the world to come.

To leave the biblical texts themselves and refer instead to its interpreters, the philosophy-science of the first centuries of the church, influenced by Neoplatonism (and its forerunners), led to the assumption that the word *soul* in the Bible should be invested with content reminiscent of Platonic dualism rather than Hebrew holism. And Cartesian mechanics has perpetuated a similar dualism among modern readers of the Bible. The questions I want to raise—Whose science? Which science?—thus seem crucial for interpreting the Bible and for engaging in theological reflection on the nature of the human person.

It is difficult to know what to make of some of the details of Rae’s review. I am unsure why anyone seeking “a substantive discussion of the neurosciences” would pick up a book with the subtitle *The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*, for example. Another mystery: since neither in this book nor otherwise do I identify myself as a nonreductive physicalist, I wonder why Rae has chosen thus to label me and my position. My choice not to label my position in this way is not because I regard nonreductive physicalism as problematic on biblical grounds, but because I do not regard the biblical witness as fitting easily the precision employed by today’s philosophers. Thus, I have preferred the more fuzzy term, “monism,” and throughout steer clear of the eliminative physicalism that Rae attributes to my position. (Does Rae lump all nondualist positions together on principle?) Along the same lines, it almost goes without saying that Rae’s representation of nonreductive physicalism with reference to humans as “consisting of nothing more than their material ‘stuff’” is an egregious caricature that accounts in no way for the modifier “nonreductive”—regarding which I can do no better than to refer my reader to my colleague, Nancey Murphy (e.g., *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006]).

I find it puzzling that Rae (and other dualists) are attracted to the writings of N. T. Wright, even attempting to draw support for their dualism from Wright. This is baffling because Wright’s anthropological monism is transparent in many of his writings, and this makes me wonder how carefully Wright is being read. For example, Rae urges that

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my claim that Paul's dualism is eschatological rather than anthropological "is a distinction without a difference," but my claim actually parallels Wright's study of the matter in *The New Testament and the People of God* ([Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 252–6). For Wright, this distinction is significant for how we understand the Jewish context of early Christian thought. He enumerates a range of possible dualisms—cosmological, moral, anthropological, psychological, and more—then rejects, for example, *anthropological* dualism and embraces *eschatological* dualism as normative for first-century Judaism. For Wright, first-century Judaism did not view humans as bipartite creatures. Rae claims that "Wright has clearly demonstrated that for those living during the time of the Bible, including the writers themselves, the intermediate state was a mode of nonphysical, spiritual existence." But Wright has demonstrated no such thing—and, indeed, is far too sophisticated a biblical scholar to flatten the evidence from the period of the Second Temple in this way. This is not even true of Wright's own reading of the New Testament evidence. Setting aside Wright's more thoroughgoing analysis in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), we can turn to the popular-level book to which Rae refers: *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). More generally, with regard to "immortal souls," Wright observes that

much of the Christian and sub-Christian tradition has assumed that we all do indeed have souls that need saving and that the soul, if saved, will be the part of us that goes to heaven when we die. All this, however, finds minimal support in the New Testament, including the teaching of Jesus, where the word *soul*, though rare, reflects when it does occur underlying Hebrew or Aramaic words referring ... to what we would call the whole person or personality, seen as being confronted by God (p. 28).

Over and over in *Surprised by Hope*, Wright draws a sharp line of demarcation between body-soul dualism and biblical faith. To cite another example, Wright observes, "We have been buying our mental furniture for so long in Plato's factory that we have come to take for granted a basic ontological contrast between 'spirit' in the sense of something immaterial and 'matter' in the sense of something material, solid, physical." But this is not the case with Paul, Wright notes, nor was it even the case with the

"dominant cosmology" of Paul's day, which was Stoic; far less was it the case within "Jewish creation theology" (*Surprised by Hope*, pp. 153–4). Christian hope is not grounded in an "immortal soul," Wright says (e.g., *Surprised by Hope*, p. 160). Indeed, when answering the question of how God will accomplish that act of new creation by which we experience eternal life, Wright follows the well-known science-theologian, John Polkinghorne (himself a dual-aspect monist): "God will download our software onto his hardware until the time when he gives us new hardware to run the software again" (*Surprised by Hope*, p. 163). Wright's perspective here seems far removed from Rae's "intermediate state" experienced as "a mode of nonphysical, spiritual existence."

Of course, my point is not that Wright and I agree on all of the relevant exegetical details. However, on our respective affirmations of fully embodied, holistic human life in this life and the next, and the implications we draw regarding the nature and mission of the church, Wright and I find ourselves very much under the same theological roof. Rae's attempt to introduce dueling New Testament scholars at this point does not work.

Finally, I am nonplused that Rae thinks I have taken a cheap shot at dualists when I observe that distinguishing between feeding souls and feeding the hungry makes good sense in a world understood in dualistic terms. I am nonplused because I make no claim that this distinction is either necessary or inevitable. I am nonplused because, in Rae's defense of a social ethics grounded in dualism, he perpetuates this very distinction by observing that his students wonder if "the social mission of the church" has not led to an underemphasis on "the evangelistic mission of the church." Rae has made my point for me: dividing the church's mission in just this way finds a home in a world understood in dualistic terms. But if the human is understood in holistic terms—indeed, in the very terms for which I argue in *Body, Soul, and Human Life*—then the distinction between, say, biological or social or relational or spiritual needs is not so easily made. God's work of restoration, and so the church's mission, is oriented not to parts of a person but to human persons holistically understood, fully embodied, embedded relationally within the human family and in the cosmos God has created, and, indeed, in relation to God. ☞