

Book Review

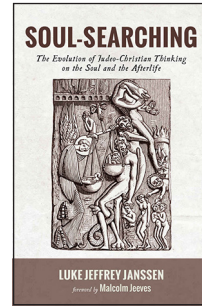
Luke Jeffrey Janssen.

Soul-Searching: The Evolution of Judeo-Christian Thinking on the Soul and the Afterlife.

Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2019,

Softcover, pp. 242, \$31. ISBN: 978-1-5326-7981-0.

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The writer of this book is a professor of medicine at McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario), with a PhD in medical science (physiology and pharmacology) and a master's degree in theological studies. He is the author of several book and articles, and a regular blogger in the field of theology and science, which makes him one of the rare experts of this field. There are only a few contributors in the current debate on human nature who are in the position to do full justice to the highest scholarship both in science and religion. His newest book, *Soul-Searching*, is a real treat for anybody who is interested in this field.

His goal in the book is not to give a final authoritative answer to the question of the nature of the soul and afterlife, but to demonstrate “how our understanding of both has been changed tremendously over the past several thousand years” (p. xiii). He is not about to dispel the traditional Christian notions about God, spirit, heaven, or any other traditional elements of theology, but to find a more scientifically relevant and complete understanding of the human-Divine relationship. He also hopes to encourage more dialog about these notions concerning the issues presented in his book.

When it comes to biblical inspiration, Janssen expresses a view in which the authors of the sacred texts were immersed, and thus influenced by, the ancient Near Eastern *zeitgeist*.

His proposal is that the Hebrew writers might have been formulating their own religious ideas by “*simply responding to and adapting*” (p. 22—emphasis original) them through the lenses of ancient Near Eastern ideologies. He treats this idea as a possible means of divine revelation. Thus, he surveys the ancient sacred texts and the way they might have influenced the Hebrew sacred texts. He assesses, siding with the majority of contemporary scholars, that the Old Testament assumed a holistic view of human existence. When it comes to the New Testament, and its host Greek culture, he writes that “it is an oversimplification to say that ‘the Greeks’ saw humans as a duality of an immaterial soul and a material body: there was instead a range of views regarding precisely how material the soul was” (p. 48). He concludes that the biblical view of human ontology is not monolithic, or even “decidedly monistic in nature” (p. 84). He agrees that it depicts human being as psychosomatic unities while the body functions, but it also teaches that something immaterial which conveying the very personhood of the individual person exists after bodily death.

In the rest of the book Janssens tries to find solutions to this perceived tension in the Biblical texts. One possible way is to “soften dualism” by understanding the material and immaterial parts of human nature not entirely distinct (i.e., substance dualism), but as a single functioning whole (p. 88). However, he considers these

attempts ending up merely softening the term “substance’ or producing a fairly dualistic form of monism” (p. 89). He finds the idea of mind and personality as emergent properties of the brain a much more appealing alternative. In a fairly technical (but still accessible to lay readers) section of the book, he proposes other options. He introduces Attention Schema Theory, Integrated Information Theory, Global Workplace Theory, and Multiple Drafts models which focus on the cognitive strategies employed by the brain to produce consciousness. He gives special attention to the model proposed by Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, which propose that “a structural molecule in our neurons—tubulin—might account for consciousness itself” (p. 96). The author also gives a detailed overview of Non-reductive Physicalism.

The topic of chapter four is afterlife. Here Janssen follows a similar structure than in the previous chapters. He surveys prehistoric and ancient Near Eastern material followed by Old and New Testament exegesis to argue for a progressive evolution of such concepts as afterlife, Sheol, Heaven, and resurrection. In the final chapter he recuperates his main notions framing them in the wider science-religion dialog.

I found Janssen’s concept of organizing theological anthropology into four classes appealing. In his schema “Anthropology 1.0” covers the first four thousand years of ancient Near Eastern ideology, followed by “Anthropology 2.0” which is roughly placed from the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE having an unequivocally dualistic perspective. “Anthropology 3.0” is referring to the past several centuries of “scientific age” in which solely naturalistic explanations were developed about human nature. He hopes that

we are on the verge of seeing “Anthropology 4.0” in which the science-religion dialog can help us to find more relevant interpretations of the Bible and classical doctrines.

I judge that the most troubling issue from an Evangelical perspective in the book is Janssen’s idea of “Progressive Revelation.” However, he provides a comprehensive argument for his notion. My second critique is more from a scholarly perspective. He obviously rejects the Platonist/Cartesian soul-body dualism, but I find that his arguments often only replace this notion with another kind, that is brain-body dualism. Furthermore, using tubulins as an explanation for consciousness seems too reductionist for me. Its connection to quantum theories (p. 101) only leads to another concern, namely substituting one “mysterious” concept (i.e., the soul) to another (i.e., quantum mechanics). When it comes to the notion of bodily resurrection, his support for James H. Charlesworth and N. T. Wright is also leads to a dualist position of human nature (especially when using the software/hardware metaphor on pp. 181–82). Finally, it is not clear if he agrees with the physicalist explanations of spirituality, but if he does, it puts him outside of the scope of traditional Evangelical theology.

Overall, I found the book a first-rate attempt to move theological anthropology toward the right direction. I judge that it might be a helpful resource both for clergy and lay persons who want to be more informed about some of the most contemporary issues in this particular field.