

“Souls Under the Altar”: The ‘Soul’ and Related Anthropological Imagery in John’s Apocalypse

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The cry of the “souls under the altar” in Rev 6:9-10 is momentous: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” The reality that gives rise to this question echoes the quintessential theodicy plea of the Old Testament.¹ Against the background of human history marked by death, war, and injustice, which the riders of the first seals illustrate (6:1-8),² “there emerges at the opening of the fifth seal a well defined existential situation.”³ As Revelation’s only prayer of supplication, the vision provides the book’s first direct view of the people of God beyond the first century reality of the seven churches. It is a pathetic image prone to be forgotten. Here God’s people are portrayed as martyrs. Their witness to God’s truth and maintenance of the testimony of Jesus has led to their violent death: slaughter (*sphazó*, σφάζω, 6:9). By their very death they imitate and are identified with their Lord, the Lamb who Himself is slaughtered (σφάζω, 5:6). Those on God’s side of Revelation’s cosmic conflict are the slaughtered and those being-slaughtered; their numbers continue to grow

¹ Ps 6:3; 74:9-10; 79:5; 80:4; 90:13; 94:3-7; Isa 6:11; Jer 4:21; 23:26; 47:5-6; Hab 1:2-4; Zech 1:12; Dan 8:13; 12:6.

² John R. Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 188; Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 59; Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation Second Edition* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 226-228.

³ Glancarlo Biguzzi, “John on Patmose and the ‘Persecution’ in the Apocalypse,” *Estudios Biblicos*, 56, no. 2 (1998): 212.

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(6:10, 11).⁴ They are vexed by the discrepancy between expectations and reality. They have died for God who is sovereign, holy, and true (6:10). There is angst that salvation will be further postponed. Their prayer for judgment and vindication reverberates through the ensuing narrative.⁵ Their impassioned cry becomes the “genetic nucleus” of the whole narrative of the sealed scroll⁶ and “the crux of interpretation of the whole book.”⁷

As this question of theodicy rises in the context of anthropology—it is human beings who ask such urgent questions of theodicy—this impassioned existential cry of the “souls under the altar” opens up for the attentive reader a window into Revelation’s anthropology.⁸ As a whole, the book’s vision of the fifth seal not only gives voice to the problems of justice and the character of God confronting heaven, i.e., theodicy;⁹ it also yields tacit insights into human nature and being. It opens to view the human dimensions of the cosmic conflict and in doing so it enables us to see human beings and human nature from several unique vantage points.¹⁰

While Revelation uses a variety of images in representing human nature

⁴ Stephen Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, Exegesis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 82; David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998), 73, 74. All faithful followers of the Lamb who have died are included in the imagery, not martyrs only. See also Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 290.

⁵ Rev 8:3, 4; cf. 19:1-6.

⁶ Rev 4:1-8:1. Biguzzi, “John on Patmose and the ‘Persecution’ in the Apocalypse,” 212.

⁷ George Bradford Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966), 82.

⁸ The study of anthropology in Revelation is sparse if not non-existent. In his chapter on Revelation’s anthropology, Couch says nothing in terms of the essential nature of man except that he is a social being. See Mal Couch ed. *A Bible Handbook to Revelation* (ed.; ed. Mal Couch; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 131-141. Ice focuses on worldview and religious/moral phenomena of the book’s anthropology. See Thomas D. Ice, “The Meaning of ‘Earth Dwellers’ in Revelation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 166, (July-September 2009): 350-365. Green focuses on the book’s biblical theological anthropology with respect to questions of body/soul dualism and monism. See Joel B. Green, “Three Exegetical Forays Into The Body-Soul Discussion,” *Criswell Theological Review*, 7, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 3-18. There is no sustained or comprehensive exploration anthropology in Revelation.

⁹ Rev 5:1-5; cf. 15:3, 4; 16:5-7; 19:1-5.

¹⁰ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 390.

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and experience, most are indirect, tacit. The book's form and content, imagery and symbolism, subtle allusions and rhetoric, narrative and caricature, challenge our understanding of its real meanings regarding the human phenomenon. The line between the symbolic and rhetorical usage of anthropomorphic language and the tacit realities that exist behind them is not easily negotiated. Exploring those possibilities often seems counter to engaging the book's larger prophetic and worldview narrative and intent. Yet our anthropology reflects our worldview.

Our question here is whether or not Revelation provides a unified anthropology in keeping with the larger biblical witness? If so, what does it look like? As Scripture's last book, what final images of the nature of man does Revelation unfold? How does it nuance and integrate, if at all, the inner immaterial and spiritual qualities of the human person (character, will, choice, conscience, mind, moral capacity, spirituality) in relation to the tangible corporeal aspects of humanity (body/soul)? What of personal identity, social behaviors, ethnicity and language, nations, and culture? More specifically, what is the book's understanding of 'soul' and related anthropological terms, particularly in such passages as Rev 6:9-11?

This study explores how the vision of the fifth seal (6:9-11) is both the source of a thematic pattern throughout the book of Revelation and provides the initial conceptual bracketing imagery of a literary *inclusio*. It observes how several new items, with little or no immediate precedent in the book's unfolding narrative, are introduced in this fifth seal vision and which subsequently become extremely important concepts throughout the rest of the book. Several of these newly introduced items yield tacit anthropological implications. These tacit insights into human nature and experience include: 1) the corporeal (body/soul); 2) the spiritual/moral; 3) the existential/'personal identity'; and 4) the social/cultural aspects of human beings in relation to God, to one another, and to one's self.

It will be seen that the vision of the fifth seal does not require a dualist interpretation, but on the contrary, that the vision is very much at home with the larger biblical monist understanding of the human person.¹¹ We assert

¹¹ Many are so accustomed to a dualistic reading of Revelation 6:9-11 that they fail to see immediately or even entertain how it might make sense within a monist anthropology, thus predisposing their understanding of a number of key theological and exegetical issues elsewhere in the book. The default hermeneutical position by which many make sense of the Bible's anthropology is a dualistic one—the assumption that the theological anthropology of the Christian Scriptures assumes and supports body-soul dualism. This reflects dualistic presuppositions about the essence of what it means to be human. At the

that from the vantage point of the key role this unique text plays within Revelation as a whole, wider anthropological realities and issues can also be observed and explored.¹² Our methodology assumes that behind the book's symbolic and rhetorical use of anthropomorphic imagery and/or nuances there are tacit reflections of authentic human realities of being and action—both personal and social. The vision's broad context, content, features, and focus will first be explored. Specific concepts with anthropological implications are then highlighted and examined.

While this study touches on the meaning of Revelation's "souls under the altar," its purpose is not to add to the often-limited way that this phrase has been debated, i.e., the anthropological question concerning the human body/soul in death. Rather, it will observe, identify, and articulate the numerous, tacit, yet related anthropological imagery that is nuanced within the fifth seal vision as a whole (6:9-11) and particularly from the book's overall "soul" imagery. Its purpose is to present introductory exegetical and theological insights toward a fuller understanding of the anthropology of the Book of Revelation.

A Unique Text

The vision of the fifth seal is a unique text with extensive verbal and conceptual correlations with the rest of the Apocalypse. These verbal and conceptual correlations suggest that the vision plays a key role within a unified literary whole. As such the vision becomes the source of a thematic pattern throughout the unfolding cosmic narrative¹³ and it prepares the remainder of the book.¹⁴ New items with little or no immediate precedent are introduced which become extremely important concepts throughout the rest of Revelation: **altar**—θυσιαστήριον (8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7);

very least Rev 6:9-11 does not demand a dualist interpretation, but on the contrary is very much at home with a monist understanding of the human person. See Green, "Three Exegetical Forays Into The Body-Soul Discussion," 3-5.

¹² It is beyond the scope of this study to explore in depth the significance of the fifth seal except to outline its pivotal function in Revelation as a whole and its implications for an understanding of the book's anthropology.

¹³ Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, Exegesis*, 90, 113.

¹⁴ See John Paul Heil, "The Fifth Seal (Rev 6,9-11) as a Key to the Book of Revelation," *Biblica*, 74, no. 2 (1993): 220, 222, 242; Biguzzi, "John on Patmos and the 'Persecution' in the Apocalypse," 212; Jan Lambrecht, "The Opening of the Seals (Rev 6,1-8,6)," *Biblica*, 79, no. 2 (1998): 209; Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, Exegesis*, 90, 113.

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soul—ψυχῆ (8:9; 12:11; 16:3; 18:13, 14; 20:4); **cry out**—κράζω (7:2, 10; 10:3; 12:2; 14:15; 18:2, 18, 19; 19:17); **judge**—κρίνω (11:18; 16:5; 18:8, 20; 19:2, 11; 20:12, 13); **avenge**—ἐκδικέω (19:2); **our blood**—αἷμα ἡμῶν (16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2); **robe**—στολή (7:9, 13, 14; 22:14); and **fellow servants**—σύνδουλος (19:10; 22:9) to name a few.¹⁵ While there are important links and echoes of Revelation’s earlier passages, concepts, or themes, the text of this vision “is equally the *starting point* for a large number of threads of meaning throughout the book, or the sounding board from which many later passages will pick up an echo.”¹⁶

Four subsequent passages in Revelation, which depict the oppressed people of God, are particularly significant as each text echoes several semantic components that first occur in 6:9-11.¹⁷ In the last of these depicting the oppressed people of God—at 20:4—John again reports *seeing* (εἶδου) the *souls* of the slain as opposed to what he only *hears* in the other three the connections. Thus 6:9-11 and 20:4 form a literary *inclusio* of

¹⁵ Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, Exegesis*, 74-76. Incidental (εἶπον) and unique words (ἕως πότε and δεσπότης) also occur as well as words that occur rarely and in contexts similarly focused on martyrs (ἐκδικέω, ἀναπαύω and the phrase χρόνον μικρόν).

¹⁶ Ibid., 76.

¹⁷ I.e., Rev 12:10-12; 16:5-7; 19:1-2; and 20:3-4. See *ibid.*, 92. Pattemore asserts that there are seven semantic components found in each of these passages. Dalrymple’s assertion that the narrative of the two witnesses in chapter 11 is a primary account that depicts the suffering people on God’s could further nuance these fifth seal themes and provide yet another connected passage (Rob Dalrymple, *Revelation and the Two Witnesses: The Implications for Understanding John’s Depiction of the People of God and His Hortatory Intent* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2011). The verbal links of altar (θυσιαστήριου), “those who dwell on the earth” (οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς), as well as thematic links of witness (μαρτυρίαν), slaughter, resurrection, 42 months/1260 days (cf. 12: 6, 14), and vindication in the context of God and the heavenly realm are significant. “Like Jesus the lion/lamb-slain, the witnesses are people of unimaginable power who are also people defeated, killed, abandoned” thus a major “characterization of the community” of faith (Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 73). Mueller, however, posits that Revelation’s two witnesses are not the people of God, but rather the Old and New Testament Scripture (Ekkehardt Mueller, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 13, no. 2 [2002]). So also Ellen White (Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911/2002, 267). Nevertheless, that there is a link between the fortunes of Scripture and the fortunes of the people of God is indisputable. The fortunes of the people of God rise and fall in keeping with their witness of Scripture and its reception by those who dwell on the earth: and vice versa.

prospect and fulfillment.¹⁸ There is sacrifice and reward, faithful witness and vindication in judgment, slaughter and resurrection.

Furthermore, with the opening of the sixth seal, a second well-defined existential situation—and pregnant question—is voiced: “Who is able to stand?” (6:17).¹⁹ The fifth and sixth seals then, are linked linguistically and conceptually between two contrasting existential situations and questions—“How long . . .” and “Who is able to stand?” The sixth seal projects universal ramifications preceding the judgment for which the saints have prayed for in the fifth seal.²⁰ The sixth seal is in direct response to the question posed by the martyrs.²¹ It shows what the judgment will look like when it comes. It unfolds the existential realities of “face” (conscience) where there is effort to hide oneself in order to avoid God’s judgment. This second existential situation and question further heighten the unique, key role, which the vision of the fifth seal plays throughout Revelation.

Tacit Anthropological Imagery

The anthropological implications of the fifth seal’s unique features and content are both broad and significant. First, explicit moral imagery with little or no immediate precedent is introduced for the first time and which become extremely important concepts throughout the rest of Revelation’s cosmic conflict narrative: **cry out**—κράζω (7:2, 10; 10:3; 12:2; 14:15; 18:2, 18, 19; 19:17); **judge**—κρίνω (11:18; 16:5; 18:8, 20; 19:2, 11; 20:12, 13); **avenge**—ἐκδικέω (19:2); and **our blood**—αἷμα ἡμῶν (16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2). This moral imagery rises in the context of human beings struggling with questions of theodicy. Obviously, there is more in view in the fifth seal than the unjust physical elimination of those who would

¹⁸ Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, Exegesis*, 92. Pattemore asserts that the pattern of the text reveals both a “literary sequence” (6:9-11 > 12:10-12 > 16:5-7 > 19:1-2 > 20:3-4) and a “narrative sequence” (12:10-12 > 6:9-11 > 16:5-7 > 20:3-4 > 19:1, 2). See *ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹ Joseph L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (ed. Charles H. Talbert; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 69, 70. The question from the sixth seal forms an ironic contrast with the visions of the Lamb who is standing (5:6) and the innumerable multitude who are standing before the throne and before the Lamb (7:9). See Heil, “The Fifth Seal (Rev 6,9-11) as a Key to the Book of Revelation.”

²⁰ Heil, “The Fifth Seal (Rev 6,9-11) as a Key to the Book of Revelation,” 230.

²¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 99.

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remain faithful to God—or theodicy.²²

These moral concepts highlight the reality that the geography of the final crisis reaches beyond any external cosmic and global dimension (with its burdened question of theodicy) and into the individual human heart itself. It is human beings who voice the injustice. It is human beings who raise questions. Their outburst nuances realities of human nature in terms of inner personal moral capacity, perception, longings, accountability, and articulation. They hint at why John would use the word “souls” (ψυχᾶς–*psychē*) rather than “bodies” (either σώματα–bodies or πτώμα–corpse) when referring to the hurting people of God from both sides of his *inclusio* (6:9; 20:4). The word *psychē* provides the broadest anthropological referential in an otherwise apocalyptic visionary context. Its usage suggests that the cosmic conflict is concerned with the whole person, not just the physical body or the inner life.²³ The implications for anthropology touch the human phenomenon in its entirety—the inner, physical, personal, social, spiritual, moral, psychological, emotional, cultural, and life-framing worldview. Thus the human being and self would be both implied and nuanced in Revelation’s unfolding cosmic narrative and theodicy.

Second, there are two well defined existential situations and questions in Revelation’s seven seals: “How long, O Lord?” (6:9), and “Who is able to stand?” (6:17). These two existential situations together with their attending existential questions, unfold both human desire for justice/concealment and human blamelessness/guilt in the face of theodicy and judgment. As the fifth and sixth seals are linked linguistically and conceptually between these two visions, human conscience is expressed in images of innocence, integrity and hope (6:9) as well as that of guilt, shame, and fear (6:17).²⁴ The two visions reveal that human beings are moral beings with moral awareness and capacities: conscience. Human beings intuit their existence in a moral universe where God who is holy: 1) holds

²² To water down the text to the mere physical body/soul discussion signifies a weak and inadequate reading of the whole book of Revelation. See Biguzzi, “John on Patmos and the ‘Persecution’ in the Apocalypse,” 213.

²³ We explore the exegetical/theological basis for these implications of John’s use of the word “souls” (ψυχᾶς–*psychē*) in more detail below.

²⁴ Rev 6:17 unfolds existential realities of “face” and “conscience” where there is effort to hide oneself in order to avoid God’s judgment. This echoes some of the earliest human action in the story of Eden when Adam and Eve attempt to hide from God because they know their sin (Gen 3:8). See Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 83.

them accountable; 2) promises to hold their persecutors accountable; and 3) and allows Himself to be held accountable by their very question.²⁵ These two questions—one from the martyred dead, and one from the living lost—remind every reader of both the enduring moral nature of the cosmic conflict and of their own moral nature. They are like Abel’s blood still speaking from the ground.²⁶

Seeing the “Souls”

The tacit depiction of human beings sandwiched between John’s “seeing the souls” *inclusio* is multifaceted. It touches both inner immaterial and corporeal realities of human nature and experience. Implications for understanding the book’s anthropology are considerable.

Since John’s “seeing the souls” of the slain people of God forms a literary *inclusio* with implied meanings and interpretation (6:9; 20:4), we are pressed to ask: Since the word **soul** (ψυχή) occurs for the first time here in Revelation’s running narrative (6:9), what does it mean? Is it something spiritual, figurative, or immaterial? Or is it a comprehensive image with respect to human ontology? Are these souls alive, which would indicate that, the soul is immortal? Related questions press for answers: What does the phrase “the souls under the altar” mean? Which altar are we speaking about (the brazen altar of sacrifice or the golden altar of incense)? Where is this altar (in heaven or on earth)? Is the vision’s spatial imagery in view by implication or actuality? What does this scene portray if taken literally—can we imagine it? A simple reading of the text states: That these souls are slain, which means they are dead, not alive.

The word **soul** (ψυχή) occurs seven (7) times in Revelation.²⁷ That John is not speaking of disembodied “souls” that have left their bodies at death and “gone to heaven” or that he is speaking to the issue of where people go after they die is made clear by his use of *psychē* throughout the book.²⁸ Twice *psychē* refers to life itself: in 8:9 “the creatures which were in the sea and had life (ψυχή), died”; and in 12:11 overcomers in Christ’s blood “loved not their life (ψυχή) even when faced with death.”²⁹ Here the

²⁵ Rev 6:9, 10; cf. 15:3, 4; 19:1, 2. One could say here that God also holds himself accountable by allowing questions of theodicy.

²⁶ Heb 11:4; 12:24; Gen 4:20.

²⁷ Rev 6:9; 8:9; 12:11; 16:3; 18:13, 14; 20:4.

²⁸ Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, 75.

²⁹ One could argue that “life” here includes all the anthropological implications evidenced in human existence.

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soul or life (ψυχή) is juxtaposed with death (θάνατος) implying opposites where death fundamentally terminates the soul. *Psychē* as life can be either human or non-human. But it can refer as well to “being” as a creature or person: in 16:3 “every living thing (πάσα ψυχή ζωής) in the sea died” (16:3), i.e., creature; and in 18:13 “and slaves, that is, human souls” (καὶ σωμάτων, καὶ ψυχὰς ἀνθρώπων), i.e. person. The former as with 12:11 nuances the reality of a “living soul” suggesting that a *psychē* can die.

Revelation 18:13 places ψυχή along side of its only use of the word body (σῶμα) in the entire book (καὶ σωμάτων, καὶ ψυχὰς ἀνθρώπων). Many translations gloss over this evocative connection altogether when either interpreting bodies as “slaves” or implying bodies are separate and distinct from the human soul. The NIV reads “and bodies and souls of men.” The NLT reads “and bodies—that is, human slaves.” Interestingly Revelation uses the word corpse (πτῶμα) three times when referring to dead bodies (11:8, 9)—suggesting that in 18:13 a living body is in view and that the concepts of “bodies” and “human souls” are synonymous. In other words, as the text refers to the exploitation of “bodies,” John envisions the entire person (human soul). As an obvious *epexegetical kai*, 18:13 would better be translated “bodies—that is, human souls” (i.e., “human beings”).

While the notion of “slaves” is evident from the context (or perhaps, prostitution), the anthropological implications of the phrase’s construction moves the attentive reader beyond the moral dysfunction of exploitation itself to nuancing the ontological reality of human beings in their essence—an embodied being. Furthermore, the fallen culture depicted by materialistic and consumer oriented Babylon both views and treats human beings as a mere commodity on a par with jewelry, clothing, furniture, perfume, food, cattle, and chariots (18:11-13). In Babylon’s worldview, human beings are mere objects. They are bodies to be exploited, marketed, and discarded—regardless that they are persons. This phrase is not only insightful in terms of its critique of the exploitation of human beings, but it is rich with corresponding anthropological implications. It focuses the reality of the organic unity of body and human soul as well.³⁰ When you

³⁰ As the trading objects sold by Babylon are touchable materials one could reasonably conclude that the ψυχὰς ἀνθρώπων must also be a concrete/physical object—howbeit including intangible dimensions. The mention of a living body on the list just before the word soul may indicate that Revelation uses σωμάτων and ψυχὰς interchangeably. Interestingly, in 6:9 there is a shift of gender from feminine τὰς ψυχὰς (the subject of the verb ἔκραξαν in v. 10) to masculine τῶν ἐσφαγμένων as well as the two masculine pronouns referring to the same entities (souls of 6:9) in 6:11. Grammatical consistency

sell the body, you sell the human soul—the person. This human soul/person includes whom she or he is in her/his desires, emotions, feelings, thinking, inner self. Thus when one speaks of the human soul, body is assumed and vice versus.

Finally, *psychē* refers to the seat of one's desires: "The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you" (18:14 ESV). Here the inner self is clearly in focus—howbeit with a body assumed to experience whatever is desired. We will return to the anthropological implications of these realities later.

That Revelation would 1) twice portrays sea creatures as *having* (8:9) or *being* (16:3) souls; 2) equate the human soul with the body (18:13); and 3) place the soul in juxtaposition with death as opposites (12:11; 16:3) reveals how it echoes anthropological realities found in the Genesis narrative.³¹ Genesis 2:7 records that "the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (לַיֵּשֶׁבֶת חַיָּה); i.e., a living soul.³² One does not have a soul; he is a soul—a living being, a living person. The breath of life unites with the inanimate body transforming it into a living being. Revelation echoes this chronicle of Adam's creation in its narrative of the Two Witnesses who are killed and whose dead bodies lay lifeless in the street for three and a half days: "But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God came into them, and they stood on their feet; and great fear fell upon those who were watching them" (Rev 11:11). While scholars suggest Revelation 11 echoes Ezekiel 37:10 with its vision of the

requires feminine personal pronouns in v. 11. It seems that John refers to the souls (feminine) and to those who were slain (masculine) interchangeably, suggesting that the souls are not separable from those who are slain. When the slain die, the souls also die. It would be awkward that the voice from heaven would speak to dead bodies as well as to the living souls (6:11). This is not the case as these servants of God are clearly dead.

³¹ When reading Revelation one is plunged fully into the atmosphere of the Old Testament Scripture—thematically, theologically, spiritually, morally, and anthropologically. Revelation's link with Genesis in particular is evidenced throughout: creation (4:11; 10:6; 14:7; 21:5), tree of life (2:7; 22:2, 14), Paradise of God (2:7), breath of life animating lifeless body (11:11), adversarial serpent (12:9), woman and Messianic offspring (12:1-4), river of life (22:1), antediluvian moral dysfunction (11:18), removal of the curse (22:3), face-to-face encounter with God (22:4), rainbow (4:3), redemptive recreation (21:1-4), seventh-day Sabbath (1:10; 14:7), Euphrates river (9:14; 16:12), creatures as souls (8:9; 16:3), etc.

³² "Living creature" ESV, "living person" NLT.

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dry bones standing up with life when God breathes His Spirit upon them,³³ it is the Genesis narrative that is foundational for both books' prophetic imagery of spiritual revival and empowerment for mission. That both human and non-human life in Revelation is a soul likewise echoes Genesis anthropology where the breath of life is given to both man and beast.³⁴

Revelation then, does not support the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul. It does not describe the soul as a separable and intangible entity of a person. Rather the word ψυχη means the person or the whole being itself. As referred to above in the context of human beings, i.e., the "souls under the altar," the word ψυχη provides the broadest anthropological referential in an otherwise apocalyptic visionary context. This anthropological referent suggests that the cosmic conflict is concerned with the whole person, not just the physical body or the inner life. The implications for anthropology touch the human phenomenon in its entirety—the inner, physical, personal, social, spiritual, moral, psychological, emotional, cultural, and life-framing worldview. The human being and self are both implied and nuanced in the unfolding cosmic narrative and theodicy. This nuances to the fullest the imagery of human angst with regard to theodicy and the scope of divine redemption envisioned in Revelation's redemptive re-creation.

Resurrected "Souls"

The forgoing anthropological implications of ψυχη lead inevitably to the *inclusio*'s closing bracket with its reference to the resurrection of the dead—"I saw . . . the souls" (20:4). This second *seeing* of the "souls" provides a balancing perspective on the condition of God's slaughtered people. Their existential lament "How long?" is finally answered.³⁵ Earlier they appeared as sacrificial blood poured out under the altar (6:9). Now they appear as risen ruling overcomers (20:4): "I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came

³³ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48* (ed. Robert L. Hubbard; vol. 2; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 389. "So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army" (Ezek 37:10).

³⁴ Gen 6:17; 7:15; 7:21, 22; cf. Eccl 3:19-21.

³⁵ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*, 289.

to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (20:4 NIV).

The significant additional imagery here is the phrase: “They came to life” *ezēsan* (ἐζήσαν—an aorist active indicative). This pregnant verb is followed with: 1) a parenthetical statement—“The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended” (20:5a) where *ezēsan* is preceded with the negating particle οὐκ—“They did not come to life”; and 2) an interpretive statement which clarifies the meaning of *ezēsan*—“This is the first resurrection” (20:5b). *Ezēsan* (ἐζήσαν, “came to life”) and *anastasis* (ἀνάστασις, “resurrection”) are thus equated.

But what does John mean by resurrection? Is this resurrection spiritual, symbolic, or bodily? Does the vision really expect the martyrs to return to their fleshly bodies and resume a physical existence? Many find problems with equating this resurrection of the souls with the resurrection of physical bodies in history.³⁶ These difficulties arise from a supposed inability to distinguish the visionary, referential, and symbolic levels of meaning from each other.³⁷ While some find evidence against such a literal interpretation,³⁸ Revelation itself helps us understand that the intended meaning here is the resurrection of physical bodies in history.

First, there is the use of the aorist active indicative form of the verb *ezēsan* (ἐζήσαν) translated “came to life.” It occurs five times in the New Testament. Four occur in the book of Revelation and one in the book of Romans—each in contexts of resurrection from the dead. In the message to the church at Smyrna, Jesus is described as “The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life” (2:8). Nearly every reader understands the reading of *ezēsan* here as referring to the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Earlier John sees the Christ in His glorified resurrected body (1:13-17). He hears Christ’s claim: “I am the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades” (1:18). This unequivocal reference to His death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as the power which He holds over the death and the grave provides the conceptual background of Christ’s later self-description to the church at Smyrna: “who was dead, and came to life” (2:8). Later Revelation sets the death/resurrection of Christ in poignant visionary and apocalyptic language:

³⁶ Ibid., 291. The “first resurrection” is seen as regeneration, which brings people out of spiritual death and into eternal life, Christ’s resurrection a first-fruits, and paradoxically, the physical death of believers which delivers them from all that threatens them on earth.

³⁷ Ibid., 292.

³⁸ Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 254.

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“a lamb standing, as if slain” (5:6).³⁹ Clearly the texts indicate that being dead and being alive are two opposite conditions.⁴⁰ Dead is not living.

Ezēsan occurs next in the context of the Beast who’s deadly wound was healed. Here the text reads: “who was fatally wounded and then came back to life” (13:3, 12-14 NLT). Clearly resurrection in this context is visionary and symbolic, not physical. Nevertheless, the parody of the risen Christ assumes Christ’s own resurrection as the referent. In Romans, Paul uses *ezēsan* when he argues: “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom 14:9). Paul repeatedly uses the historical reality of the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus as the context for theological and ethical formation. One can reasonably conclude that John’s two uses of *ezēsan* with regard to resurrection in chapter 20 likewise point to the resurrection of the physical body in history.⁴¹

Second, there are the interpretive implications stemming from the two sides of the *inclusio* itself. The two brackets capsule both death and

³⁹ While neither *ezēsan* or *anastasis* are used here, the notion of standing after being slain is a clear reference to Christ’s resurrection. The Greek word *anastasis* (resurrection) is a combination of the preposition *ana* (up, upward, denoting motion from a lower to a higher) and the verb *histēmi* (to stand, set in place, put). When prefixed to verbs *ana* signifies upward, up to. This vision of the Lamb standing up from being slain plays on the word “to stand,” which is an unfolding theme in the ensuing fifth seal vision narrative and which includes notions of resurrection: i.e., the redeemed of all ages standing before the throne (7:9; cf. 14:1; 15:2), the corpses of the two witnesses standing when the breath of life from God comes upon them (11:11), and the dead standing before the great white throne (20:12). Commentators recognize this vision of the Lamb standing as referring to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and recognize parallels with Acts 2.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jn 3:16 and Rom 6:23 where life and death are likewise contrasted as opposite realities.

⁴¹ Revelation 11:11 may give some hints on how the dead come to resurrection life. After being dead for three and a half days, the two witnesses come to life because “the breath of life from God came into them.” This imagery repeats what happened at the sixth day of creation when God “breathed into the nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen 2:7). The chiasm of the two witnesses: who stood (A), but then died (B) and lay on the street (B1) and then stand again (A1) implies the concept of *anastasis* “resurrection,” which means to stand back up. With an obvious creation motif present, resurrection may be understood as redemptive re-creation. See my discussion of Creation, de-creation, and redemptive re-creation as well as the creation power behind resurrection, Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “The Seventh-day Sabbath and Sabbath Theology in the Book of Revelation: Creation, Covenant, Sign.” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 49, no. 2 (2011). As there was no life in man before his creation, so also there is no life in a dead man before his resurrection.

resurrection in keeping with the experience of the Lamb standing as if slain (5:6). There is sacrifice and reward, faithful witness and vindication in judgment, death and resurrection. Some interpreters have puzzled how John can see “souls” rather than bodies, but in a vision that is no problem.⁴² His vision is obviously broader than mere bodies or the body/soul state of the dead level of discussion to which this passage is so often relegated. It is the entire human being and the fullness of human being that John has in view. Resurrection gives significance to the body and affirms man’s essential wholeness of being and existence.⁴³ Resurrection is a positive assertion: “the whole man, who has really died, is recalled to life by a new act of creation by God.”⁴⁴ “It is the inner man’s very nature which demands the body.”⁴⁵

This begs the question though: How can the dead cry out to God if they are dead? From the biblical perspective the answer is rather plain as expressed in the enduring witness of Abel: “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground” (Gen 4:10); “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks” (Heb 11:4); “the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:24).⁴⁶

Worldview Polarization, Culture and Society

The fifth seal contrasts two distinct groups of human beings: those who are “slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained” (6:9), and “those who dwell on the earth” (6:10). While the vision of the fifth seal opens to view a dynamic picture of the people of God, it does so in relation to the rest of humanity. This contrast

⁴² Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation* (ed. Max Anders; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 372.

⁴³ V. Norskov Olsen, *Man, The Image of God: The Divine Design--The Human Distortion* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988), 149.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁵ Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), 32, 33.

⁴⁶ Joel Musvosvi explains Abel’s blood crying from the ground (Gen 4:10): “Abel was no longer alive, and there is no indication that a conscious entity from Abel was making this appeal. On the contrary . . . shed innocent blood results in divine intervention involving punishment for the guilty one and vindication for the innocent” (Joel N. Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse* (vol. 17; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 232.

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is further articulated in the seal's linguistic and conceptual link with the lost of the sixth seal in 6:17). The phrase "those who dwell on the earth" (οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) occurs often in the book of Revelation.⁴⁷ The fifth seal does not introduce this phrase for the first time here, but it does pointedly characterize it for the first time in relation to God's slaughtered people. "Those who dwell on the earth" are the ones who murder the martyrs (6:10). Likewise, they are the ones who reject the two witnesses' call to repentance (11:10). The phrase is not as neutral as might first appear to the casual reader. It does not refer merely to the entire mass of humanity or simply those who live on planet earth.⁴⁸ It is a technical term, which always refers to unbelievers who are the enemies of God.⁴⁹ It designates the worldview of the dominant portion of humanity. It is a qualitative description which points to human beings who "are at home in the present world order, men of earthbound vision, trusting in earthly security, unable to look beyond things that are seen and temporal."⁵⁰ Their functioning worldview (and culture) is in contrast with and in opposition to those who

⁴⁷ Rev 3:10; 6:10; 8:13, 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:2, 8. Of the 13 times κατοικέω appears in Revelation, nine are in the present active participial form followed by the phrase ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς— "upon the earth" (3:10; 6:10; 8:13, 11:10, 13:8; 13:14; 17:8). Two refer to those who dwell in the earth but either don't include the preposition ἐπὶ or separate those on the earth from those dwelling in it (13:12; 17:2). In the message to Smyrna the people of God dwell where Satan dwells (2:13). The issues of worldview and worldview influence are evident in each context. Revelation 14:6 uses the terminology τοὺς καθημένους ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς where the verb καθημαί is used rather than κατοικέω.

⁴⁸ Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, 49. I suggest that the phrase "the whole world" (3:10; cf. 12:9; 16:14) means something different from the phrase "those who dwell on the earth." The former refers to the entire mass of humanity, while the latter refers to those who have only an earthly perspective and thus ally themselves with the beast in rebellion against God. Revelation's summary of "language of nations, tribes, tongues, and people" (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15) gives further example of language referring to humanity as a whole in contrast to "those who dwell on the earth."

⁴⁹ Easley, *Revelation*, 65; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (ed. Moisés Silva; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 193. "Those who dwell on the earth" are the ones who murder the martyrs (6:10), who reject the two witnesses' call to repentance (11:10), who worship the beast (13:8, 12), who are deceived into making an image to the beast (13:14), and who get drunk on the harlot's wine (17:2). They do not have their names written in the book of life (17:8), rather they are subject to the coming hour of trial (3:10; 8:13).

⁵⁰ Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 88. See also Ice, "The Meaning of 'Earth Dwellers' in Revelation," 350-365.

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are on God's side in the cosmic conflict.⁵¹

Those who are "slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained" (6:9) present a contrasting worldview in relation to God. Here for the first time Revelation introduces the term "fellow servants"—σύνδουλος (6:11). This designation occurs later only in the context of the prophetic apocalyptic worldview of "the testimony of Jesus" (19:10; 22:9).⁵² These links bring the attentive reader to 12:17 where "keeping the commandments of God" and "holding to the testimony of Jesus" are integral worldview realities for those who would be faithful to God. Thus in contrast to the worldview of "those who dwell on the earth," Revelation asserts the worldview of God's covenant people who are later more graphically depicted in the book's chiastic center in the imagery of the woman and her seed (12:1-17). The people of God are a tiny and powerless minority within a hostile world's culture. They are persecuted and marginalized elements in human society.⁵³ They are an alternative community and worldview pitted in conflict with the powers that be and the dominating worldview and cultural apparatus, which such powers assert and compel.⁵⁴

Both people-groups referred to in the fifth seal represent the worldview polarization that takes place among earth's larger and diverse inhabitants. This enlarged purview of humanity is better observed in the First Angel's message which engages the people of the entire world with the urgent end-time truths of the eternal gospel: "And I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Rev 14:6). While the passage affirms the universal scope of God's redemptive call in contrast to that of the beast's destructive influence over the same worldwide audience

⁵¹ See my discussion Larry L. Lichtenwalter, "Worldview Transformation and Mission: Narrative, Theology, and Ritual in John's Apocalypse," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 21, no. 1-2 (2010): 211-244.

⁵² See my discussion of "testimony of Jesus" as gospel centered apocalyptic prophetic worldview, *ibid.*, 214, n. 19.

⁵³ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 173, 181.

⁵⁴ See my fuller discussion of worldview and worldview conflict in the Book of Revelation, Larry L. Lichtenwalter, *Revelation's Great Love Story: More Than I Ever Imagined* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 2008), 119-124; Lichtenwalter, "Worldview Transformation and Mission: Narrative, Theology, and Ritual in John's Apocalypse," 4-13.

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(13:7; cf. 17:15), it also unfolds tacit anthropological material. It assumes and envisions: 1) distinctive nations (ἔθνος), 2) distinguishable people groups within the nations (λαόν), and 3) unique tribes and languages within given people groups and nations (φυλὴν καὶ γλώσσαν). Revelation consistently summarizes humanity in this fourfold pattern—nation, tribe, tongue, and people.⁵⁵ These categories describe the distribution, characteristics, and relationships of human beings in the world.⁵⁶ Worldwide human life is organized into societies—the stuff of anthropology. Further tacit anthropological material is portrayed in Revelation’s lists of the social status and roles within human social order: the “rich and poor,” “slave and free,” “small and great,” kings, nobleman, commanders, the strong.⁵⁷ The global, the regional, the local, the varied roles and standings within society, as well as the individual person are all alike in view. All spheres and all peoples are to hear to eternal gospel. All are to be called to experience its hope, warning, and transforming power.

This rich imagery of nations, people groups, languages, tribes/clans, social status and roles implies the existence of integrating cultures, which mirrors, expresses, and fosters the unique characteristics of a given society. It assumes too, worldview(s), which a given culture similarly mirrors, expresses, and fosters within that particular society. The delineation of roles and societal standing—“small and great,” “poor and rich,” “free and slave,” kings, commanders, noblemen, etc.—further suggest the presence of disparate worldviews on both the structural level and existential perception/experience of individuals within society.

The implications for anthropology are numerous, especially in light of the Church’s identity, message, mission, and missional contextualization—critical cultural contextualization.⁵⁸ Conflicts between human cultures on religious/moral matters in relation to these anthropological implications are assumed. Revelation’s vision of the fifth seal explicitly nuances the conflict arising within these anthropological realities. Nevertheless, human equality is assumed in Revelation and it is

⁵⁵ Seven times altogether, though none of the ordering within the respective lists agrees precisely with the other: Rev 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15. See chart Easley, *Revelation*, 101.

⁵⁶ Couch ed. *A Bible Handbook to Revelation* (ed.), 134.

⁵⁷ Rev 6:15; 11:18; 13:16; 19:5, 18; cf. Gal. 3:28; Col 3:11.

⁵⁸ See my discussion, Lichtenwalter, “Worldview Transformation and Mission: Narrative, Theology, and Ritual in John’s Apocalypse,” 211-244.

an essential part of human creation.⁵⁹ There is no fundamental difference in the essential nature of races (and genders). Every nation, all tribes, peoples, and tongues, the small and the great, rich and poor, free men and slave are equally within the Apocalypse's field of vision for both redemption and moral accountability.⁶⁰ Slavery and trafficking in human lives is a reason for divine judgment (18:13).

From an anthropological vantage point, we observe that Revelation reveals human nature as fundamentally relational.⁶¹ The fifth seal hints at this anthropological phenomenon when it uses the terminology "their fellow servants and their brethren" (6:11). So too in the bloody worldview conflict that leaves one group dead and another alive (6:10). Human relationships are grounded in and are the expression of the ontological being of the human person. Human beings can be God-related (3:20; 6:9, 17), other-person-related (11:10), and self-related (8:6; 12:11). Revelation's themes of covenant, faithfulness, and truthfulness likewise express man's essential relational nature.⁶² This anthropological reality is subtly nuanced in God's apparent postponement of salvation until the fellow servants and brothers of the "souls under the altar" would experience a similar fate (6:11). "For salvation to be effective, everyone must be present, a concept based on the biblical principle of totality. God does not save one without the other."⁶³

Linguistics, worldview, religious/moral phenomena, and metaphysical questions of human being (body, soul, and the meaning of life) are noticeable facets of the Revelation's depiction of the human phenomena. The book envisions human beings in the entirety of their capacities, distinctives, and experience. The fifth seal vision indirectly nuances these societal perspectives as important aspects of the book's comprehensive vision of human beings in the cosmic conflict.

Between the *Inclusio*—the Creation Referent

In addition to the forgoing, a wide range of insights into human nature can be found in the visionary material sandwiched between Revelation's

⁵⁹ Cf. Rev 4:11; Acts 17:24-26; Mal 2:10).

⁶⁰ Rev 7:9; 11:18; 13:16; 14:6; 19:5, 18; 20:12.

⁶¹ In his chapter on Revelation's anthropology, Couch says nothing in terms of the essential nature of man except that he is a social being. See Couch ed. *A Bible Handbook to Revelation* (ed.), 131-141.

⁶² Rev 2:10, 13; 17:14; 5:1-11:19; 21:8, 27; 22:15.

⁶³ Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes*, 66. Cf. Rev 6:11 with Heb 11:39, 40.

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“seeing souls” *inclusio* (6:9; 20:4). This includes anthropological implications of the book’s prevailing Creation motif.⁶⁴ The correspondence of anthropological perspectives between protology and eschatology are observable. Literarily, the book’s Creation motif provides a dominant anthropological referent **before** (4:11; 5:13; cf. 1:8; 3:14), **between** (8:9; 10:6; 11:11, 18; 12:1-4, 9; 13:8, 15; 14:7; 17:8), and **after** (21:1-22:5) the “I saw . . . the souls” *inclusio* of 6:9 and 20:4. In particular, John’s bracketing use of ψυχὰς in itself generates Genesis’ Creation implications in terms of the breadth of human being and nature envisioned (Gen 2:7). This is significant in a document where themes of Creation, de-creation, and redemptive re-creation prevail.⁶⁵

Biblical Creation inevitably bears on the nature of human reality. Human living is not meaningless. Human beings are here by design, by plan. They have a certain future because God is the One who created them (4:11; 21:1-7). Nor is human life as God envisioned it “open” as per existentialist, humanist, naturalistic, or pantheistic views of human nature. There is an ordered quality of life consistent with human being, a moral right and wrong (21:8; 27; 22:11, 15; 9:21; cf. 2 Pet 3:13, 14). Immoral behavior is against the kind of behavior God envisioned for human beings (18:4, 5; 9:21; 22:14, 15). Human beings are ontologically equal with the same fundamental ability to make free moral choices and respond to God as their Creator (4:11).

Revelation’s Creation motif reveals what God thinks about human beings. They are worth creating. They are worth changing in the present and giving a new heavens and a new earth (21:1, 5). They are worth dwelling among (21:3). They are worth comforting (4:11; 21:1-7; 22:4). A personal God dwelling among human beings shows their true value. Creation and Redemptive Re-Creation is about a Person acting for mankind. Man as a reflective moral being has the capacity to personally respond to God with either worship and obedience or irreverence and disobedience.⁶⁶ Human beings can cry out to God for justice (6:9). God created human

⁶⁴ See my discussion of Revelation’s prevailing Creation motif and anthropological implications, Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “Creation and Apocalypse,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 15, no. 1 (2004): 125-137.

⁶⁵ See my discussion of Creation, de-creation, and redemptive re-creation in John’s Apocalypse: Lichtenwalter, “The Seventh-day Sabbath and Sabbath Theology in the Book of Revelation: Creation, Covenant, Sign,” 285-320.

⁶⁶ Rev 14:6-12; 9:20, 21; 22:11, 17; 16:15; 3:19-21.

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beings as moral beings, thus making them morally accountable to His self.⁶⁷

He gave them responsibility as stewards to care for Creation, thus holding accountable those who would destroy His creation.⁶⁸ All, which God created, is God's private property—the life of another is sacred—thus their blood will be avenged.⁶⁹ The two brackets of the “I saw . . . souls” *inclusio* tacitly highlight these kinds of human realities as both texts (6:9; 20:4) place the people of God in direct relation to God who alone is holy and Creator.

Broader Creation related anthropological nuances include the reality that human beings have self-conscious rationality. They are able to know themselves and examine and evaluate their own thoughts and assess their own condition. They have the capacity to experience shame or fear or remember or sense the need to repent.⁷⁰ Likewise human beings are able to perceive distance between themselves and other moral beings (or powers) and to plan the nature of their relationships with them.⁷¹ Such self-conscious rationality makes interpersonal relationship possible. Genuine relationships require that the persons view themselves as distinct in the relationship.

Human beings possess self-determination or freedom. They can choose. They can do what they want. They have the ability to create thoughts and actions that have no determinative cause outside of the self.⁷² Such capacity to choose is at the core of the human person and is foundational for mankind as a moral being. Without freedom, human beings could not make choices or be responsible for them (cf. Deut 30:19). Revelation's ethos of the Tree of Life and entrants into the Holy City underscore this reality.⁷³ Revelation is a book about choice. It is about how human beings understand the results of his or her choice. It points to who we are as a result of what we have chosen. It reminds us how our choices impact both history and eternity.⁷⁴ This is anthropology!

Revelation thus presents human beings as a unity in thought, will, emotion, character, conscience, and activity (2:23; 22:11). It affirms the essential moral nature of mankind. These qualities of relational being,

⁶⁷ Rev 14:7; 20:11, 12; 2:23.

⁶⁸ Rev 11:18; cf. Gen 1:26-28.

⁶⁹ Rev 6:10; 16:5-7; 18:24; 19:2.

⁷⁰ Rev 6:15-17; 2:5, 10, 21; 3:3, 18; 16:15; 18:10; 9:20, 21; 20:11.

⁷¹ Rev 2:23; 3:20; 17:13, 17.

⁷² Rev 22:17; 18:4; 2:21, 23; 3:3; 9:20, 21.

⁷³ Rev 21:7-8, 27; 22:14, 15.

⁷⁴ Rev 22:10-15; 1:3; 2:7, 11, 17, 26-29; 3:5, 6, 12, 13, 21, 22; 13:9.

identity and personhood, self-determination, and essential moral nature stand as evidence against the existential dismissal of any essential human nature and which favors total freedom of all individuals to mold themselves and mirror Genesis's imagery of the *imago dei*.

Robes Given, Washed

The anthropological nuances of the fifth seal's "white robes" must not be missed: "And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also" (6:11). The word for robes is *στολή*, a term occurring three more times in the seal interlude of chapter 7 (7:9, 13, 14), and one last time in chapter 22:14: four times altogether.

For people in the milieu of Bible times, there was a much closer association between clothing and the self than there is today.⁷⁵ Outer clothing was symbolic of the inner life or the spiritual state of a person.⁷⁶ There was a distinct relational dynamic in that clothing had to do with relationships between human beings (and God) as much if not more than it did one's self.⁷⁷ The biblical text reflects these nuances in a wide range of symbolic use of clothing,⁷⁸ even using the imagery of clothing in the context of de-selfing and re-selfing human persons.⁷⁹

In keeping with these wider contexts (biblical usage in particular), Revelation's narrative employs "garments" *himatia* (ἱμάτιον) and "robes"

⁷⁵ There is a distinct moral-spiritual-socio-psychological-cultic role of clothing. Clothing personifies one's identity (one's perception of self, who they are). It represents character (the aggregate of one's confession, choice and conduct). It delineates one's social status and relationship to others (a relationship between human beings, social roles, what one is in relation with and what one is for another). See Klaus Berger, *Identity and Experience in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 40-42.

⁷⁶ James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 139; James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (vol. 32; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 41-42.

⁷⁷ Clothing also function as signs or symbols of self in relation to others and our world. They indicate social status, wealth, power, and gender. The cut, the style, and the decoration, the color, and the quantity of clothing serve as social markers that immediately identify a person.

⁷⁸ For examples, see Victor H. Matthews, *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), 93.

⁷⁹ Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9, 10; cf. Eph 2:10; Isa 61:10; 2 Cor 5:2-4; Gal 3:27. Walter Brueggeman, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 15.

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stolas (στολή) as metaphors for an individual's inner life of moral/spiritual identity and character.⁸⁰ There are both "white garments" (ματίοις λευκοῖς) and "white robes" στολή λευκή (3:5 and 6:11 respectively). White garments/robes symbolize a range of positive meanings that include both ritual and moral holiness and purity.⁸¹ They can symbolize righteous character.⁸² When a few spiritually alive people in Sardis are pointed out as not having "soiled their garments," Jesus promises they will walk with Him in white for they are worthy (3:4). His promise is that every overcomer will be thus "clothed in white garments" (3:5). The language refers to those who have not soiled the purity of their Christian lives (character and self) by falling into sin.⁸³ This aligns with later references to cleansing robes from soiling in 7:14 and 22:14, both, which suggest inner moral and spiritual contamination.⁸⁴ These individuals in Sardis had not fallen into sinful practices and so had remained pure in contrast to most of their fellow churchmen. Their reward continues to picture ethical standards as a garment.⁸⁵ Since they have refused to defile their garments while under great cultural pressure to do so, Christ will replace their humanly preserved, clean garments with those that are white by divine standards and origin.⁸⁶ Here practical purity is imparted to the redeemed in their association with Christ.⁸⁷

Revelation's garments of white are neither earned or self-made. Rather, they are graciously given, offered, or enabled to receptive people by God.⁸⁸

⁸⁰ Rev 3:5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13, 14; 16:15; 17:4; 19:8; 22:14. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse*, 41-42; Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, 96, 139.

⁸¹ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker; vol. 52; Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1997), 223. Like in Zechariah 3:1-5 where the priest Joshua the high priest is depicted as wearing dirty clothes while standing before the angel of the Lord. It is a metaphor for the sins of both the priest and the people. The removal of these dirty clothes explicitly represents the removal of both guilt and moral impurity as well as one becoming something new both in character and life (ibid., 222.).

⁸² Beatrice S. Neall, *The Concept of Character In The Apocalypse With Implications For Character Education* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc, 1983), 121.

⁸³ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* (ed. Kenneth Barker; Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 257.

⁸⁴ Suggesting considerable overlap, yet with distinct nuances, between Revelation's use of *himatia* (ἱμάτιον) and "robes" *stolas* (στολή).

⁸⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 258.

⁸⁸ Rev 3:5, 18; 6:11; 7:14; 19:8; 22:14.

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This is true for both “garments” ἱμάτιον and “robes” στολή. Thus, soteriological implications prevail with respect to divine origin, assurance and hope for God’s people.

In the fifth seal, στολή λευκή are given to wear (6:11). This is language, which picks up on the promise made to the faithful in Sardis (3:4-5).⁸⁹ Surprisingly though, in 7:14 (cf. 22:14) the owner/wearer themselves make their στολή white.⁹⁰ Soteriological implications for these parallel visions (6:9-11; 7:10-15)⁹¹ are obvious and dominate both with respect to man-ward existential theodicy issues of innocence, divine justice, and assurance for God’s suffering people.⁹² Yet, in both visions—the “given to wear” and “themselves make them white”—anthropological nuances surface along side those already evident in the outer clothing/inner life symbolism. The imagery of washing garments likely alludes back to the consecration of Israel in preparation for the divine visitation they were soon to experience (Exodus 19:10, 14).⁹³ The idea of sin as dirty clothes is a prevailing biblical concept.⁹⁴ Even more fundamental is the reality of sin as an inwardly defiling reality. Thus, the στολή λευκή imagery in 6:11 raises anthropological realities of inner moral defilement and fallen human nature, especially when set in close proximity to the Lamb’s redeeming blood (7:14).

The Lamb’s blood is referred to four times in Revelation.⁹⁵ Each occurrence nuances a particular aspect of human need in relation to the redeeming power of Christ’s substitutionary atonement. Each occurrence nuances a particular aspect of human nature and being in relation to sin and Christ’s substitutionary atonement. Each informs our understanding of Revelation’s anthropology.

⁸⁹ Fee, *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary*, 98.

⁹⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 326.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 319, 320.

⁹² “The gift of a white garment is a heavenly recognition of the righteousness of the saints, who by this action are declared innocent,” Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 165.

⁹³ Fee, *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary*, 114; Osborne, *Revelation*, 325. This “whitening” of robes of the faithful resonates with the thought and symbolism of Daniel 12:1 where the wise who have been victims of suffering are described as “refined, purified, and cleansed” (Hebrew, made white). See Smalley, *The Revelation to John: Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*, 197.

⁹⁴ Isa 64:6; Zech 3:5; Psa 51:7; Isa 1:18.

⁹⁵ Rev 1:5; 5:10; 7:14; 12:11.

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In 1:5, sin enslaves, but the Lamb's blood releases us from sin's bondage.

In 5:9, sin is an incalculable debt that places one so morally and spiritually in the arrears that there is no hope of being more than they are, but the Lamb's blood purchases us and makes us what we can never be or do on our own—subjects of God's kingdom reign and priests who bring hope of God's grace to a hurting world (5:10).

In 7:14 sin defiles, touching one's very being and rendering them impure and unfit for the presence of a holy God—we are sinners at the very core of who we are—but the Lamb's blood enables an internal work of grace, cleanses conscience from dead works so that we can serve the living God (7:14, 15; cf. Heb 9:14).

In 12:10, 11, sin engenders shame, condemnation, and legal guilt, but through the Lamb's blood there is no condemnation (cf. Rom 8:1, 31-34), rather peace with God as the voice of both conscience and any external accuser (Satan, 12:10) are silenced.⁹⁶ Man is enslaved, defiled, indebted, and blameworthy.

Each of these images underscores man's essential moral/spiritual bankruptcy, helplessness, and hopelessness. The anthropological implications are both ontological and existential.

Extending these anthropological realities, Revelation's cosmic conflict narrative describes man in greater depravity and as the object of more divine judgment than do most other books of Scripture. The acne of human blasphemy and wickedness is portrayed in the beast and the false prophet who are the supreme demonstration of Satan's handiwork in the human race.⁹⁷ Accordingly, a major theme of Revelation is the subject of sin and evil. It is teeming with sin and all its ramifications for the universe and for our world. It is ironic that under the fifth seal it is the people of God who cry out in weary response to evil (6:9, 10), while under the fifth trumpet it is fallen and lost human beings who are so existentially burdened with the weight of sin and evil that they would rather die than go on living (9:5, 6).⁹⁸

⁹⁶ See Charles E. Hill. "Atonement in the Apocalypse of John," in *The Glory of Atonement: Biblical Historical and Practical Perspectives* (ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 190-208; Lichtenwalter, *Revelation's Great Love Story: More Than I Ever Imagined*, 37-42.

⁹⁷ Couch ed. *A Bible Handbook to Revelation* (ed.), 142, 143.

⁹⁸ Images of pride, arrogance, violence, exploitation, murder, falsehood, deception, thievery, immorality, infidelity (adultery), rivalry, war, intimidation, ruin, destruction, coercion, abound throughout the book. All of which further jade and crush the human self,

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Sin twists human nature into something inhuman.

Against this bleak backdrop of the moral/spiritual nature of human beings in relation to God—whom the fifth seal asserts is “sovereign Lord, holy and true” (6:10; cf. 15:3, 4)—the imagery of “white garments” *στολή λευκή* (whether given or themselves made so) takes on incredible soteriological and anthropological meaning. The white garments and the whitening of garments reach to the very core of the human self and experience. When one washes their robes white, they are washing his or her very “self.” When they receive a white robe they are receiving/becoming a new self. While fallen human nature is portrayed in several of its horrible effects, nevertheless the blood of the Lamb resolves all of these! Through the atoning work of the Lamb, human beings can become a new creation.⁹⁹ The paradox is jarring; the blood of the Lamb whitens. It speaks to man’s need and God’s answer to that need. The imagery assumes substitutionary atonement and divine mediation.

The imagery of human beings washing their robes in the Lamb’s blood is symbolic of their inner alignment with the work of Christ in their behalf.¹⁰⁰ Although the Lamb’s blood cleanses their robes (their very self), human beings are to “play an active role”¹⁰¹ by consciously washing themselves in the Lamb’s blood. The existential realities of washing one’s robe and making them white in the blood of the Lamb provide incredible anthropological insight into human nature and being. It speaks to ontological and existential need and how human beings find inner change. It speaks of moral and spiritual realities beyond us, and something objective outside of us which we must avail ourselves of in order to experience them.

Under the Altar

The fifth seal’s mention of the altar (*θυσιαστήριον*)—and “souls” under it—raises difficult questions. Is this altar in heaven or is it on earth? Which altar is being referred to: the altar of sacrifice (burnt offering) or the altar of incense? In what way is it that “souls” can be said to be “under” the altar? Does this suggest an “intermediate state”: that the dead are in heaven prior

leaving it with existential angst of helplessness, hopelessness, and meaninglessness.

⁹⁹ Rev 5:10; 7:14, 15; 17:14; 22:14.

¹⁰⁰ Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, 140.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

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to the end?¹⁰² Is there fluidity of apocalyptic thinking which makes it possible for the overlapping of images and the reality that more than one dimension may be at work:¹⁰³ where one need not press the either-or question of the position of the altar and its relation to the throne or even what altar it might be?¹⁰⁴ After all, John's worldview and spiritual geography does seem to imagine a clear link between the realms of heaven and earth.¹⁰⁵

Θυσιαστήριον is mentioned seven times in revelation.¹⁰⁶ In 8:3, 5, it is a "golden altar" which stands before the throne of God in heaven and appears to be the altar of incense representing the prayers of the saints. So also in 9:13. In 14:18; and 16:7 it is located in connection with narrated scenes in heaven in the context of divine presence as well. However, the altar of sacrifice is likely in view in 11:1 where θυσιαστήριον is to be measured along with the temple of God and those who worship there. Here the temple of God (ναός), the altar (θυσιαστήριον), and worshipers (προσκυνοῦντας) appear in close relationship with one another, but they are in evident contrast to the outer court, which was not to be measured (11:2).¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere the NT makes a distinction between the temple (ναός) and the altar with the latter obviously the altar of sacrifice (Matt 23:35; cf. Lk 11:51).¹⁰⁸ Since θυσιαστήριον in 11:1 is mentioned independently from

¹⁰² The puzzle of this text is not so much the word 'souls,' since as we have already seen could just as easily and preferably be translated: "persons." Rather it is the seeming difficulty posed by the presence in heaven of the dead prior to the end. See Green, "Three Exegetical Forays Into The Body-Soul Discussion," 15. Many understand souls here as referring to human beings' inner immaterial conscious identity which is distinguished from our bodies and continues after the death of the body, i.e., an intermediate state of bodiless souls (Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*, 125; Green, "Three Exegetical Forays Into The Body-Soul Discussion," 3-18. But as seen above, at the very least Rev 6:9-11 does not demand a dualist interpretation, but on the contrary is very much at home with a holistic understanding of the human person.

¹⁰³ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 102.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰⁵ Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, Exegesis*, 68.

¹⁰⁶ Rev 6:9; 8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; and 16:7.

¹⁰⁷ Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation Second Edition*, 349.

¹⁰⁸ The NT use of θυσιαστήριον appears fluid: associating it with both the altar of incense and the altar of sacrifice: altar of sacrifice (Matt 5:23, 24; 23:18-20, 35; Lk 11:51; 1 Cor 9:13; 10:18); altar of incense (Lk 1:11; Rev 8:3, 5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7). The book of Hebrews appears to use θυσιαστήριον solely for the altar of sacrifice and θυμιατήριον for

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the temple of God (ναός), and that the altar of incense would be assumed as part of the temple proper (at the veil separating the Holy from the Most Holy), the mention of measuring an altar in addition to that of the temple would mean the altar in view here is likely not the altar of incense but rather the altar of sacrifice.

Because in the fifth seal the souls are seen under the θυσιαστήριον—as though they had been sacrificed upon the altar and their blood poured out at its base—it is suggested that the altar in view here (6:9) is more likely the altar of sacrifice where sacrificial blood was poured. In the Old Testament ritual the blood of sacrificial victims was poured out at the base of the altar (Lev. 4:7).¹⁰⁹ If the altar of sacrifice is in view, it could be further understood that it would not be located in heaven, but rather on earth.¹¹⁰ Christian martyrs are viewed as sacrifices offered to God. In fact, they were slain on earth and their blood wet the ground.¹¹¹ The view projects heavenward rather than in heaven itself. This would be consistent with the rather earthly and temporal realities of the seals, which contrast sharply with heavenly and eternal realities pictured in the throne room visions (4:1-5:14). It would also undermine notions of an intermediate state where souls would be in heaven.

The preposition “underneath” *hypokatō* (ὑποκάτω) however, is emphatic, as in Rev 5:3, 13 where the phrase “underneath the earth” is distinguished from “on the earth” or “in heaven.” Would John have used such forceful language if, following Lev. 4:7, he was simply referring to the existence of souls “at the *base*” of the altar? Could he not have described their position as being “in front of” the altar, as earlier he has seen what appeared ‘in front of,’ or “before” God’s throne (4:5-6). “The seer’s choice of diction at this point reinforces the suggestion that the souls of the martyred, crying for vengeance ‘underneath the altar,’ were not initially in heaven at all, but far ‘below’ it, on earth: on the same territory which has

the altar of incense (Heb 7:13; 13:10 and 9:4 respectively). The context and associated words or imagery become important for clarifying meaning.

¹⁰⁹ Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation Second Edition*, 244.

¹¹⁰ As per Stefanovic: “Since the altar of sacrifice was not in the temple, but in the outer court, it is clear that the scene portrayed here takes place not in the heavenly temple but on the earth which was symbolized by the outer court of the temple” (ibid.).

¹¹¹ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 103.

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just been affected by the disasters of the first four seals.”¹¹² In other words God’s people “sacrificed their lives on earth, and at a moment in history,”¹¹³ as on an altar of sacrifice. Yet their burdened plea, in effect, is still voiced at the heavenly altar,¹¹⁴ i.e., the altar of incense (imagery consistent with 8:3, 5; cf. 5:8). Both the fluidity of apocalyptic thinking—which makes it possible for overlapping of images and the reality that more than one dimension may be at work¹¹⁵—and the clear link between the realms of heaven and earth¹¹⁶ would allow such. In effect, in John’s cosmology, the heavenly altar is not far away from the earthly and may perhaps merge in the imagery.¹¹⁷ “The symbolism here encourages the hearer to consider that what may appear to be a hapless death at the hands of the powers of this world is in reality a sacrifice on the high altar of that other world.”¹¹⁸

For sure, this is a visionary scene where there is symbolic representation of almost unimaginable spiritual realities: so too, for our interest in anthropology.

The deeper significance of ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστήριον τὰς ψυχὰς (“souls under the altar”) is in its tacit connection with the worship which had been taking place on a comprehensive scale around the throne of God

¹¹² Smalley, *The Revelation to John: Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*, 158.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹¹⁴ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 103. It is the opinion of the author that a stronger case can be made for θυσιαστήριον as the altar of incense in 6:9 and that the meaning of θυσιαστήριον as the altar of incense is consistent throughout all Revelation’s usage of the term. Rev 6:9 is the only mention of an altar in Revelation with some apparent ties to the altar of burnt offering, except possibly for the one in 11:1 that may well be an earthly rather than a heavenly altar (Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 442). While an allusion to Lev 4:7 is possible, it is souls not blood that are under the altar so the parallelism does not quite fit. Likewise an altar of sacrifice imagery undercuts the uniqueness of the Lamb’s sacrificial death (cf. 5:9) and how Revelation’s atoning work is consistently focused from the viewpoint and locus of the heavenly sanctuary (4:1-5:14; 8:1, 2; 10:8; 11:19; 12:10; 14:17; 14:5; 16:1, 17; 18:4; 19:11, 14; 20:1, 11; 21:2, 10; cf. 8:3, 4; 9:13). Neither is it the purpose of this study to articulate such, nor does the question of which altar is in view in 6:9 materially affect either the basic understanding of the passage or its implications for anthropology.

¹¹⁵ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 102.

¹¹⁶ Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, Exegesis*, 68.

¹¹⁷ Smalley, *The Revelation to John: Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*.

¹¹⁸ Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 86.

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(4:1-5:14).¹¹⁹ In the unfolding narrative of the sealed scroll vision (4:1-11:19), the adoring, heartfelt honor paid to God in the heavenly realm contrasts dramatically with the situation on earth where few hold fast to God's words and bear faithful testimony of His holy character.¹²⁰ The seals and the trumpets reveal a world where the worship of God appears almost absent.¹²¹ Nevertheless, it is a world where worship does take place—both

¹¹⁹ Worship is a dominating theme in Revelation. Even a cursory reading of Revelation makes it clear that worship is at the heart of the conflict in which John sees his churches enmeshed (Marianne Meye Thompson, "Worship in the Book of Revelation," *Ex Auditio*, 8, (1992): 45.). The language of worship stands out and worship plays an important part in unifying the book in both form and content (Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53.). There are repeated scenes of worship throughout (chapters 4 and 5; 6:9, 10; 7:9, 12; 8:3-4; 11:15-19; 12:10-13; 14:1-4; 15:2-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-8; 22:1-5). There is no book of the New Testament in which worship figures so prominently, provides so much of the language and imagery, and is so fundamental to its purpose and message as Revelation (Thompson, "Worship in the Book of Revelation," 45). Here realities of worship unfold that are timeless, overarching, comprehensive, and architectonic (Barry Liesch, *People in the Presence of God: Models and Directions for Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 233.). The ultimate goal of Revelation's message is to inspire the true worship of God (Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1129).

¹²⁰ Rev 6:9-11; 7:1-4; 11:3-13.

¹²¹ Most every one of Revelation's repeated authentic scenes of worship take place in heaven (chapters 4 and 5; 6:9, 10; 7:9, 12; 8:3-4; 11:15-19; 12:10-13; 14:1-4; 15:2-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-8; 22:1-5). As such they are designed to help God's people know where they fit in the scheme of things. They are to sense the incredible link between heaven and earth. They are to already see themselves as that kingdom of priests who faithfully serve God (1:6; 5:10). They are to imagine themselves as participants in that vast heavenly worshiping community where the twenty-four elders represent them (4:9-11; 5:14; 11:16-17; cf. Heb 12:22-24; Eph 3:15). See, Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation Second Edition*, 186-189; Osborne, *Revelation*, 228, 229; Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 322-326; Thompson, "Worship in the Book of Revelation," 48. The Revelation's community of worship breaks down the boundaries between heaven and earth (Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, 71). True worshipers form an egalitarian community around God and the Lamb at the center (*ibid.*). Worship is "a radical equalizer that breaks down all boundaries in heaven and earth except between the worshiping community and the two objects of worship" (*ibid.*, 69). The social boundary between the people of God and the people of the world "expresses in the region of social experience what the liturgical boundary expresses in the region of worship" (*ibid.*, 71). Revelation asserts a primacy of worship imagination and practices to worldview formation. See discussion of the pedagogical practice of worship and worldview formation in James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 133-139; Lichtenwalter, "Worldview Transformation and Mission: Narrative, Theology, and Ritual in John's Apocalypse," 211-244.

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true and false.¹²² In effect, θυσιαστήριον refers more to worship than it does to any sacrifice or offering per se, or even spatially in terms of its location either on earth or in heaven, as worship is assumed in altar oriented sacrifice or ritual wherever it might be. An altar is the place where acts of worship are performed, where gifts may be placed and ritual observances carried out in honor of supernatural beings. It is a connecting point between the worshiper and the divine. It assumes divine presence and access and reflects human beings as religious beings who worship.

Thus, Revelation's first direct view of the people of God beyond the first century reality of the seven churches is not so much that they are slaughtered like their Lord, but as such they faithfully worship God, and that they do so in keeping with what is taking place in the overarching reality backdrop of the heavenly realm—beyond the rebellion, moral dysfunction, turmoil, and false worship on earth.

The reality of Revelation's vast worshipping community includes different kinds of worshippers who worship in different ways at different distances from the throne (living creatures, elders, angels, all of creation—those in heaven and those on the earth, both creatures and earthlings) are not only viewed as one, but located spatially around the throne of God and focused on God as Creator and Redeemer.¹²³ And so the worship of God's faithful, while emanating from earth, is portrayed as if in heaven itself.

In keeping with this imagery, the worship of the “souls under the altar” is twofold: First, in the giving of their very lives (ψυχὰς), and second, in their quintessential theodicy plea: “How long?”¹²⁴ In this context of worship, it is not coincidental that Revelation's vision of the “souls under the altar” introduces for the first time the term “fellow servants” σύνδουλος

¹²² Rev 9:20; cf. 11:1.

¹²³ Rev 4:1-5:14; 8:3-5; 15:1-4. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, 69.

¹²⁴ Much how the Psalms display a full spectrum of worship tensions—joy and sorrow, silence and shouts, praise and protest, praying and listening, heartache and peace, hope and hopelessness, community and individual, divine immanence and transcendence—Revelation's worship/warfare tapestry embraces worship tensions of praise, protest, petition, silence, shouts, heartache, hope, hopelessness, divine presence and absence, community and individual. Innocence cries out for vindication. Hearts murmur at the absence of God. The weary would let go, give in, or give up. The interim between God's promise and the fulfillment of the promise demands painful waiting. Finding personal and corporate equilibrium in the juxtaposition of interruptive evil and the ceaseless and passionate worship of God on His throne is not easy.

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(6:11), which we have already noted occurs later only in the context of the worldview prophetic apocalyptic nature of “the testimony of Jesus” (19:10; 22:9). Both subsequent references, however, occur in a narrative setting of worship: each chronicling John’s own experience of falling down to worship his angel messenger only to be interrupted and corrected: “Don’t do that,” commands the angel, “Worship God!” (19:10; 22:9).¹²⁵ Likewise the vision’s corresponding reference to “those who dwell on the earth” (οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) finesses the contrasting reality of those who worship falsely, i.e., the beast, his image, or the dragon (13:8, 12, 4).

More could be said regarding the “souls under the altar” in relation to Revelation’s worship motif. There is enough here though to broadly observe the anthropological implications—man is a religious being who worships. The sense of the transcendent is at the heart of true humanness (Eccl 3:11).¹²⁶ Worship is intrinsic to human nature. All the issues and nuances of Revelation’s worship motif (both true and false, whether confession, character, or conduct, whether as ritual, theology, or narrative) revolve around this basic human characteristic of man in relation God. In particular, the theodicy plea of the “saints under the altar” highlights cosmic and existential dimensions of worship. Questions of theodicy and existential angst are projected as integral to genuine worship experience. They are the stuff of worship. Revelation’s worship shows how praise upholds the permanent truths about God acting in history and human life. It reminds us how heartrending prayer expresses the full gamut of trust, questions, protest, hope, and hopelessness. It expresses, too, the hurt and pleading on the part of God’s people for help. It protests at the way things are.¹²⁷ At bottom, though, it speaks to the intrinsic religious nature of human being and experience.

“How Long . . . Until?”

Somewhat related to the human sense of the transcendent, together with its corresponding impulse to worship, is human historical consciousness and how human beings cannot define the meaning of existence, except in terms of the past, present, and future.¹²⁸ The saint’s plea for justice reflects man

¹²⁵ Even for John, there is need to be reminded of both *whom* we worship and *how* we should worship.

¹²⁶ Olsen, *Man, The Image of God: The Divine Design—The Human Distortion*, 85, 86.

¹²⁷ John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Pslams 1-41* (ed. Tremper Longman; 3 vols.; vol. 1; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 60.

¹²⁸ Olsen, *Man, The Image of God: The Divine Design—The Human Distortion*, 123.

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as a historical being. It asks that God intervene in the reality of history.¹²⁹ “How long . . . until (ἕως πότε) you judge?” (6:10). “The judgment has not yet come to pass, and God’s people await it as a temporal event.”¹³⁰ Their wait only extends however, as the vision does not signify the end of their suffering: rather, salvation is postponed indefinitely it seems until their fellow servants experience a similar fate (6:11). The word *chronos* (χρόνος) appears which expresses time as something measured (ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν, ἕως) and which moves on objectively (6:11).¹³¹ Temporal nuances are present with words like *longer* or *still* (ἔτι) and *until* (ἕως) as well (6:11; cf. 6:9). The time-based assumption of their theodicy plea provides a subtle marker regarding historical and or time sensitive material throughout the Apocalypse.

Revelation is a book about time and history.¹³² It has past, present, and future aspects of history intertwined throughout its message.¹³³ Its highly symbolic imagery takes us to the cosmic and global, from ages past to eternity future, from heaven to earth and under the earth, using apparently timeless images and sequences to make its varied points. Nevertheless, it is grounded in human history (and cosmic) and assumes history’s flow toward a divinely appointed purpose.¹³⁴ It encompasses the whole scope of

¹²⁹ Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes*, 65.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Temporal realities in Revelation include time as: (1) *chronos* (χρόνος), which is expressed as something measured and which moves on objectively (2:21; 6:11; 10:16; 20:3); (2) *kairos* (καιρός), which considers qualitative or epochal time in relation to personal involvement, to goals to be achieved, some opportunity, event or anticipated fulfillment (1:3; 11:18; 12:12, 14; 22:10); and (3) *aiōn* or *aiōnios*, (αἰὼν or αἰῶνας), which is translated “forever and ever” “everlasting” or “eternal” and designates duration of time defined by its content, and which connects the present age and salvation in the coming age in a linear concept leading toward the endless time (not timelessness) of God’s redemptive re-Creation (1:18; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 14:11).

¹³² Jesus tells John: Write “the things which you have seen,” “the things which are,” “and the things which will take place after these things” (1:19). It’s a three-part picture. “The things which you have seen” refers to the vision John just saw of the majestic glorified Jesus Christ (verses 9-18). “The things which are” are the seven churches and their present condition, which Jesus will discuss next (2:1-3:21). And “the things which will take place after these things” is the rest of Revelation and refers to future events (4:1-22:21). Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation Second Edition*, 98, 103; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 115.

¹³³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 97.

¹³⁴ Some visions concern near events while others involve the remote future or distant past (12:4, 7-9; 13:8; 17:8; 21:1-22:5). Certain visions are historical in that they are anchored in a definable point in history (12:10) while others provide more of a backdrop meaning for

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human time and history. Because Revelation locates the fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy within the flow of human history, it is consistent with real human nature and existence.

An understanding of history and the historicalness of man includes some key words or basic concepts: “a linear concept, contrary to a cyclical one; purpose, decision, action, and events; perception and value judgment morally based in God; a threefold time relationship of past, present, and future; a beginning and an end; a three-dimensional relationship of God to man, man to man, and man to God.”¹³⁵ Man’s historicalness is part of his humanness.¹³⁶ Being and time run parallel. To be is to be in time. When time ends, so does being. Moral and spiritual realities of human being have to do with both what man does in time as well as who he chooses to be in time. In the setting of time, actions and relationships produce concrete events within concrete time and thus are historical. Each person lives in historical time and is influenced by past and present historical processes. For better or worse, his or her own actions and relationships have historical consequences for which he or she is morally accountable.¹³⁷ These are the anthropological assumptions unfolding in the book of Revelation as a whole and hinted at in the fifth seal’s vision narrative.

The experience of human historical consciousness opens to view the reality of human beings as creatures of hope. Such is likewise expressed in the cry, “How long?” Human beings can both envision the future and desire something new, better. Hope is intrinsic to human nature. Revelation is a book full of hopes and the God of hope who fulfills His covenant promises—to which the theodicy plea ultimately appeals (1:7; 21:1-22:5). Human beings measure hopefulness and hopelessness against the hope-crushing vicissitudes of their experience of life and the God Whose vision of redemptive re-creation engenders hope no matter what. Both the historicalness of man and his penchant to hope is undergirded by the

a philosophy of history. They have either taken place or will take place, but it’s not important to know when or where, but simply that it happens and impacts everything else in real time and space. These near and past and future events blend together in a tapestry that conveys a particular biblical worldview that can anchor faith wherever one lives in history. See my discussion, Lichtenwalter, *Revelation’s Great Love Story: More Than I Ever Imagined*, 65-70.

¹³⁵ Olsen, *Man, The Image of God: The Divine Design—The Human Distortion*, 123.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

historicalness of God¹³⁸ expressed in the description of His character and existence: “Him who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4; 8; 4:8). By characterizing God as One “who is to come,” Revelation’s worldview unfolds sovereign providence overruling every phase of history, and every step of history moving toward the realization of God’s ultimate purpose or goal. Something the “souls under the altar” hint at when addressing God as “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true” (6:10 ESV) (ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός).

Conclusion

While this study has explored the meaning of Revelation’s “souls under the altar,” its purpose has not been to add to the often-limited way that this phrase has been debated, i.e., the anthropological question concerning the human body/soul in death. Rather, it has observed, identified, and articulated the numerous tacit, yet related, anthropological imagery nuanced within the fifth seal vision as a whole (6:9-11) and particularly from the book’s overall “soul” imagery. It presents introductory exegetical and theological insight toward a fuller understanding of the anthropology of the book of Revelation.

The vision of the fifth seal (6:9-11) contains some of Revelation’s most provocative and engaging images and provides a narrative motivation for God’s judgment. The query “how long” is a crucial question for John’s whole story. It is the source of a thematic pattern throughout the book of Revelation as well as provides the initial conceptual bracketing imagery of a literary *inclusio* in which John “sees the souls” of the martyred people of God (6:9; 20:4). New items with little or no immediate precedent are introduced in the fifth seal vision. These new concepts become extremely important throughout the rest of the book. Several exhibit tacit anthropological implications, which are either nuanced in the vision itself or within the bracketed scope of the *inclusio*’s unfolding narrative.

That John saw the souls of the martyrs *under the altar* has nothing to do with the state of the dead or their situation in the intermediate state or where people go at death.¹³⁹ That he is not speaking about disembodied “souls” that have left their bodies after death and “gone to heaven” is made

¹³⁸ Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 353. Like other qualities of human nature found in Revelation, man’s historicalness reflects the *imago Dei*.

¹³⁹ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 103.

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clear by his use of *psuchē* (ψυχή) throughout the book.¹⁴⁰ Revelation 6:9-11 does not demand a dualist interpretation, but on the contrary is very much at home with a monist understanding of the human person.¹⁴¹ In effect, Revelation does not support the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul. It does not describe the soul as a separable and intangible entity of a person. Rather, the word ψυχή means the person or the whole being itself. In the context of human beings, i.e., the “souls under the altar,” *psuchē* provides the broadest anthropological referential in an otherwise apocalyptic visionary context, suggesting that the cosmic conflict is concerned with the whole person, not just the physical body or just the inner life. The implications for anthropology touch the human phenomenon in its entirety—the inner, physical, personal, social, spiritual, moral, psychological, emotional, cultural, historical consciousness, and life-framing worldview. The human being and self would be both implied and nuanced in the unfolding cosmic narrative and theodicy. This nuances to the fullest the human angst toward theodicy and the scope of divine redemption envisioned in Revelation’s redemptive re-creation.

As the question of theodicy rises in the context of anthropology—it is human beings who ask questions of theodicy—the fifth seal’s impassioned existential cry of the “souls under the altar” opens for the attentive reader a window into Revelation’s anthropology. It not only gives voice to the problem of justice and the character of God confronting heaven, i.e., theodicy,¹⁴² it yields as well insights into human nature and being. It opens to view the human dimensions of the cosmic conflict and in doing so enables us to see human beings and human nature from several unique vantage points.¹⁴³ The book’s unfolding comprehensive ψυχή informed anthropology points to human dignity, freedom, individuality, essential moral consciousness, religious nature and penchant for worship, wholeness of being, historical consciousness, and hope. Inner realities of human being and character are in view. Man’s fallen nature and its implications for human experience and existence likewise comes into view. It is only human self-realization in the context of substitutionary atonement and the need of divine redemptive re-creation that man’s essential need is met and he or she

¹⁴⁰ Rev 6:9; 8:9; 12:11; 16:3; 18:13, 14; 20:4. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, 75.

¹⁴¹ Green, “Three Exegetical Forays Into The Body-Soul Discussion,” 15-17.

¹⁴² Rev 5:1-5; cf. 15:3, 4; 16:5-7; 19:1-5.

¹⁴³ Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 390.

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is restored to the fullness of their human potential.¹⁴⁴

In the context of the fifth seal narrative the “souls” in view are already dead. They have lost their lives because of their witness to God’s Word. But those hearing (or reading) the vision are still very much alive. The rhetorical force of the vision is not an instruction to people who have died, but rather a communication to people who still live.¹⁴⁵ Now great significance is given to their own [the living] witness. It is not a casual matter of their personal preference to risk all by their witness or to retain their comfort and security. The living are to find their identity with the fellow-servants who likewise will give their all (6:11)—and in doing so, worship at the heavenly altar. In the process the living ones themselves, in their own person and life, will experience the existential realities toward which the vision’s impassioned cry points.

Anthropology provides part of the real-to-life tapestry on which Revelation’s prophetic apocalyptic narrative of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan unfolds. It reminds us that the book’s symbolic and rhetorical use of anthropomorphic imagery reflect authentic human realities of being and action—both personal and social. For sure, most of these referents are tacit. Nevertheless, they reveal how Revelation speaks to all aspects of human life and need. They affirm that the geography of the final crisis reaches beyond any external and global dimension with its burdened question of theodicy and into the individual human heart and condition itself. These insights into the human dimension of the cosmic conflict enable us to understand more fully the scope of the Everlasting Gospel (14:7) toward bringing hope of both a better human existence and better human *being* and *action*.¹⁴⁶

Without doubt, the book of Revelation is critical for a study of the theme of anthropology in the New Testament.

¹⁴⁴ Rev 1:5; 5:9-11; 7:14-15; 12:11; 21:1-8; 22:1-5.

¹⁴⁵ Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, Exegesis*, 88-89.

¹⁴⁶ Rev 14:7; 20:1-22:5; 7:14-17.

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