

Dualism

Is it not true that the idea of an intermediate afterlife in Heaven or Hell is predicated on dualism? Is it not true that dualism was a philosophical view that originated with the Greeks, and not with Scripture?

In much of today's Messianic community, is it very easy for a leader or teacher to claim that a theological idea—particularly an accepted tenet of mainstream Christianity—is somehow “Hellenistic” or “Greek,” and simply *by saying this* people will reject it. What will often follow on the part of an audience is no critical thinking or analysis, but just accepting a person's biased opinion, which itself was likely intended to monger fear or inflame prejudice. In the case of anyone who believes in a disembodied, intermediate state for human beings between death and the resurrection, it is true that he has to believe in some kind of dualism to posit post-mortem survival of one's consciousness. Whether this is *exactly* what the Ancient Greeks actually believed, though, requires some review and consideration of what various figures from classical history actually thought.

What is the Greek philosophical concept of the “immortality of the soul” that is so criticized by opponents of dualism? Do keep in mind that ancient philosophical groups like the Epicureans (cf. Acts 17:18) did not believe in any kind of an afterlife, much less a resurrection (just like the Jewish Sadducees). No different than various atheists or agnostics today who believe that death is the total end of a person's existence, so were there many Greeks and Romans in the First Century world of the Apostles who believed the same. **To say that all Greeks believed in a disembodied afterlife would be historically inaccurate.**¹ But among those who did believe in a disembodied afterlife, what was specifically adhered to?

There is actually a rather huge difference between Believers today who affirm a *temporary* disembodied state for people between death and the resurrection—and Platonic dualism, as taught by the Hellenistic philosopher Plato, successor of Socrates. In a review of ancient classical sources, both prior to and following the time of Yeshua and the Apostles, it is easy to detect how Platonic dualism advocated that the soul of a person was trapped inside the prison of the body. Death meant an escape from such a prison. N.T. Wright views the following quotations below as being “Classic statements” on how in classical philosophy “the immortal soul is set free from the prison-house of the physical body.”²

“But, I suppose, if at the time of its release the soul is tainted and impure, because it has always associated with the body and cared for it and loved it, and has been so beguiled by the body and its passions and pleasures that nothing seems real to it but those physical things which can be touched and seen and eaten and drunk and used for sexual enjoyment, making it accustomed to hate and fear and avoid what is invisible and obscure to our eyes, but intelligible and comprehensible by philosophy—if the soul is in this state, do you think that it will be released just by itself, uncontaminated?” (Plato *Phaedo* 81b).³

“Now the earthly likeness of justice and self-discipline and all the other forms which are precious to souls keep no luster, and there are few who by the use of their feeble faculties and with great difficulty can recognize in the counterfeits the family likeness of the originals. But beauty was once ours to see in all its brightness, when in the company of the blessed we followed Zeus as others followed some other of the Olympians, to enjoy the

¹ Consult Ben Witherington III, “A Closer Look: The Fate of the Dead,” in *1&2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp 126-130 for a summary of various Greek and Roman views on the afterlife. Notably, only the heroes of the Hellenistic mythos really had a chance of going to be with the gods, whereas most of the deceased went to a rather gloomy existence in the netherworld of Hades.

² N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 48.

³ Plato: *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans., Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 140.

beautiful vision and to be initiated into that mystery which brings, we may say with reverence, supreme felicity. Whole were we celebrated into that festival, unspotted by all the evils which awaited us in time to come, and whole and unspotted and changeless and serene were the objects revealed to us in the light of that mystic vision. Pure was the light and pure were we from the pollution of the walking sepulchre we call a body, to which we are bound like an oyster to its shell" (Plato *Phaedrus* 250c).⁴

"For some say that the body is the grave (sema) of the soul which may be thought to be buried in our present life; or again the index of the soul, because the soul gives indications to (semainei) the body; probably the Orphic poets were the inventors of the name, and they were under the impression that the soul is suffering the punishment of sin, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is incarcerated, kept safe (soma, sozetai), as the name soma implies, until the penalty is paid" (Plato *Cratylus* 400c).⁵

"Never value anything as profitable that compels you to break your promise, to lose your self-respect, to hate any man, to suspect, to curse, to act the hypocrite, to desire anything that needs walls and curtains: for he who has preferred to everything else his own intelligence and daimon and the worship of its excellence, acts no tragic part, does not groan, will not need either solitude or much company; and, what is chief of all, he will live without either pursuing or flying from death; but whether for a longer or shorter time he shall have the soul enclosed in the body, he cares not at all: for even if he must depart immediately, he will go as readily as if he were going to do anything else that can be done with decency and order; taking care of this only all through life, that his thoughts abide with the concerns of an intelligent animal and a member of a civil community" (Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 3.7).⁶

It is most doubtful that any Messianic Believer who has been told to regard all forms of dualism as something "Greek" and "evil," has ever really seen a series of relevant quotes from ancient sources. Platonic dualism is something that clearly goes against the Biblical truth of God's physical Creation being good (Genesis 1:31), which most especially includes how His people are to enjoy eating good food, drinking wine and spirits, a husband and wife taking pleasure in sexual intercourse, and being in awe of the flora and fauna. Platonic dualism leaves open the definite possibility of reincarnation of souls into other bodies after death,⁷ although the Biblical message is that human life begins in the womb (Psalm 139:13)—with the ultimate end for a Believer's redemption being a permanently embodied condition at the Second Coming (i.e., Philippians 3:21-22; 1 John 3:2).

Some kind of dualism is required for us to make proper sense out of Biblical passages where deceased persons are depicted in some kind of disembodied, post-mortem, conscious and active condition (i.e., Isaiah 14:9-10; Luke 16:23-31; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Revelation 6:9). The dualism presented to us in the Bible of disembodied activity, largely in Heaven, **need not at all** imply a degradation of the physical body or of the great beauties of Planet Earth—both of which God has made as a testament to His power. The body is by no means a prison in which the soul is trapped as a kind of prison, especially if the ultimate aim of salvation is to see its redemption (Romans 8:23).

Any advocates of Platonic dualism, among the Believers in the First Century, would be easily refuted by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4, where he asserts that he would prefer to be further clothed/clothed upon—something to take place at the Second Coming—rather than die and be found naked or bodiless. The more likely condition for most Believers, though, has been the nakedness brought on by death, although he is clear to state that such a condition will mean being present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). Yet, no reader of Paul's letters or the Bible should ever assume that a disembodied condition is permanent. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians (*NIGTC*), Murray J. Harris properly details,

"Paul may be repudiating the view of the hereafter held by the precursors of Gnosticism at Corinth (1 Cor. 15:12), who appear to have taught, as a corollary of baptismal resurrection, that the Christian hope consisted primarily of emancipation from corporeal defilement. Similarly, in v. 3 may be Paul's rebuttal of the fallacious deduction made by these Corinthian 'proto-gnostics' that the expression ἐνδύσασθαι ἄθανασίαν [*endusasthai*

⁴ Plato: *Phaedrus*, trans., Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1995), pp 35-36.

⁵ Plato: *Cratylus*, trans., Benjamin Jowett (Quiet Vision Publishing, 2004), pp 33-34.

⁶ Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations*, ed. William Kaufman (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997), 16.

⁷ Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, 141.

athanasian] ('to put on immortality') used in 1 Cor. 15:53-54 implied that the believer's final destiny was disembodied immortality."⁸

Harris goes on to further detail how Paul does affirm a disembodied condition for the redeemed in the Messiah's presence, although this is only temporary, until the resurrection. His comments are clear that even though Paul held to some dualistic presuppositions, they would be a far cry from the common Platonic views:

"Although Paul did not share the Orphic sentiment *σῶμα σῆμα* [*sōma sēma*] ('the body is a tomb') and although he never envisioned the Christian *summum bonum* as emancipation from corporeality, apparently he could conceive of temporary disembodiment (cf. 12:2-3) as the lot of believers who die before the second advent...Paul must have believed in the...safekeeping of believers as, in a bodiless state, they await the resurrection: they are in active communion with Christ in his immediate presence (v. 8b)."⁹

Any kind of dualism seen or implied in the Scriptures, affirming a temporary separation of a person's consciousness from the body until the resurrection, runs into significant conflict with Platonic dualism. For the most part, the Hellenistic dualism seen in the philosophers advocated *permanent disembodiment*. Contrary to this, the dualism present in the Bible advocates *temporary disembodiment* to be followed by the total integration of the person in the resurrection. John W. Cooper, author of the book *Body, Soul, & Life Everlasting*, has helped to label how the Bible advocates **holistic dualism**. He states that "the Hebrew view of human nature strongly emphasizes living a full and integrated existence before God in this world, but that it unquestionably also includes the belief in continued existence after biological death."¹⁰ Holistic dualism allows for a disembodied afterlife, but holds resurrection as the ultimate goal for all people. Holistic dualism totally eschews any perspective where the human body is to somehow be treated as a prison, or Planet Earth as being something less-than-good as created by God.

It is unfortunate that there are various Messianic teachers who operate out of so much of a spirit of malice and hatred toward either evangelical Christianity and/or anything that they perceive as being "Greek," that in the case of dualism they often make statements in a vacuum, with no references or documentation offered.

It is very true and most unfortunate, that many popular pastors speak of salvation *only* in terms of "going to Heaven when you die," and fail to speak of the subsequent resurrection and Messianic reign coming to Earth. It is hard to deny that many of today's Christians (and even some Messianics) envision a post-mortem scene quantitatively indifferent from Platonism. Going to be with the Lord in Heaven upon time of death is, incorrectly, thought to be the ultimate destination—rather than returning with Him to the Earth to be resurrected at the Second Coming (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:14). This does need to be significantly corrected with more of an emphasis on the future reality of the resurrection and the world to come. Fair-minded voices need to come forward where the errors of Platonic dualism and endless disembodiment can be replaced, with a correct view of holistic dualism and temporary disembodiment to be attended by the resurrection.

While there are various Believers who need to be corrected from some dualistic errors of Plato, let us not overlook the monistic errors of the psychopannychist, who believes that there is complete unconsciousness between death and the resurrection. This may be far more serious, because in treating the human person as *only* being a collection of bones, tissue, and blood—the psychopannychist is likely to have been influenced by the materialism of Darwinian evolution—which is largely not concerned at regarding human beings as possessing any component or connection from a Divine Creator and another dimension.

⁸ Murray J. Harris, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 389.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 402.

¹⁰ John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 40.