

# THE CURRENT STATE OF THE STATE OF THE DEAD

*An honest book that upholds the traditional view of body and soul  
admits the strength of conditional immortality.*

## A BOOK REVIEW

*by Desmond Ford*

***Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: biblical anthropology and the monism-dualism debate*, John W. Cooper [1989: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI] 262 pages. Includes indexes. \$16.95 paper.**

"John W. Cooper's *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* is at once pastoral and scholarly, historical and analytic, biblical, philosophical, and scientific." That is the appraisal bestowed by Dr. Robert Gundry of Westmont College on this book. Cooper's book (his first) is held by many to be the best defense of the traditional view of the soul and the afterlife.

My own description would be somewhat different. To me, the book is one of the best contemporary examples that cherished traditions survive in the minds of those who love them (despite overwhelming evidence of the falsity of those traditions).

But I am grateful for the encomiums lavished on this volume. After reading it on a lengthy plane trip, I concluded, "If this is the best defense of traditionalism, then it is no stronger than a Jehovah's Witness' defense of Arianism, or a Mormon's defense of baptism for the dead!" \*

### **An Honest Christian Author**

More must be said. Dr. John Cooper is an exceedingly well-read and honest Christian scholar. (Cooper is associate professor of philosophical theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan.) He has placed all his readers in his debt by acknowledging the frequently tenuous nature of many of the traditional argu-

ments. He makes clear his awareness that the issue is still very much open to debate.

On the first page he tells us, "The central issue is whether the soul can survive and function apart from the human body." On the same page he accurately summarizes the contemporary trend (and its significance):

"... many in the academic community have taken a clear position on the body-soul question which they continue to assert with conviction. And if what they are saying is true, then two disturbing conclusions immediately follow. First, a doctrine affirmed by most of the Christian church since its beginning is false. A second conclusion is more personal and existential—what millions of Christians believe will happen to them when they die is also a delusion" (page 1).

A little later in chapter one we read:

"Far from being a dead or irrelevant issue, the body-soul question is alive and troubling for many Christians today. There is a pervasive sense of tension between what the church has taught and what numerous educated Christians think they ought to believe" (pages 4-5).

### **More Honest Quotes**

In the following paragraphs we further illustrate the honesty of the author. He summarizes or alludes to positions that differ from his own.

"Biblical scholars have subjected anthropological terms and texts to careful analysis and have concluded that the biblical view of human nature is not dualistic at all, but is quite emphatically

holistic. Historians of Christianity have confirmed that the roots of traditional anthropology are nourished by the soil of the Hellenistic worldview, not by Scripture as had always been assumed. And finally, many Christians who devote themselves to radical obedience and witnessing the whole gospel for all of life have charged that the body-soul distinction of traditional Christianity is one of the root causes of the many ways in which the faith has been distorted and prevented from effecting the complete salvation of humanity and the whole creation.

"All these charges are voiced from different directions, but they all concluded the same thing—dualism is out, holism or monism is in. As David Myers puts it: 'the truth is that we do not have bodies, we are our bodies. On this important concept scientific research and biblical scholarship seem to be approaching a consensus'" (page 34).

"The biblical scholarship of at least the last hundred years has produced an enormous amount of material which undermines the Platonic-dualistic reading of Old Testament anthropology" (page 41).

"In sum, *ruach* is used in a wide variety of ways in the Old Testament, some of them coinciding with *nephesh*. But none of them points to an immaterial subsistent self. Once again Platonism is left without much foundation" (page 44).

"There are no texts in which soul or spirit or person must be interpreted as an immaterial substance which functions independent of the body" (page 47).

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*(The Current State of the State of the Dead, continued from page 10)*

**Comments on Texts**

**On 1 Peter 3:19-20** Cooper says:

"... this is an extremely obscure passage and provides no firm foundation for inferences about the intermediate state" (page 124).

**On Revelation 6:9-11:**

"... this is a difficult text and cannot bear much weight in the monism-dualism debate. Perhaps if we are reluctant to view Armageddon literalistically as a military conflict in the Middle East, we ought to be equally cautious about the souls under the altar" (page 128).

**On Luke 16:19-31:**

"... although the parable may draw on popular views of the damned in the intermediate state, it may not explicitly portray the condition of the blessed dead in general. The bosom of Abraham may be a special place for the other patriarchs and the martyrs only. Although the story certainly draws from the beliefs of the Jewish people, it may not tell us about how they imagined the lot of the ordinary blessed dead awaiting resurrection.

"A caution of a different and more serious nature must be sounded as well. This is a parable whose point is not to teach about death or the intermediate state, but to warn its hearers about the dangers of riches and the consequences of failing to love their neighbors. Although it does corroborate what we know from other sources about popular eschatology, it does not necessarily tell us what Jesus or Luke believed about the afterlife, nor does it provide a firm basis for a doctrine of the intermediate state. For it is possible that Jesus simply uses popular images in order to make his ethical point. He may not have been endorsing those images. He may not have believed them himself because he knew them to be false.

"If we then return to the initial question—what does this passage tell us about the intermediate state?—the answer may be, 'Nothing'" (pages 138-139).

**On 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:**

"It could be that the New Testament uses sleep as a metaphor for persons who do not exist but who will one day 'awake,' that is, be re-created. But it is even more plausible that Paul is speaking here of soul-sleep, a situation where persons continue to exist but lack consciousness " (page 151).

**On 1 Corinthians 15:**

"The extinction re-creationist will argue that this whole chapter speaks about the resurrection of persons, not just bodies to which souls reattach. In fact the soul is not even mentioned. He will claim that there is nothing here to suggest an intermediate state or surviving soul.

"In response it must be admitted that there is no direct proof of the dualist view" (Page 153).

**On 2 Corinthians 5:1-10:**

"So there are serious problems with the *ependyein* argument as well as with alternative ways of picturing an immediate resurrection in II Corinthians 5:1-5. Of course that does not prove the intermediate state position. I will not attempt to do so. Let's admit that we are actually left with a standoff—the intermediate state and several versions of instantaneous resurrection are all compatible with verses 1-5" (page 159).

"The tent and present clothing are earthly existence, being unclothed is dying, and nakedness is disembodied existence. The heavenly dwelling we have with God can mean either of two things. It can refer to the resurrection body which we will receive at the parousia, an inheritance which will be ours in the future. Or it can indicate the entirety of eternal life in general—being 'with Christ'—without explicitly referring to the resurrection body which will be given at the parousia" (page 161).

**On 2 Corinthians 12:1-4:**

"Caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions from this. For Paul does not assert that he was apart from his body, a claim which would clinch the case for dualism. He only says that it might have been so" (page 165).

"A final word about Paul's termi-

nology. Nowhere does he use the words 'soul' or 'spirit' to refer to persons in the afterlife. But this is no more evidence against dualism than the fact that the Old Testament may never use *nephesh* or *ruach* to refer to the dead in Sheol" (page 171).

"It is true that Scripture does not pay much attention to the intermediate state and that what it does say is neither precise nor detailed. To a large extent it is *terra incognita*—unknown territory" (page 172).

"There is an interval, a period of time between death and resurrection, during which persons exist without bodies. But this presupposes that the dead remain on the same time-line as the living, that eschatological time is historical time.

"It has often been suggested that this view of time is mistaken. When we die, we depart from the spatio-temporal conditions which are the constitutive framework of the physical world. We are no longer in time, but pass into eternity. So the question of time between death and resurrection is irrelevant and meaningless. Both the intermediate state and extinction-re-creation eschatologies allegedly presuppose an improper view of time and eternity. If this is true, then our entire argument has been built on a foundation of sand—a naive assumption about time" (page 210).

**Cracks in the Foundation**

We have made no attempt to represent Cooper's positive arguments for his beliefs. They are frequently proposed in a tentative manner. A reader impartial to the issue could well fail to be impressed by Cooper's presentation of the traditional view of the intermediate state.

We salute the author as both well read and honest. Though we believe the doctrine of individual reward at Christ's second coming, we recommend this book to all. It reveals (unintentionally perhaps) the endless cracks in the traditional foundation for individual reward at death. ❖

*\*Arianism is the doctrine that Christ is a created being. It began with the Libyan theologian, Arius [c. 256-336 A.D.]. Baptism for the dead is the LDS practice of being baptized in the temple on behalf of the dead.*