The references to the souls in Revelation 6:9 and Revelation 20:4

A Bible reference that is frequently used by the tradition that wants the dead living without resurrection is in the book of Revelation and in the following passages: Revelation 6:9 and Revelation 20:4. These two references relate closely to each other and therefore we will see them together in this article. Starting from Revelation 6:9 we read:

Revelation 6:9-11
“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.”

Much of the misunderstanding here is caused by reading the word “soul” and immediately interpreting it as the souls of the dead people that are living now somewhere. This is because all these years we have been taught that once somebody dies then “his soul goes to heaven, where it lives with God or it goes to hell where it is tormented forever.” But we have to define a word as the Bible
defines it. And soul is not used with this meaning in the Bible. The article “Body, Soul and Spirit”, gives insights to this, clarifying what is the soul. In short, the soul is what gives life to the body. As long as you have life you have a soul, soul-life. Life and soul are words used many times as synonyms. 40 times the KJV translates the Greek word “ψυχη” (psuchi) which in Greek means “soul” as “life” and not as soul. Apart from this usage the word soul is also used in the Bible with the meaning of “person”. There is an expression in today’s English that is used in a similar way: thus when somebody says that he has 10 hands working for him, we don’t understand 10 isolated literal hands but 10 persons. The word hand is put for the whole person. The same also happens for the word soul: it is put for the whole person. For example in Acts 27:37 we read:

**Acts 27:37**

“And we were in all in the ship two hundred threescore and sixteen **souls** (Greek: psuches).”

What does this mean? It simply means 276 persons. The NKJV has it in fact like this:

“And in all we were two hundred and seventy six **persons** on the ship”

Here are some more examples:
I Peter 3:20
“when the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water”

Acts 7:14
“And Joseph sent, and called to him Jacob his father, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls.”

Genesis 12:5
“And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.”

You will find more such examples in the Bible. In all these examples the word “soul” is simply put for the person. Instead of saying “persons”, it says “souls”. The meaning however is the same. Now returning to the passage in Revelation, when we read that John says that he: “saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held” what it means is that he saw the persons that had been slain for the Word of God and their testimony. How did He see these persons? In a vision. “I was in the Spirit.” we read in Revelation 1:10, while Revelation 9:17 says: “And this is how I saw in the vision…”. What
was John seeing was a vision and seeing something in a vision does not mean that it is literally there or that it is happening literally.1

Actually, there is a crystal clear proof that these martyrs of Revelation 6 were NOT living somewhere in heaven when they appeared as speaking. This proof is in fact in the second reference to the “souls” in the book of Revelation. This is in Revelation 20:4-5. There we read:

Revelation 20:4-6

“When I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.”

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not “souls floating around” but persons, the martyrs that were slaughtered for their testimony of Jesus and because of the Word of God. What do we read for them in Revelation 20:4-5? We read that “they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” “They came to life” obviously means that were not living before! Otherwise they wouldn’t come to life! They would already be living! Verse 5 makes it also clear “the rest of the dead did not come to life…” In other words before Revelation 20:4: none of them was living. After Revelation 20:4, those that were beheaded because of the word of God, from dead became alive. How? By the only way a dead can become alive: by resurrection! We read it in the above passage: “This is the first resurrection!” All the others continued to be dead (“they did not come to life” says the Word of God).

Summary

Having seen the above, we can go back to Revelation 6:9-11. What did John saw there? Those that were slain for the Word of God and their testimony. They were speaking and asking God to avenge their blood. Were these dead people, alive - though they had not been resurrected - and were they literally speaking? No. What John saw was a vision. As we say in the articles about the transfiguration of Christ: “The fact that something or somebody is shown in a vision does not require its physical presence in the vision. It is a picture that God gives to communicate a message to the one to whom He shows the vision.” The reader is referred to this article for a detailed examination of the word vision in the Bible. We also saw that
Revelation 20 make it crystal clear: these dead are not alive now. They will be made alive in the future, with a resurrection, and will reign with Christ 1000 years. It also makes clear – referring to the dead that had not yet been resurrected - that “the rest of the dead did not come to life”, which means that they remained dead. And dead means dead - no living with Christ, no lake of fire yet. This all comes later, in verses 11 to 15 of Revelation 20.

I strongly encourage the reader to also read the following article: “The three resurrections: when will the dead become alive?” I had originally written it together with this article but I felt it would stand better on its own.

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