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“Where Soul Meets Body: Narsai’s Depiction of the Soul-Body Relationship in Context”

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Introduction

Speculation on the nature of the soul and the precise parameters of the soul-body relationship occupied no small amount of the late-antique literary landscape. In particular, Christian authors of late antiquity—likely motivated by intra-Christian arguments ranging from the resurrection of the dead to Christology—contributed significantly to this literary production, with specific works on the soul originating from Tertullian,¹ Gregory of Nyssa,² Gregory Thaumaturgus,³ Augustine,⁴ and Nemesius of Emesa.⁵ And this brief list only includes dedicated titles on the soul; it does not include the many authors who took up the topic of the soul as part of other works. The ‘gnostic’ corpus of Nag Hammadi, which includes texts like “Exegesis on the Soul,” provides further evidence that Christian readers were interested in the soul as a nexus of philosophical and exegetical instruction.⁶ Moreover, Christians were not the only ones engaged in this debate, as neo-platonic philosophers like Porphyry of Tyre,⁷ Plotinus,⁸ and Iamblichus of Apamea⁹ wrote significant treatises that shaped the contours of the soul-body debate in late antiquity.

The sprawling nature of these questions in late antiquity is not surprising given their deep roots in the Greek philosophical tradition. Plato’s *Phaedo*, *Timaeus*, and *Phaedrus* along with Aristotle’s *De Anima* were widely read, and commentaries of these works circulated in the curriculum of philosophical instruction.¹⁰ By the time a distinctly Christian intellectual tradition emerged (late

¹ *De anima* (PL 2.681-798); edition: *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani De anima*, ed. by J. H. Waszink (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1947); ET: “A Treatise on the Soul,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, trans. by Peter Holmes, ed. by A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and C. Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885).

² *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46.11-160); edition: *S. Gregorii Nysseni De anima et resurrectione cum sorore sua Macrina dialogus*, ed. by J. G. Krabinger (Leipzig, 1837); ET: *St. Gregory of Nyssa: On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. by Catharine P. Roth, Popular Patristics Series 12 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992).

³ *Ad Tatianum De anima* (PG 10.1137-1146). The authorship of this work is dubious, but it is attributed to Gregory; ET: “On the Topic of the Soul,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VI, trans. by S. D. F. Salmond, ed. by A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and C. Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886).

⁴ *De anima et eius origine*; edition: *Sancti Aureli Augustini De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum ad Marcellinum libri tres; De spiritu et littera liber unus; De natura et gratia liber unus; De natura et origine animae libri quattuor; Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum libri quattuor*, ed. by K. F. Urbani and J. Zycha, CSEL 50 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1913), 303-419; ET: *Answer to the Pelagians I*, ed. by J. E. Rotelle and trans. by R. J. Teske, WSA 1.23 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 465-561.

⁵ *De natura hominis*; edition: *Nemesius Emesensis De natura Hominis, Graece et Latine*, ed. by Christian Frederic Matthaei (Halaë/Magdeburg: Gebauer, 1802); ET: *Nemesius On the Nature of Man*, trans. by R. W. Sharples and P. J. van der Eijk, Translated Texts for Historians (Oxford: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

⁶ NHC II, 6; edition: “The Expository Treatise on the Soul,” ed. by Bentley Layton, in *The Coptic Gnostic Library: Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7, Vol. 2*, ed. by Bentley Layton, Nag Hammadi Studies XX (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 144-168; ET: “Exegesis on the Soul,” trans. by Madeleine Scopello and Marin Meyer in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. by Marvin Meyer (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), 223-234.

⁷ Porphyry’s primary work dealing with the soul is *On Abstinence*; ET: *On Abstinence from Killing animals*, trans. by Gillian Clark (London: Duckworth, 2000).

⁸ Plotinus’ discussion of the soul is spread throughout the *Enneads*; edition and ET: *Plotinus*, 7 volumes, ed. and trans. by A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1968-88).

⁹ *De anima*; edition and ET: *Iamblichus’ De Anima*, ed. by John F. Finamore and John M. Dillon, *Philosophia Antiqua* 92 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹⁰ The most well-known of these commentaries is Alexander of Aphrodisias’ commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima*: *Alexander of Aphrodisias: On the Soul*, trans. by Victor Caston, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); for a collection of other commentators on the *anima* tradition, see Richard Sorabji, ed., *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200-600 AD: A Sourcebook, Vol. 1: Psychology (with Ethics and Religion)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

2nd/early 3rd century), debates on the soul had moved well beyond a simple Platonic/Aristotelian divide, as Epicureans, Stoics, and middle- and neo-platonists refined their positions dialectically. Beyond philosophical treatises, the medical writings of Galen also proved to be significant in the history of the soul-body problem in late antiquity, which further demonstrates the pervasiveness of this issue in the thought of ancient authors.¹¹ Thus, any author of late antiquity who ventured to espouse on the soul immediately stepped into a deep quagmire of sources, polemics, and debates.¹²

This no less true of authors who wrote in Syriac than in Greek and Latin. By the time Narsai of Nisibis began his homiletical career in the mid-fifth century, there were already competing traditions about the soul in the nascent Syriac literary corpus. The so-called “Hymn of the Soul” (or “Hymn of the Pearl”) circulated as part of the *Acts of Thomas* in Syriac,¹³ Memra 28 of the *Book of Steps* addresses the topic of the body-soul relationship,¹⁴ and a significant portion of Demonstration 6 (“On the Bnay Qyama”) from the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage is dedicated to the soul-body relationship.¹⁵ Moreover, although Ephrem the Syrian did not compose any works specifically on the topic of the soul, it is a frequent subject in his hymns, particularly in the cycle known as the *Hymns on Paradise*.¹⁶ Narsai’s contemporary, Jacob of Serugh, also addressed the topic of the soul in some of his writings.¹⁷ Other than Ephrem—who was clearly directly influential on Narsai’s thought—it is not certain that Narsai was familiar with any of these previous or contemporary works dealing with the soul; but regardless of his awareness of them, Narsai’s thoughts on the soul emerge against a backdrop of these pre-existing literary traditions. Like any other author in late antiquity, Narsai’s treatment of the soul is embodied within a particular time and place; thus, like any philosopher of late antiquity knew, we cannot do justice to the content of Narsai’s thought (the soul) without also attending to the context in which it emerges (the body).

Narsai’s Memra “On the Soul”

¹¹ Galen addresses the matter of the soul in multiple works, but primarily we can point to his fragmentary *The Faculties of the Soul Follow the Mixture of the Body* (*QAM*) [also known as *The Soul’s Dependence on the Body*]; edition: *Quod Animi Mores Corporis Temperamenta Sequantur*, ed. by I. Müller, *Scripta Minora II* (Leipzig, 1893); ET: P. N. Singer, *Galen: Selected Works: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹² Although it is certainly not comprehensive and is written apologetically, Nemesius of Emesa provides an incredibly useful encyclopedic history of these sources and debates as he saw them.

¹³ Edition and ET: *The Hymn of the Soul contained in the Syriac Acts of St. Thomas*, ed. by A. A. Bevan, *Texts and Studies V*, 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897).

¹⁴ Edition and ET: *The Syriac Book of Steps 3*, ed. by Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F. G. Parmentier, *TeCLA 12c* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 168-183.

¹⁵ Edition: *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes*, ed. by J. Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca 1.1* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), 239-312; ET: *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, trans. by Adam Lehto, *Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 27* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2010), 169-198. I have argued elsewhere that the portion of Dem. 6 that deals with the topic of the soul (6.14-18) was originally an independent work that was edited together with a separate work on virginity when the corpus of the *Demonstrations* was created. See J. Edward Walters, “Reconsidering the Compositional Unity of Aphrahat’s Demonstrations,” in Aaron Michael Butts and Robin Darling Young, eds., *Syriac Christian Culture: Beginnings to Renaissance* (CUA Press, forthcoming).

¹⁶ Edition: *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und contra Julianum*, ed. by Edmund Beck, *CSCO 174-175*, Syr. 78-79 (Louvain: Peeters, 1957); ET: *Saint Ephrem. Hymns on Paradise*, trans. by Sebastian P. Brock, *Popular Patristics Series* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990).

¹⁷ S. P. Brock, “An Acrostic Poem on the Soul by Jacob of Sarug,” *Sobornost 23* (2001), 40-44. See also *Jacob of Sarug’s Homily on the Chariot that the Prophet Ezekiel Saw*, trans. by Alexander Golitzin, ed. by Mary T. Hansbury, *TeCLA 3* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016), 553-556.

this regard, which then becomes the basis for his Christological claims regarding Christ’s mind. The fact that Nemesius argues in favor of bipartite human composition as an explicitly anti-Apollinarian argument provides some extra context for Narsai’s claims, given that Apollinaris’ arguments regarding Christ’s divinity were so contemptible among the Antiochene exegetes.

Narsai also employs the exegesis of Gen. 2:7 as the basis for his claims about the generation of souls following the initial creation of the soul in Adam. Narsai highlights the order of events in God’s creation of humanity: “First, the Divine Will composed a body in the formation of humanity /and after a time, he formed a soul and deposited it within [the body].”⁴² This order, then, is re-enacted with every human being. First a body is created, and then it is imbued with a soul:

تَجِدُ فَيُفَضِّلُ سَيِّئًا هَوْنًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا :
 ❖ هَوْنًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا
 تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا :
 ❖ تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا
 تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا :
 ❖ تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا
 ...
 تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا :
 ❖ تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا

Her creation was after the body in the construction of Adam,
 and this same order continues every day in her and the body.
 First the great fashioner forms a figure of limbs,
 and then breathes into it the living spirit, and it becomes a soul.
 He wove a garment of flesh with a spiritual hand,
 and then laid it over the soul like purple garments.
 In the darkness he constructs the body and creates the soul,
 just as when he created creation and placed it in the darkness.

...
 The greatness of his power is constantly proclaimed in our fashioning,
 within the formation of the body and soul, which happens every day.⁴³

Narsai thus makes it very clear that the order (بِحسب) of Adam’s creation is a pattern that is repeated for every human being. In fact, this is a sign of God’s ongoing work in the world: a miracle that humans witness in everyday life, a reenactment of creation in every impregnated womb.

Moreover, Narsai argues in favor of *creatio ex nihilo* for each and every soul: “Her nature comes into being from nothing / insofar as she is similar to angels and spiritual beings,”⁴⁴ and further: “The souls came into being from nothing; in the beginning, they came into being / and from nothing their existence arises in all generations.”⁴⁵ In other words, Narsai claims that every soul in every single human being is an act of *creatio ex nihilo*, which seems to preclude the possibility of pre-existent souls (although he does not say this explicitly).

Narsai distinguishes between the ongoing generation of bodies and souls thus: bodies can reproduce themselves; souls cannot. This is, in fact, by design. Narsai tells us that when God

⁴² 66.127-128; M.II.241.20-21: هَوْنًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا : هَوْنًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا .

⁴³ 66.147-154, 157-158; M.II.242.8-15.

⁴⁴ 66.141-142; M.II.242.4-5: هَوْنًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا : هَوْنًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا .

⁴⁵ 66.145-146; M.II.242.7-8: هَوْنًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا : هَوْنًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا تَجْعَلُ نَفْسًا .

constructed the body, God placed within that body a seed with the purpose of reproducing other bodies, but the soul has no such seed:

بَعِ جَمِيهَةً هُنَا وَتَلَا تَحْتَهُ لِحْفَا
❖ وَهَيَّجَ لَهَا بَعِ يَتَلَا لَهَا عَجَلًا
صَلَاةً تَفِي وَتَلَا لِحْفَا مَعِ تَفِي
❖ مَعِيهِ دَفِيذًا نَلَا فَيَذَا دَفِيذًا لِحْفَا
لِحْفَا لَهَا كَمَا وَتَلَا دَفِيذًا تَسْفَا
هَلَا تَصَلَاةً تَلَا حَتَاةً تَلَا تَلَا

Like a foundation, he put a seed in the inner part of the body,
and proceeded gradually [to build] him, like a building, unto completion.
The matter became a seed for the body, and then it came into existence,
and from that body sprouted [another] body that resembles the [first] body.
As for the soul, there is no seed that produces another [soul],
and it is not in her matter that her nature sprouts within [its] limbs.⁴⁶

And again elsewhere:

أَسَدًا ذَا شَأْنٍ حَلَاةً تَجِيهَةً
❖ دَلِيبًا تَلَا تَجِيهَةً تَلَا جَلَا كَمَا وَتَلَا
شَأْنٍ وَتَلَا دَفِيذًا تَلَا تَلَا دَفِيذًا
❖ مَعِ جَلَا هَجِيهَةً تَلَا مَلَا حَجِيهَةً

We constantly see a great marvel in our fashioning,
for a human sprouts forth in the image of a human from the inner seeds.
We see the seed, which a human sows into the earth of a human,
and although it is contemptible and despised, it turns into a glorious vessel.⁴⁷

Thus, Narsai’s theory of the generation of the soul requires God’s ongoing creative activity. Bodies can, of course, reproduce, but God alone can create a soul. Human reproduction, then, is an occasion to reflect on the wonder of human composition and God’s elegant design of the human form: “The greatness of [God’s] power is constantly proclaimed in our fashioning.”⁴⁸ For Narsai, then, this theory of the generation of souls is not mere philosophical speculation; it is a sign of God’s care for humanity and God’s activity in the world that should lead humans to glorify their creator.

Once again, Nemesius provides an important point of reference for Narsai. In this case, however, Nemesius disagrees with Narsai’s conclusion. Nemesius rejects the idea that the body was created before the soul: “It would be a perversion of the truth, however, if one were to suppose that, because the soul was put into the body after the body had been framed, therefore the soul was created after the body. Moses does not say that the soul was created at that moment at which it was put in the body, nor would it be reasonable to suppose it.”⁴⁹ In other words, Nemesius rejects the exegesis upon which Narsai bases his claim. For Narsai, it is self-evident that the creation of the soul follows the creation of the body because that is the order in which they appear in the text. Nemesius, for his part, rejects this position on *a priori* grounds because he believes all souls were created as part of the pre-material creation. Moreover, Nemesius makes his argument within a polemical context against both Eunomius and Apollinaris. Nemesius critiques Eunomius for teaching that the creation of souls after bodies would imply God’s ongoing creative activity in the world, which Nemesius rejects based on

⁴⁶ 66.133-138; M.II.241.24-242.2.

⁴⁷ 66.165-168; M.II. 242.19-22.

⁴⁸ 66:157; M.II. 242.14-15: **وَأَنَّهُمْ سَلِيحًا جَلِيحًا حَلَاةً تَجِيهَةً.**

⁴⁹ Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man*, 2.17; Telfer, *Cyril and Nemesius*, 282.

Gen. 2:2.⁵⁰ Thus, it appears that, at least in principle, Narsai and Eunomius shared a common belief regarding the ongoing generation of souls⁵¹—a position that Narsai’s fellow Antiochene, Nemesius, explicitly rejects. Clearly, then, there was not necessarily a consensus position on this matter within the Antiochene tradition.

According to Gregory of Nyssa, Macrina provides an interesting middle ground on this topic: she argues against both pre-existent souls and the idea that souls are formed after the body. For Macrina, the soul must be created at the precise moment that the bodily embryo begins to form.⁵² Thus, for Macrina, neither the body nor the soul can precede the other. Against Apollinaris, Nemesius levels the claim that he teaches that souls reproduce themselves, just as bodies do.⁵³ Narsai also explicitly rejects this claim, and the fact that Nemesius attributes the idea to Apollinaris may explain why Narsai is so adamantly opposed to it. Indeed, we may justifiably assume that Narsai’s insistence that souls do not reproduce by means of a “seed” the way that bodies do is possibly part of a broader anti-Apollinarian polemic.

It is also worth noting that Christians were not the only ones who disagreed with one another on the timing of the creation of the soul and when the soul enters the body. Iamblichus offers a succinct summary of the various philosophical explanations for when and how the soul enters the body.⁵⁴ And, indeed, there is some overlap between the Christian and non-Christian debates on this matter; according to Iamblichus’ account, non-Christian philosophers also debated whether the soul was generated by means of the seed in the act of reproduction.

2. The Qualities of the Soul

Having established Narsai’s view with respect to the origin and generation of souls, we can now consider the qualities that he ascribes to the soul. There are three primary aspects of the soul’s activity that stand out in this memra: control of bodily senses, the capacity for speech and reason, and creativity/artistry.

Through a series of evocative poetic images, Narsai depicts the ways that the soul controls the bodily senses. For example:

تَدْمَعْمِ يَجْدُ بِحَدِّهِ نَبِيَّ هَيْبَةٍ حَمِيضَةٍ
تَاهُ مَجْدِيكِم تَجِيءُ بِتَدْبِيرِ حَمِيضِ فِدْقَةٍ
حَبِّ تَحْمَلُهُمْ بِمَلِكِيهِمْ مَدْحَبِ فَيْقَةٍ
هَجْفَعْدِ نَبِيَّتِ تَكْ هَمْزِيَّةِ كَمَلِيَّتِيهِ

Like a spring of flowing life, [God] placed [the soul] within the body,
through her the dull senses are moistened, so that they produce fruit.
Through the drinking of her rationality the body is composed,

⁵⁰ “But of souls arrive out of non-existence, then creation is still going on in defiance of the word of Moses, that ‘God rested from all his works.’” Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man*, 2.17; Telfer, *Cyril and Nemesius*, 283-284.

⁵¹ This is not to say that Narsai knew he shared this position with Eunomius, but simply that they happen to have come to the same conclusion.

⁵² G. Nyssa, *On the Soul* 9: “For if we should grant that the soul lives in some particular condition before the body, we would necessarily have to allow that there is some force in those absurd invented doctrines which settle the souls in the bodies through evil. On the other hand, no one with good sense would imagine that the origin of souls is later and younger than the formation of bodies, since everyone knows that none of the soulless beings has in itself the power of movement and growth. But there is no disagreement or doubt that those which are being nourished in the womb have growth and spacial movement. So, the remaining alternative is to suppose that soul and body have one and the same beginning.

⁵³ “The opinion of Apollinarius, on the other hand, was that souls are born of souls, just as bodies are born of bodies, because the soul of the first man comes down, with the bodily succession, to all his offspring. For Apollinarius denies either that souls pre-existed or that they are being created now.” *On the Nature of Man*, II.17 (284).

⁵⁴ *De anima* 31-32.

and it sprouts up and gives the sound of praise to its fashioner.⁵⁵

The imagery here is rich: the soul is a fountain, and the body is a tree or plant that ‘sprouts’ from the water provided by the fountain. Moreover, aside from its life-giving quality, the water of this fountain also ‘moistens’ the ‘dull senses’ so that they are able to produce fruit. The end result—the fruit—of the soul’s provision is the sound of praise to the creator. Throughout these lines, Narsai intentionally plays with sensory concepts (the sight of a fountain/tree, the taste of drinking from a fountain, the sound of praise) to illustrate the soul as the source of sensation.

Elsewhere Narsai again vividly depicts the soul’s capacity for sensation and its function in governing the body’s senses:

بُعِ جَنْدُ ذُخْرِي قَلْبِي جِهْمِي:
 ❖ هِيصْتِي بِجَنْدِي دُصْحِي دُصْحِي تَمَلِكِي هِيصْتِي
 بُعِ اُتْمِي حَيْكَلِي دُخْرِي اِشْرِي كَسْتِي كَهْمِي:
 هُوْمِي دُخْرِي اِشْرِي تَلِي يَنْتَبِي جِهْمِي:
 تَمَلِكِي سَلْبِي اُتْمِي حَلْمِي تَلِي دُجْبِي:
 ❖ هُوْمِي دُخْرِي اِشْرِي كَجْبِي بِنِي تَمَلِكِي جِهْمِي
 تَدُوسِي جِهْمِي دُخْرِي حَلْمِي تَلِي سَلْبِي:
 ❖ هُوْمِي دُجْبِي سَمِي تَمَلِكِي دُصْحِي دُخْرِي
 اِشْرِي بُعِ تَمَلِكِي جِهْمِي هُوْمِي:
 ❖ هُوْمِي دُخْرِي اِشْرِي يَنْتَبِي جِهْمِي جِهْمِي

Like a harp she engages the visible senses,
 and the finger of her skillfulness makes sound in word and in hearing.
 Like a flute transmits wind, it is given a mouth,
 and she sings through it the sound of a pleasant song.
 Through a hollow pipe she constantly sings pleasing sounds,
 and she brings joy to the life of the sorrowful through the joy of her life.
 Through her spirit of vitality, the dead one⁵⁷ gives praise with sweet sounds,
 and as if it were his own, it is proud that another has made it perceptible.
 It is like a pipe deprived of sound and vitality,
 but when the living soul sings in it, it acquires vitality.

Again, Narsai creatively employs sensory language, particularly of sound, to illustrate his point. Here Narsai invites his hearers to consider the soul as a skillful musician, first as a harp player, then a flutist. The image of the harp player envisions the soul controlling the senses by plucking strings—the strings of a harp do not move themselves to make sound, they must be played by an external force. Likewise, however, even though the soul controls the senses, the soul itself cannot make sounds without a bodily instrument. This interrelationship of the soul and body for sensation is seen clearly in the flute image: the soul sings through the mouth, and through the hollow pipe. Indeed, the body, apart from the soul is “deprived of sound and vitality.” The body needs the song of the soul to live, and the soul needs the instrument of the body to sing.

In this imagery, Narsai clearly exhibits the Aristotelian view of the body/soul relationship with regard to the soul’s dependence upon the body, which, by and large, became the *de facto* position for many philosophers of all “schools” after Aristotle. Whereas Plato had taught that the soul only relied on the body as a vehicle, Aristotle argued that the soul was the first actuality (*ἐντελέχεια*), which

⁵⁵ Memra 66.57-60; M.II.239.22-24.
⁵⁶ Memra 66.109-118; M.II.241.8-14.
⁵⁷ i.e. the body, which would be dead without the soul.

between rational souls and irrational souls.⁶⁶ Moreover, as we have already seen, the Aramaic Targum tradition explicitly links the creation of the soul in Gen. 2:7 with the capacity for speech. Nemesius, like Narsai, argues that the “rational” aspect of human existence, which distinguishes human nature from animals and plants, is proof that humans are created in God’s image.⁶⁷

The same couplet from Narsai cited above also introduces another divine quality that God has granted to the soul: creativity or artistry. Throughout the memra, Narsai uses two words for the creative ability within the human soul: ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ and ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ.⁶⁸ As demonstrated in the previous citation, ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ is an impression of God’s own nature, but it is also a mystery that causes humans to inquire into their own nature, and there find God:

ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ
ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ
ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ
ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ
ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ
ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ

In its soul, [God] placed the great treasure of his creativity
so that everything that is made might request from her [the soul] what is needed for their lives
The human soul is a treasury of hidden things
for in it, the infinite power of the creator is contained.
Hidden secrets are concealed within the inquiry into her formation.
and they cannot be explored except through the power of her creativity.⁶⁹

So, by implanting God’s own creative abilities within the soul, God grants to humans the ability to speculate about human nature as a means by which they might learn something about their creator. Narsai returns to this precise theme again later in the memra:

ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ
ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ
ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ
ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ

O painter, how wise is your creative power,
that your greatness is revealed in humanity—the work of your hands!
As on a tablet, you have depicted the world in body and soul,
so that heaven and earth might seek you through its revelation.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Though later commentators on the classical tradition were by no means in agreement about this. Porphyry, in particular, should be noted because he argued that animals did have a rational soul because, regardless of whether humans can understand them, they can speak and communicate with their own kind; see Porphyry, *Abstinence*, 3.3.4; 3.4.4. Moreover, Porphyry also notes that some birds are even capable of mimicking human speech, which suggests a rational soul; *Abstinence*, 3.4.7.

⁶⁷ *On the Nature of Man*, 1.2-3. Indeed, while recognizing that animals do have varying levels of communication abilities, Nemesius argues that humans alone have “articulate speech” (ἐναρθρος διάλεκτος) attached to “thought” (διάνοια) and “reasoning” (λογισμός), *On the Nature of Man*, 1.3.

⁶⁸ Generally Narsai uses ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ when he refers to God’s creative ability and ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ when he refers to the artistic or creative ability of the soul. However, there is at least one occasion where he uses ܘܢܘܨܘܘܘܝܘܬܐ in reference to the soul, so his usage of these terms is not a clear distinction of divine as opposed to human capacities.

⁶⁹ 66.39-44; M.II.239.10-14.

⁷⁰ 66.353-356; M.II.247.22-248.1.

Here again we see the theme, as with **ܘܗܠܠܘܗ**, that God has given particular qualities or abilities to the soul that, in turn, make the created thing seek out its creator, in order that it might rightly give praise where praise is due.

3. The Soul’s Responsibility Within the Body

In addition to its capacities and functions that the soul performs within the body, Narsai also provides extensive reflection on the soul’s responsibility within the body. Again, like his treatment of the qualities of the soul, Narsai’s description of the soul-body relationship relies heavily on creative images. For example, early in the memra Narsai uses nautical imagery:

ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ
❖ ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ
ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ
❖ ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ
ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ
❖ ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ

By her speed [the body] crosses the sea as if upon land,
and the weight of its body does not cause her to sink in the floods.
Like an anchor she clings, the captain of its corporeality,
keeping it from injuries, so that it is not harmed.
Following her direction, it travels like a sailor in the starlight,
and she navigates the path of [its] journey to a safe harbor.⁷¹

One interesting element of this metaphor is the creativity that Narsai employs to describe the function of the soul. Despite the fact that he maintains a constant image of nautical navigation over six lines, the body is clearly the boat, but the identification of the soul shifts throughout this chain of metaphors: it is speed, an anchor, a captain, and a navigator. It is all of these things at the same time, and it seems that Narsai employs this multiplicity of roles intentionally to show just how much the soul does for its vessel. By performing each of these roles, the soul navigates its boat toward a safe harbor.

The sailor-ship analogy of the soul’s relationship to the body is at least as old as Aristotle, though Aristotle does not make significant use of it and in fact neither explicitly accepts nor rejects the analogy.⁷² In his commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima*, Alexander of Aphrodisias discusses the sailor-ship metaphor multiple times in his commentary, and he explicitly rejects it.⁷³ Plotinus also discusses the analogy, and although he finds it useful for illustrating that the soul and body are separable, he also clearly notes the inadequacy of the analogy.⁷⁴

In addition to the sailor-ship analogy, Narsai also compares the soul to a charioteer:

ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ
❖ ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ
ܘܗܠܠܘܗ ܫܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܢܘܨܘܢܐ

⁷¹ 66.77-82; M.II.240.11-15.

⁷² Aristotle mentions this analogy in *De Anima* II.1 (413a8), where he sets up the question of whether the soul is the actuality of the body in the same way that a sailor is of the ship. For more on Aristotle’s indecision on the analogy, see Thomas Olshewsky, “On the Relations of Soul to Body in Plato and Aristotle,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14. 4 (1976), 400-402. For a more in-depth consideration of Aristotle’s employment of this metaphor, see Theodore Tracy, “The Soul/Boatman Analogy in Aristotle’s *De anima*,” *Classical Philology* 77.2 (1982), 97-112. For a critique of Tracy’s argument and further discussion, see A. P. Bos, *The Soul and Its Instrumental Body: A Reinterpretation of Aristotle’s Philosophy of Living Nature* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 123-135.

⁷³ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On the Soul* 14.4-5, 15.9-10, 20.26-21.21.

⁷⁴ *Enneads* 4.3.21.

هكبتخ دبتنن مسبتن دكبتنن س
بب دبتنن لببب تببب ببب بببب س
هكبببب لبب دكب ببببب ببببب
ببببب ببببب ببببب ببببب ببببب
هكبببب ببببب لبب ببببب بببببب

Like horses, its senses are constrained by her authority,
but it does not understand what is the cause of its constraint.
Like a charioteer, her will drives on its body,
and wherever she wills, the boat of its corporeality is directed.
As if grasping reins, she guides the path of its actions,
and she directs it so that it does not stumble in [its] desires.
A word from her restricts its mouth like a muzzle,
and does not allow him to harm himself or his companions.⁷⁵

The idea behind the imagery here is more or less the same as the previous metaphor, but with the added component that it mentions the soul’s control over the senses. This image also depicts the soul in a more active role, asserting her will over the body in order to steer and protect it.

The charioteer-chariot analogy has its origins in the Socratic dialogues of Plato’s *Phaedrus*.⁷⁶ However, despite the fact that Narsai uses this common metaphor, it is obvious that he employs it differently than Socrates. In Narsai’s analogy, it is clear that the soul is the charioteer, the body is the chariot, and the horses are the bodily senses. By contrast, in the *Phaedrus*, the soul is, to some extent, the whole combination of charioteer, chariot, and horses; moreover, Socrates contends that the human soul is like a pair of unevenly yoked horses, one noble and well trained, and the other wild and difficult to control.⁷⁷ Iamblichus briefly mentions both the sailor-ship and charioteer analogies as common ways of explaining the soul-body relationship, but he clearly finds both to be deficient.⁷⁸ Again, it seems clear that Narsai is intentionally using and transforming a classical metaphor of body and soul for his own purposes.

Both of these metaphors, then, depict the soul in a protective role, guarding the body, guiding the body, and leading it through life. But elsewhere in the memra, there is an even more significant role that the soul plays: that of champion in the struggle against the passions. Again, as with the nautical metaphor, Narsai feels free to play with the imagery as he depicts the way that the soul engages against the passions with the body:

تبببب بببببب بببببب بببببب
دكب بببببب بببببب بببببب
بببببب بببببب بببببب
بببببب بببببب بببببب

In love, she urgently exhorts her substance and her partner,
that it not be deterred from the fight for truth.
Like a watchman, she cries out to the senses and the thoughts,
“Arise and prevail with good works!”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ 66.299-306; M.II.246.12-17.

⁷⁶ *Phaedrus*, 246a-257b.

⁷⁷ For an excellent discussion of the unruly horse, see Elizabeth Belfiore, “Dancing With the Gods: The Myth of the Chariot in Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” *The American Journal of Philology* 127.2 (2006), 185-217.

⁷⁸ *De anima* 33.

⁷⁹ 66.313-316; M.II.246.21-24.

All souls who endure sufferings enter into Eden,
and there they rest as if upon a pleasant bed.
As if in slumber, they rest from [their] actions there,
and they do not make use of the power of speech that is in them.
They indeed rest from the toil of good and bad,
and they do not contend in the struggle of righteous labor.⁸³

Unfortunately, Narsai does not tell us anything about the souls who are not in Eden. He makes no further mention of them. He is clear, though, about what the souls of the righteous do: they *rest*. Indeed, they rest “as if in slumber.” However, it is worth noting that he does not actually say that they sleep. Narsai then continues to describe this restful state:

ܘܟܢ ܘܝܫܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ
ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ
ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ
ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ
ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܬܗܘܢ

“It is not the case that the power that is in them has ceased from vitality,
rather, it no longer has a bodily vessel to transmit words.
It is not the case that the stream of discernment has been cut off and dried up,
rather, it no longer has a bodily tree that needs irrigation.”⁸⁴

That is, Narsai argues that souls do not lose their inherent qualities of sensation and capacity for speech; but, the soul is unable to perform these functions without the body. The soul does not lose its capacities, but in its incorporeal state it is incapacitated.

Regarding the fate of souls at death, perhaps the most useful points of comparison are Narsai’s predecessors in Syriac literature, namely Aphrahat and Ephrem. Aphrahat is significant in this comparison because of the relative idiosyncrasy of his views on the matter. According to Aphrahat’s argument in Dem. 6, when a person dies, the soul is buried with the body and sleeps, and the soul loses its capacity for sense-perception.⁸⁵ Subsequently, on the day of the resurrection, both bodies and souls are resurrected together. Furthermore, in Dem. 8, Aphrahat expands on this topic, and although he refrains from claiming that the souls of the righteous will be rewarded or that the souls of the unrighteous will be punished in the time period awaiting the resurrection, he does claim that the sleep of the righteous souls will be peaceful while the sleep of the unrighteous souls will be restless.⁸⁶ It is also worth noting here that Aphrahat’s argument is closely paralleled by Macrina’s teaching in Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Specifically, though Macrina does not say anything about sense-perception, she does argue that the soul remains with the body even though the body decomposes.⁸⁷

In Hymn 8 of the *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem offers a brief reflection on the fate of the soul as it awaits the resurrection. Here, Ephrem discusses the relationship of the bodily senses to the soul

⁸³ 66.463-468; M.II.251.3-6.

⁸⁴ 66.468-472; M.II.251.7-9.

⁸⁵ Dem. 6.14.

⁸⁶ Dem. 8.19: “The upright lie down and their sleep is pleasant, throughout day and night. For they do not perceive the whole night to be long, but experience it as though it were a single moment. Then, when the morning comes, they wake up and rejoice. The sleep of the wicked, however, lies heavily upon them, like a man stricken with a strong, deep fever who tosses and turns on his bed, and who is disturbed throughout the long night. They fear the morning, when their master will condemn them.”

⁸⁷ G. Nyssa, *On the Soul*, ch. 4.

it, but rather little by little it gave [it] to the body.”¹⁰³ Thus, the implication here is that Diodore attributes Jesus’ growth to his human nature, not to his divine nature. Theodore of Mopsuestia also addresses the interpretation of Luke 2:52 in his *On the Incarnation*, and his treatment of the passage makes it clear that the Antiochenes forged their position on this verse in opposition to the Apollinarians and Eunomians. For Theodore, both of these positions fail to properly address the issue of Christ’s having a rational soul (ܐܢܝܡܐ ܪܥܝܢܐ), which seems to contradict Jesus growing “in wisdom.”¹⁰⁴

On the opposite side of the Christological spectrum, Philoxenos of Mabbug rejects an exegetical conclusion of this passage that separates the natures. In fact, Philoxenos attributes the Antiochene misunderstanding of this verse to the fact that human foolishness cannot comprehend the wisdom of God.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Philoxenos also expands from his exegesis of Luke 2:52 directly into a polemic against Theodore,¹⁰⁶ which testifies to the contested interpretation of this verse in the 5th/6th century Christological debates. With the polemical setting of this argument over Jesus’ natures in mind, it is easy to see how Narsai’s argument about the soul limiting its activities with respect to the body’s abilities might actually be a Christological argument in disguise: namely, that just as the divine nature does not “grow” along with the human Jesus (i.e. the Antiochene interpretation of Luke 2:52), neither do the capacities of the soul grow with respect to the abilities of the body.

Finally, on three occasions, Narsai uses the word “passibility” or “capacity to suffer” (ܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ), and his usage of this term with respect to the soul might be best interpreted as a cipher for the divine nature of Christ. Two of the occurrences of the word in particular are worth noting:

ܘܗܢܢ ܒܢܬܗ ܪܥܝܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ
ܘܗܢܢ ܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ
ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ

She hates his sufferings, even though she does not suffer in his passibility.
In love, she suffers with her beloved, [but] not in [her] nature /
for her nature is exalted above all bodily sufferings.¹⁰⁷

ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ
ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܚܐܘܬܐ

“She is not injured in the passibility of the suffering body /
and she is not destroyed when her outer garment is destroyed.”¹⁰⁸

In other words, the body suffers, but the soul does not suffer within it. Despite the fact that body and soul are bound together as one person, the bodily nature experiences suffering, while the nature of the soul does not. This language is eerily reminiscent of the way that dyophysite writers speak of the human nature of Christ suffering while the divine nature does not.

Given the confluence of these various arguments that might undergird dyophysite Christology, I think their appearance in this memra is likely not a coincidence. After all, as we have seen, Narsai was not the only post-Chalcedonian writer to use the body-soul relationship as a metaphor for Christ’s

¹⁰³ SD 5 (Severus, Extracts from Diodore); Behr, 239; see also the same quotation in Latin: PD 1 (Palatine Collection, Extracts from Diodore); Behr, 267.

¹⁰⁴ *On the Incarnation*, fol. 4; Behr 451-453.

¹⁰⁵ *Commentary on Luke*, Fragment 48; text: *Philoxenos of Mabbug: Fragments of the Commentary on Matthew and Luke*, ed. by J. W. Watt, CSCO 392, Script. Syri 171 (Leuven: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1978), 53-55; translation: *Philoxenos of Mabbug: Fragments of the Commentary on Matthew and Luke*, trans. by J. W. Watt, CSCO 393, Script. Syri 172 (Leuven: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1978), 46-47.

¹⁰⁶ *Commentary on Luke*, Fragment 49; text: *Commentary on Luke*, 55-57; translation: *Commentary on Luke*, 47-48.

¹⁰⁷ 66.258-260; M.II.245.9-11.

¹⁰⁸ 66.411-412; M.II.249.12-13.

identity. It is interesting to note, though, how coy Narsai is with this argument. He never makes the links explicit between the body-soul relationship and Christ's natures, but the arguments are so similar that it seems like his ultimate purpose in deploying this language must have been didactic in nature for his audience. Without giving them the explicit link, he provides them with the language and with the undergirding arguments that would ultimately support his christological claims.

As a final piece of this argument, it is worth observing that theologians in the Alexandrian/miaphysite milieu also employed the body-soul relationship in their christological arguments. For example, in his third letter to Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria uses language of the body-soul:

As for our Savior's statements in the Gospels, we do not divide them out to two subjects or persons. The one, unique Christ has no duality, though he is seen as compounded in inseparable unity out of two differing elements in the way that a human being, for example, is seen to have no duality but to be one, consisting of the pair of elements, body and soul.¹⁰⁹

Similarly, Severus of Antioch also employs the body-soul analogy:

We are composed of body and soul, and we see two natures (*kyana*) the one that of the body, the other that of the soul; but the human being is one from the two due to the union. And the fact that he is composed out of two natures does not permit us to conclude that he who is one is two men, but rather one single man, as I have said, on account of the composition from body and soul.

And the man that we are may serve us as an example. For with regard to him we comprehend two natures, one that of the soul and the other that of the body. However, although in subtle reflection we distinguish or in the imagination of the mind perceive a distinction, we still do not juxtapose the natures and do not allow in them the power of the separation to exhaust itself entirely, but we understand that they belong to a single unique being in such a way that from then on the two are no longer two, but through the two a single living being has been formed.¹¹⁰

It is worth noting that Cyril and Severus make use of the exact same analogy as Theodoret and Narsai, yet they employ it in support of the opposite Christological conclusion, emphasizing the unity of the human being that is a result of the composite of body and soul. It appears, then, that this analogy works both ways, depending on how one describes the body-soul relationship. Is it a composite of two, acting as one? Or is it one entity that maintains a distinction between the two? This is, of course, the inherent problem with analogies: they are malleable.

Conclusion

In the preceding analysis, I have attempted to read and understand Narsai's arguments concerning the body-soul relationship and the nature of the soul in his memra "On the Soul" within a broader literary and intellectual context. On the surface, Narsai does not engage any particular competing ideologies concerning the soul; however, when read in concert with other ancient and late-ancient authors, it becomes readily apparent that Narsai is aware of and conversant with contemporary trends in philosophical debates about the soul. In particular, it is illuminating to read Narsai's claims alongside Nemesius, because Nemesius often provides a polemical framework within which we can see Narsai participating in theological debates through his homilies. In this sense, we can view Narsai's homily "On the Soul" as a sort of theological catechism for his audience, training them to think correctly about significant theological matters without engaging directly in polemic.

¹⁰⁹ Cyril, "Third Letter to Nestorius," 8, (*Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters*, 22-23).

¹¹⁰ Severus, *Philalethes*, 42; CSCO 134, 213ff; Quoted in Grillmeier, *Christ in the Christian Tradition*, Volume 2, 34.

Throughout the homily, Narsai invites his hearers to consider the marvels of their own composition as an impetus to praise God. However, with the polemical context of Narsai’s claims in mind, it is clear that Narsai also wants his hearers to reflect on their existence as a proof of particular theological claims. Humans, made in God’s image, bear the likeness of their creator; thus, for Narsai—and other authors in late antiquity—a proper understanding of human nature undergirds “orthodox” theology. When read within this framework, the didactic strategy of Narsai’s homily “On the Soul” emerges: the body-soul relationship is not merely an analogy for explaining complex theological arguments, it is a divine revelation which, when properly understood, reveals God’s very nature:

ܐܝܢ ܕܢܘܩܢ ܢܘܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ
ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ

As on a tablet/page, you have depicted the world in body and soul,
so that heaven and earth might seek you through its revelation.¹¹¹

The human form is, as such, an inspired revelation, a text upon which God has inscribed the wisdom that leads to knowledge of God. Narsai, as master exegete, exhorts his audience to interpret this text correctly in order to understand the divine mysteries that God has revealed.

¹¹¹ 66.355-356; M.II.247.23-248.1.