

Monism:
An Examination of Theological Merits

Written for the purpose of discussing a subject within
Systematic Theology and the Doctrine of Man

by

Nicholas A. Lakin

M.Div., B.S.

October 16, 2021

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Theological Positions.....	1
Trichotomy.....	3
Dichotomy.....	4
Monism.....	5
Biblical Scrutiny of Monism.....	6
<i>Nephesh</i>	7
<i>Sheol</i>	8
<i>Elohim</i>	9
Problems with Monism.....	10
Commitment to <i>Sola Scriptura</i>	11
Contradicting the Divine.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
Bibliography.....	14

Introduction

Theology, the endeavor of studying God, has produced many subcategories as a byproduct of the endeavor. Depending on the persons or sources consulted, the subcategories might be labeled with different names, but the contents still revolve around the same topics. The topic discussed in this paper concerns the ontological nature of human beings and their constituent parts; in this paper, that subcategory will be referred to as Human Constitution. Within the subcategory of Human Constitution are three primary theological camps of thought; the people who inhabit these camps are respectively called trichotomists, dichotomists, and monists.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Biblical merits of Monism to determine its theological viability. The first section outlines the position of monists and the opposing position(s) of dichotomists/trichotomists; this section is useful for stating terminologies and comparing each of the positions. The second section subjects Monism to scrutiny of formative biblical words that have contributed to the development of their theological understanding of Human Constitution; this section is useful for examining the position through the lens of exegesis. The third section discusses practical problems with Monism and reveals it to be incompatible with stated theological convictions and Scripture itself; this section is useful for highlighting the outworking of the position. Monism is ultimately demonstrated to be biblically untenable and an inadequate theological position.

Theological Positions

The theological argument of this paper concerns the concept of a soul. The important terms “soul” (נֶפֶשׁ – *nephesh* in Hebrew and in Greek *psuché* – ψυχή) and “spirit” (רוּחַ – *ruach* in Hebrew and in Greek *pneuma* – πνεῦμα) do appear in both testaments of the Bible, but the center of the

Christian debate about the soul revolves around determining the meanings of these words in their appropriate context.¹

Though the concept is linked to biblical passages, it is also believed to have been heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. Plato advocated for the division of soul and body, and Aristotle refined that philosophical concept by developing a dualistic understanding of the soul; the results of Aristotle's opining produced two sides of the soul: the animal soul (organic elements, like breathing) and the rational soul (intellectual elements, like thinking).² This ancient Greek belief about the human soul is said to have influenced the early church writers. P. H. Davids affirms this notion by asserting that during the intertestamental period "there is also the growth of the idea that the whole person does not die, but only the body," and the other part of the person that lives onward is the soul.³ His intertestamental assertion does coincide with the lifespans of Plato and Aristotle; however, this theory of origins is uncertain when it comes to the Bible.

The origin controversy has contributed to the production of three differing theological positions concerned with the physical and metaphysical makeup of human beings. These positions are commonly associated with the number of "parts" they affirm as constituting an individual, and each position varies on their interpretation of this number. The following is not meant to be an exhaustive detailing of the nuances for each position; rather, it is an overview of the landmark tenets that serve to separate the particular thoughts of each camp. The three primary positions are detailed in the following subsections: Trichotomy, Dichotomy, and Monism.

¹ Jay P. Green Sr., ed. *The Interlinear Bible*, 2nd Edition, Vol. 1, Hendrickson Publishers, 2013.

² W. E. Ward, "Trichotomy," ed. Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 1218.

³ P. H. Davids, "Death," ed. Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 324-25.

Trichotomy

Trichotomists see humans as consisting of three parts: a body, a soul, and a spirit.

Trichotomists contend that the Scriptures have made the constitution of individuals clear by appealing to the usage of specific biblical terminologies for soul and spirit. They would assert that the biblical writers used specific terms for specific parts of individuals, and therefore, the separation of these aspects is also warranted.⁴

Trichotomists also appeal to God's ontology as support for the position. Franz Delitzsch reconciles the original creation of humanity to be "effected by the personality of God, and wholly interpenetrated thereby, —including, moreover, the human soul and humanity in the image of God."⁵ This argument for a tripartite view of human constitution is wrapped in the already established understanding of God's trinitarian nature; it conflates the image of God as a trinitarian aspect and uses this supposition as evidentiary since humans were also created in the image of God.⁶

Trichotomists believe in the existence of a disembodied state of personal consciousness after death. They understand the disembodied souls of persons to be consciously awaiting their coming resurrection by God.⁷ Delitzsch theologizes about this intermediate state regarding the soul, body, and spirit:

“Therefore the separated souls long for reunion with their bodies; nevertheless, they are unable to complete the reanimation of these latter. It is a creative act of God . . . This act of new creation is different in manifold ways from the creative act of the primeval beginning. There, when the body was formed, the personifying spirit who was to endow it with soul was not yet present: here the

⁴ Ward, “Trichotomy,” 1218.

⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology*, 2nd edition, translated by Robert Ernest Wallis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885), 64.

⁶ See Genesis 1:26-27.

⁷ See John 5:28-29.

self-conscious spirit is already at hand; and the creative restoration of the body—with which it has already lived through a history conscious to its memory, —is an act of God, which does not come to it unforeseen, but is longed for by it, is guaranteed to it, and, as in this state, so in the world to come also, is prepared for it.”⁸

Delitzsch reckons the spirit of a Christian to be absent from their body at this present time but alive and self-conscious in the heavenly realm.⁹ Additionally, he theologizes the coming eschatological resurrection to be the point in time of physical (re)union between a person’s spirit, soul, and body.

Dichotomy

Dichotomists see humans as consisting of two parts: a body and a soul. They perceive the trichotomist’s position as one that overanalyzes the biblical terminologies used for soul and spirit. In contrast, they view the biblical references to a person’s spirit as often being about their soul. Wayne Grudem claims to understand the case for the trichotomist position but asserts the dichotomist position to be more biblically probable. He concedes that “the arguments for trichotomy do have some force” but ultimately sees them as being scripturally inconclusive; instead, he views the testimony of Scripture to be that “the terms *soul* and *spirit* are frequently interchangeable and are in many cases synonymous.”¹⁰ For this reason, dichotomists understand humans to only have a soul, but like trichotomists, they believe the soul is something contained by the body.

Dichotomy is nuancedly different than Trichotomy but stands together with it in unified opposition to Monism. As related to the certainty of the soul, Grudem writes “Scripture quite

⁸ Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology*, 536.

⁹ See Ephesians 2:6-7.

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 481.

clearly teaches that there is an immaterial part of man’s nature. And we can investigate what that part is like.”¹¹ That investigation is not experiential but academic and conducted through searching the Scriptures to eventually arrive at “the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness” (Titus 1:1).¹² Exegetical comparisons are the strongest point of this position because it uses Scripture in context to plead its case.

Monism

Monists see humans as consisting of only one part: a body. They insist that the concept of a soul is not original to biblical thinking, especially as related to the Old Testament Scriptures. They also support their insisting with an apologetic explaining the usage of the Hebrew and Greek terms for soul and spirit. Millard Erickson explains their rationale by revealing, “The expression “body and soul” is not to be understood as drawing a distinction between the two . . . it should be considered an exhaustive description of human personality” and continues relaying the monist assertion by quoting H. Wheeler Robinson’s determination about Human Constitution, “Man is a unity, and [this] unity is the body as a complex of parts, drawing their life and activity from a breath-soul, which has no existence apart from the body.”¹³ This breath-soul should only be understood as the living animation of the body; the animator does not exist outside of the confines of their body.

The monist assertion that humans consist of solely one “part” only makes sense in its relative comparison to the other two positions. It can be better described as a cohesive unity or a singular essence. Erickson provides more insight into the position by revealing, “In the monistic

¹¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 473.

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all quoted references from Scripture are taken from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 2013).

¹³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 482.

understanding, the Bible does not view a human as body, soul, and spirit, but simply as a self.”¹⁴ The self does not live on after the death of the body because it is intimately knitted to it. The monist position maintains that a person’s existence begins and ends with the conditional status of their body, both now and after the resurrection.

For the monist, the idea of an intermittent state after death is simply unpalatable. To them, this simply “represents the deleterious influence of Greek philosophy on the Christian tradition.”¹⁵ This philosophical train of thought developed to consider “the material world, including our bodies, is essentially evil and something to be escaped from.”¹⁶ However, the monist would claim “Hebrew thought knows no distinction within human personality. Body and soul are not contrasting terms, but interchangeable synonyms.”¹⁷ Therefore, according to this position, the terminologies used are simply a product of their time; the writers were using words common to their audiences but rooted in Hebrew thought. Therefore, monists assert that there is no biblical difference between soul, spirit, and body.

Biblical Scrutiny of Monism

There is a large gap of theological difference between Monism and the other two positions. Dichotomy and Trichotomy are nuancedly different but still relatively similar in their ethereal conceptions of the soul. The same thing cannot be said about Monism; it is altogether different regarding the ideation of a soul. However, the difference gap looks to be confronted with seemingly straightforward passages in the Bible.

¹⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 481.

¹⁵ C. S. Evans, "Separable Souls: Dualism, Selfhood, and the Possibility of Life After Death," *Christian Scholar's Review* 34, no. 3 (Spring, 2005): 327.

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 481-82.

¹⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 483.

Monists must adequately answer the biblical passages that contradict their position. They may cling to the claim that Scripture was hijacked by Greek thought or that the Hebrew writers had no concept of a soul until the intertestamental period, but ultimately, the claims are lacking in their explanatory power. Even if the delineation of a soul originated from Greek philosophers and was adopted (or perhaps affirmed) by Hebrew writers, the people and providential timing for its revelation to mankind is theologically less important than the special revelation about it in the Scriptures. Therefore, an exegetical examination must be conducted to probe the foundational cohesiveness of Monism.

An examination of New Testament terms to support the existence of a soul is a foregone conclusion for this paper. A plain reading of the pertinent biblical passages already produces an affirmation of its existence; this reality is what spawned monistic apologetics. However, the perceived fortress of Monism, the Old Testament is not exempt from a scrutiny of biblical terminologies to ascertain if the ancient Israelites considered humans to possess a soul. Three words used by the writers of the Hebrew Bible provide insight into the worldview of ancient Israelites as related to life after death. Examining them is fruitful for understanding how the New Testament understanding of the soul was a natural conclusion to Old Testament thoughts about the afterlife. These terms are *Nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ), *Sheol* (שְׁאוֹל), and *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים).¹⁸

Nephesh

Monists claim the Hebrew term for soul, *nephesh*, is a reference to the whole of a person or animal. Essentially, to them, *nephesh* is another term for the entirety of the body. However, Deuteronomy 12:23 casts serious doubts on this claim. It reads:

¹⁸ Green Sr., ed., *The Interlinear Bible*.

“Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for the blood is the [*nephesh*]; you may not eat the [*nephesh*] with the meat” (Deuteronomy 12:23, brackets mine).

In this passage, the ancient Israelites were commanded not to eat the *nephesh* (which was housed by or associated with the blood) but only the meat/flesh of the animal. Richard Pleijel gives insight into the nuances of the verse by noting, “The second half of the verse introduces a differentiation between the [*nephesh*] and the “flesh,” whereas in the first half of the verse the [*nephesh*] seems to be identified with the blood.”¹⁹ This demonstrates a textual difference in Hebrew thought between the metaphysical properties of the *nephesh* and the physical properties of the body.

Nephesh is also used to describe a person leaving their body. Jacob’s wife Rachel is recorded to have named her son “. . . as her soul was departing (for she died) . . .” during the childbirth of Benjamin (Genesis 35:18). The parenthetical aside within the verse is telling; it details the *nephesh* to be departing to another location as the body died. Grudem agrees by affirming that “there will be a time between our death and the day Christ returns when our [souls] will temporarily exist apart from our physical bodies.”²⁰ However, a monistic reading of the verse does not allow for a dualistic interpretation; this part of the verse could be monistically restated as something akin to “as she died (for she died).” In this reading, the parenthetical aside clarifies something that did not need clarification; clearly, something else is meant.

Sheol

Rachel’s *nephesh* departed to *sheol*. Her husband, Jacob, reveals information about this place during his lament over Joseph; he identifies *sheol* as being down below and filled with the

¹⁹ Richard Pleijel, “Translating the Biblical Hebrew Word *Nephesh* in Light of New Research,” *The Bible Translator* 70, no. 2 (August 2019): 162.

²⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 483.

dead, including personal relatives like his son.²¹ This metaphysical place of gathering is the primitive Hebraic conception of the afterlife; however, a detailed description of the ongoing in *sheol* is left largely unaddressed by the Old Testament.

The importance of *sheol* to this paper is its biblical reference as a real metaphysical place. It is the realm of the dead, and the place from where the dead rise back to life in the resurrection; the notion of an eschatological resurrection is prominent in Isaiah 25-27, particularly in Isaiah 26:19. In his trichotomist dissertation, John Swope relays that “Isaiah foreshadows the timeline for personal eschatology one finds in the New Testament, that the departed stay for a time in *sheol* (“asleep”), and are raised at the coming of the Lord. Such a timeline suggests an intermediate state, not a cessation of existence.”²² In one unique instance, a biblical character does indeed rise from *sheol*; however, contrary to the expectations of Isaiah readers, he is not in bodily form.

Elohim

The deceased prophet Samuel was brought up from *sheol* by a medium to talk with the Israelite king, Saul. The story of this encounter is recorded in 1 Samuel 28:3-20. A notable aspect of this story is seeing Samuel referred to as an *elohim*. Important to the argument of this paper are verses 12-15:

When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice . . . And the woman said to Saul, “I saw [an *elohim*] ascending out of the earth.” So he said to her, “What is his form?” And she said, “An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.” And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down. Now Samuel said to Saul, “Why

²¹ See Genesis 37:35.

²² John D. Swope, "Toward a Spirit-to-Spirit Model of Christian Union with God: Exploring the Anthropological Dimension in Biblical and Theological Perspectives," Order no. 3414502 (Trinity International University, 2010), 206.

have you disturbed me by bringing me up. . .” (1Samuel 28:12-15, brackets mine).

John Cooper examines the above passage with attention to Samuel’s disembodied existence after physical death; he concludes, “the fact that something of personal existence not only survives biological death but comes to be thought of as returning to bodily life seems to entail an ontological duality or dualism of some sort.”²³ If this was truly the prophet Samuel, it would seem impossible to defend Monism considering his disembodied apparition.

Elohim is a multipurpose word used of spiritual beings, including God Himself. An expert in Semitic languages, Michael Heiser reveals that “the word *elohim* is a ‘place of residence’ term. Our home is in the world of embodiment; *elohim* by nature inhabit the spiritual world.”²⁴ Samuel being called *elohim* indicates that he was no longer human yet still existing in a manner recognizable to others. Swope notes, “Samuel was recognized by his appearance, was clothed, and spoke audibly. Though his body lacked materiality, he was not entirely formless.”²⁵ When combined with the truth of the previous subsections, this exegetical data point and the story of Samuel reveals the theological structure of Monism to have cracks in its foundations or, at the very least, casts a long shadow of doubt.

Problems with Monism

Monism has been presented as standing on shaky exegetical foundations. The unstable foundations inform faulty suppositions about the soul. These erroneous suppositions are further complicated by the theological problems that have developed around them. The theological

²³ John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) 65-66.

²⁴ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 29.

²⁵ Swope, “Toward a Spirit-to-Spirit Model of Christian Union with God,” 206.

problems are manifold, and their culmination is best represented in the final subsection of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, only two theological problems are addressed. They are explored in the following subsections: Commitment to *Sola Scriptura* and Contradicting the Divine.

Commitment to *Sola Scriptura*

Sola Scriptura is an important hermeneutic developed during the Protestant Reformation. The phrase is Latin for “Scripture only” and a guiding hermeneutic behind valuing exegesis as the primary means for arriving at theological conclusions.²⁶ However, due to sound scrutiny of others as represented by the aforementioned examples, exegetical support for monism is ultimately lacking. Most arguments or defenses for the position are sourced from beyond the pages of Scripture through means of philosophical conjecture, scientific implications, or academic assertions about religious development at the time.²⁷

Systematic theology does allow for going outside of Scripture to inform and establish theological truths. However, this practice only happens when appropriately warranted. Walter Kaiser provides information about the parameters of this practice:

“How we attempt to go beyond the text [of Scripture] is just as important as finding answers to questions in ethics, doctrine, and worship that were not immediately or directly addressed in Scripture. But central to all movements that might be classified in any way as a going beyond the text [of Scripture] will be the fixed point of the text of Scripture itself . . . However, if the consequent or “beyond” sense is separate and different from the meaning found in the heart of the biblical statement, then the theological

²⁶ *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, s.v. “*Sola Scriptura*.”

²⁷ For an example of a monistic defense under these pretenses see Nancey Murphy, “Do Humans Have Souls? Perspectives from Philosophy, Science, and Religion,” *Interpretation (Richmond)* 67, no. 1 (2013): 30-41.

nuance has gone out of bounds, and it will be judged an illegitimate going beyond what is in the text.”²⁸

Monism goes beyond the text of Scripture in a hermeneutically unacceptable way. The position bolsters itself from information outside of Scripture which contradicts the heart of the biblical statements about the soul. These extrabiblical resources attempt to negate a plain reading of the passages in Scripture about Human Constitution. Therefore, according to Kaiser, Monism is out of bounds and illegitimate.

Contradicting the Divine

Sola Scriptura is especially important when considering divine utterances. Perhaps the most important aspect of this theological discussion concerns the words and sayings of Jesus. The outworking of Monism contradicts one of His more vital statements and inadvertently strikes at the heart of trust in Him; there are at least a couple of contradictions between the beliefs of Monism and the words of Jesus.²⁹ This paper chooses to only focus on one of them; Jesus tells the repentant thief on the cross next to Him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paradise is a place that the resurrected Jesus later clarifies as a heavenly location.³⁰ However, according to the monist position, the thief on the cross ceased to exist after his bodily death that day and therefore went nowhere.

Monism stands in opposition to the promise of Christ in this situation. Jesus was not resurrected until three days later, but He told the thief “today” they would be in Paradise together. Grudem explains how this is possible by affirming, “when we die, [our soul] is able to

²⁸ Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 93.

²⁹ See Luke 16:19-31 and 23:39-43.

³⁰ See Revelation 2:7.

go on consciously acting and relating to God apart from our physical bodies.”³¹ Such is the case with the thief on the cross; though his body was dead, his soul was still alive and with Christ. Those unwilling to affirm this are treading dangerously close to calling Jesus a liar.

Conclusion

Concerning the theological category of Human Constitution, the position of Monism is found wanting. It is unable to stand tall against biblical scrutiny and does not adequately explain the controversial passages of Scripture in a cohesive manner. It does not adhere to the *sola Scriptura* commitment of Protestantism, and this is most shockingly demonstrated by contradictions to the words of Jesus, the divine second Person of the Trinity.

Monism mistakenly creates its foundational suppositions from unproven biblical terminologies in the Old Testament. The arguments for the merits of the position are mostly philosophical and rarely exegetical. It is ironic that this theological camp defends its position with philosophy while simultaneously declaring philosophy to be the root cause of the biblical confusion. Unfortunately, the outworking of their logic causes monists to contradict their Savior on vital soteriological issues.

³¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 483.

Bibliography

- Cooper, John W. *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989.
- Delitzsch, Franz. *A System of Biblical Psychology*, 2nd edition, translated by Robert Ernest Wallis. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885.
- Elwell, Walter A., ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013.
- Evans, C. S. "Separable Souls: Dualism, Selfhood, and the Possibility of Life After Death." *Christian Scholar's Review* 34, no. 3 (Spring, 2005): 327-340.
- Green Sr., Jay P., ed. *The Interlinear Bible*. 2nd Edition. Vol. 1. Hendrickson Publishers, 2013.
- Grenz, Stanley J., David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994.
- Heiser, Michael S. *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2015.
- Kaiser, Walter C. and Moisés Silva. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007.
- Murphy, Nancey. "Do Humans Have Souls? Perspectives from Philosophy, Science, and Religion." *Interpretation (Richmond)* 67, no. 1 (2013): 30-41.
- Pleijel, Richard. "Translating the Biblical Hebrew Word *Nephesh* in Light of New Research." *The Bible Translator* 70, no. 2 (August 2019): 154-166.
- Swope, John D. "Toward a Spirit-to-Spirit Model of Christian Union with God: Exploring the Anthropological Dimension in Biblical and Theological Perspectives." Order no. 3414502, Trinity International University, 2010.
- The Holy Bible, New King James Version*. Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 2013.