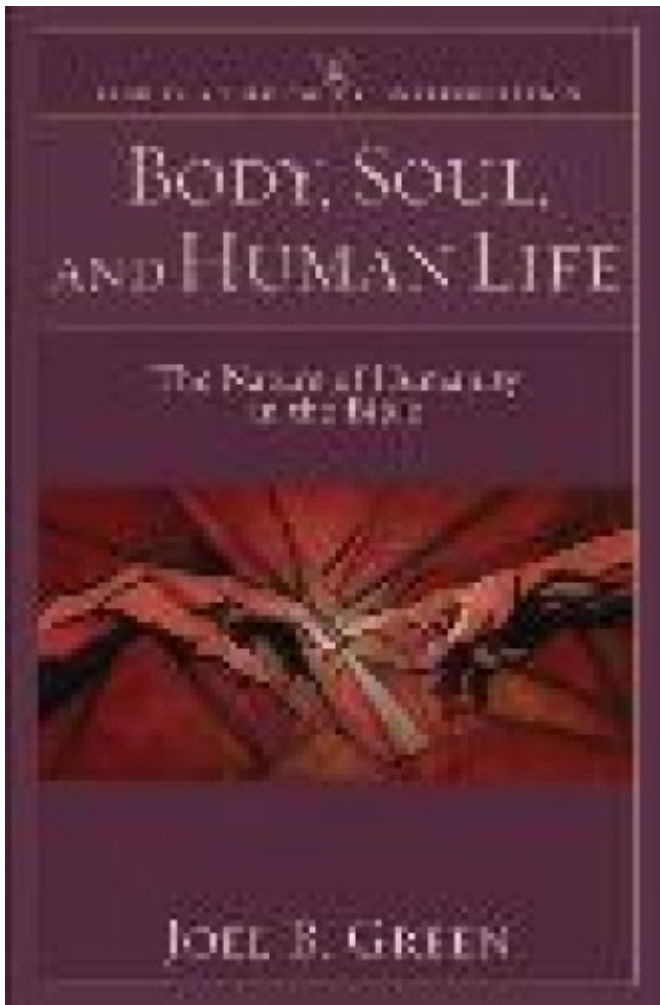


# Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible

reviewed by [Alan G. Padgett](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



## Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible

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Can I really reinvent myself, maybe by moving out west to California? Just what is a self anyhow? And where can I find one? Christians used to know what a self was. It was our soul, and we could neither invent it nor reinvent it. It was immortal, the gift of God to every human being.

Today the soul and the self both seem to be in trouble. For many thoughtful people, modern research into the brain has made the old idea of a supernatural soul implausible if not just plain impossible. Many medical doctors and scientists have abandoned any belief in an immortal soul along with their belief in Santa Claus and balancing the federal budget. Everyday people may still think we humans have a soul, but they have little or no notion of what the soul is. Yet even as we are learning more and more about the human brain and how it works, the soul remains a popular idea. For pastors who are involved with the care of souls, all of this can be quite confusing.

Joel Green is one of America's top New Testament scholars and a prolific author. His *Body, Soul, and Human Life* is the first in a series called Studies in Theological Interpretation. If the rest are as good as this one, it will be an outstanding series indeed.

In his investigation of what scripture has to say about some basic human questions regarding the soul, Green takes into account recent scientific findings. This is an unusual approach for a Bible scholar, but Green has been involved in several important and long-range projects involving scientists, theologians and philosophers around the topic of mind/brain studies and has taken graduate classes in the subject. He has contributed to two multiauthor interdisciplinary volumes and has edited two books on the topic of brain science and the soul or mind. Thus *Body, Soul, and Human Life* represents Green's mature thinking on the topic after decades of research. The result is a fascinating blend of contemporary science, discussion of big philosophical questions and first-class biblical exposition.

Green is up front about a key goal for his book: "If, as is often alleged, neuroscientists have discredited a dualist interpretation of the human person, I want to explore the usual corollary that, in doing so, they have also discredited biblical faith." Green accepts the first part of this conditional sentence and rejects the second. He argues on the basis of both science and scripture that human beings are a psychosomatic unity; on these grounds we do not have simply a supernatural,

immortal soul. The correct technical phrase for the view Green presses forward is nonreductive physicalism, which he terms monism. He compares monism to alternative views like reductive materialism and dualism.

As Green engages key questions at the intersection of the Bible and biology—What does it mean to be human? Whatever happened to free will? What does it mean to be saved? Is there life after death?—Green demonstrates that biblical teaching is not what tradition has taught us. Whether addressing the image of God, sin and human freedom, the nature of salvation in Christ or the resurrection of the body, Green argues on exegetical grounds that the correct biblical view is monism—that a human is a complex living unity, and that body, soul, mind and spirit are alike material, made up of the same created energy and matter as everything else. The resurrection of the body is thus a miracle of God, not a natural event in which the immortal soul separates off from the body at death.

Green has written a scholarly, authoritative and readable proposal that makes both exegetical and scientific sense. It is likely to be widely read and critically engaged.