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Alexander Blechle

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, ablechle001@csbsju.edu

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A NON-DUALISTIC READING OF BODY AND SOUL IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW:
FOCUSING ON MATTHEW 10:39 IN THE CONTEXT OF DISCIPLESHIP

By: Alexander J. Blechle

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology and Seminary
Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota
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Description:

The aim of this paper is to suggest a non-dualistic reading of *σωμα* and *ψυχή* in the Gospel of Matthew, which will reveal a better understanding of *ψυχή* in Matthew 10:39, especially in the context of discipleship. Three perspectives of body and soul will be considered: The Platonic, Middle-Platonic, and Matthean.

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Matthew 10:39 contains a fascinating comparison between *ἀπόλυμι* and *ἐβρίσκω*, with the elusive word *ψυχή* lying at the heart of this passage. Authoritative English translations consistently fall short of expressing the deep theological lesson regarding the radical form of discipleship being demanded within this pericope. This demand might best be understood by using a hermeneutic which suggests that the Gospel of Matthew was written in a thoroughly Jewish environment that was not saturated in Platonic philosophy. This Jewish perspective is key when considering the ideas of body and soul in the Gospel of Matthew.

The aim of this paper is to suggest a non-dualistic reading of *σῶμα* and *ψυχή* in the Gospel of Matthew, which will reveal a better understanding of *ψυχή* in Matthew 10:39, especially in the context of discipleship. Three perspectives of body and soul will be considered: The Platonic, Middle-Platonic, and Matthean. The Platonic perspective will be solely based upon excerpts from Plato's *Phaedo*, while the Middle-Platonic position will be drawn from a section of Plutarch's *A Pleasant Life Impossible*. This paper will demonstrate that the Matthean understanding of body and soul will contrast with the ancient Platonic perspective, and the near-contemporaneous writings of body and soul by the Middle-Platonists. The Gospel of Matthew's use of body and soul will be augmented with passages from the LXX translation of Isaiah, which the author of Matthew heavily relies upon. Certain presuppositions will be held regarding the Gospel of Matthew.¹

The Greek understanding of the body (*σῶμα*) and soul (*ψυχή*) was dualistic. The Greeks emphasized a temporal *σῶμα* and an immortal *ψυχή*. They also believed in the separation of the

¹ This paper accepts the two-source theory, a Jewish author(s) of Matthew, a post-70 AD composition date of the Gospel, and the Greek language as the basis for the Gospel. It also maintains that the Gospel itself is the written expression of a worshipping community of 1st century Jewish-Christians, who believe Jesus to be the most authoritative interpreter of Torah.

σωμα and *ψυχή* at death, which they viewed as the soul's release from the body, because the body was a distraction. Although this study focuses primarily on the relationship between body and soul in Platonic thought, Benjamin Blosser frames Plato's thoughts on the body and soul within the context of all created matter: "Plato's ambivalent view of the body arises from his ambivalent view of the visible world in general."² His views on the material world permeated every letter of his writing, which became the bedrock of Platonism. Platonic thought from the 4th century BCE was so influential that it continued to influence the Middle-Platonists, such as Plutarch, who were writing in the 1st century BCE until the early 3rd century CE. One of Plato's most foundational texts for understanding his views on "body" and "soul" is his *Phaedo*.

In *Phaedo*, Plato dialogues about the *σωμα* and *ψυχή*, and writes, "That so long as we have the *σωμα*, and the *ψυχή* is contaminated by such an evil, we shall never attain completely what we desire, that is the truth... we must be free from the *σωμα* and must behold the actual realities with the eye of the *ψυχή* alone"³ Not only is the *σωμα* "evil", but Plato also writes that, "Death is the separation of the soul from the body."⁴ Plato also taught that souls exist before they enter humans⁵, and continue to exist after the death of the *σωμα*. Plato makes this comment about the relationship between the body and soul, "the *ψυχή* is like the divine (*θεῖος*) and the *σωμα* like the mortal (*θνητός*)."⁶ One of the most important distinctions Plato makes is this, "the *ψυχή* is the most like the divine and immortal and intellectual and uniform and indissoluble and ever unchanging and the body, on the contrary, most like the human and mortal and multiform and

² Benjamin P. Blosser, "The Body and the Soul," in *Become like the Angels: Origen's Doctrine of the Soul* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 39.

³ *Phaedo*, 231.

⁴ *Phaedo*, 223.

⁵ *Phaedo*, 263-269.

⁶ *Phaedo*, 279.

unintellectual and dissoluble and ever changing.”⁷ Mark Julian Edwards advances this position, going so far as to suggest that, “Plato taught that man is not so much a composite of body and soul as a soul in contact with a body; the soul is not at home in the present world, and enters the body only when it is banished...”⁸ For Plato, the body is always subordinate to the soul. Plato gives a near summary of dualistic understanding of body and soul in a dialogue between the characters Socrates and Simmias early in his *Phaedo*. Simmias asks Socrates, “In this matter also, then, the *ψυχή* of the philosopher greatly despises the *σώμα* and avoids it and strives to be alone by itself?” Socrates replies, saying, “Evidently.”⁹ Clearly, Plato values the *ψυχή* more than the *σώμα* and views the *σώμα* as a distraction.

Plutarch’s Middle-Platonic understanding, nearly contemporaneous with Matthew, follows Plato’s teachings about the soul, although Blosser suggests that Plato’s anti-material sentiments are emboldened by the Middle-Platonists. He writes, “The ambivalence of Plato is retained in large part by his later disciples, though it is shifted in significant respects. The deprecations of matter voiced by Plato grow even sharper during this period...” Plutarch’s discourse *A Pleasant Life Impossible* reveals this heightened criticism of the material world.¹⁰ He writes about what happens at death stating, “the *ψυχή* as changing but not perishing in death.” He emphasizes the distinction between body and soul by writing, “There are two components of man’s nature, *σώμα* and *ψυχή*, the *ψυχή* having the greater authority.”¹¹ Plutarch seems to be suggesting that the *σώμα* and *ψυχή* might be able to live in seemingly harmonious state, as long

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Mark Julian Edwards, “Origen Against Plato,” in *Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity*, ed by Mark Edwards, Patricia Cox Miller, and Christoph Riedweg (Ashgate: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), 4.

⁹ *Phaedo*, 227.

¹⁰ Plutarch, *A Pleasant Life Impossible*, in the *Moralia*, Book XIV, pg 131.

¹¹ Ibid, 81.

as the *ψυχή* holds greater authority over the *σώμα*, although this harmony seems highly unlikely, because Plutarch holds such a negative view of the body in many of his writings.

Lanzillotta describes the pervasiveness of Plutarch's negative perspective throughout his entire corpus, with few exceptions. He writes:

The body's material nature is determinant in this evaluation, since with its weight, disorderly nature, and needs it keeps individuals attached to materiality inclining them to passions and posing a threat to the achievement of their *τέλος*. Plutarch's view of the body is so negative that *De facie* conceives of incarnation both as "prison" for the soul and punishment for the misbehavior of Spirits. A fragment of his lost treatise *On the Soul* preserved by Stobaeus goes even further, since it equates the soul's incarnation with its death.¹²

Plutarch clearly deepens Platonic convictions about negative views of body and material things.

Although Plutarch is not representative of the entire Middle-Platonic school of thought, he remains as major figure that builds upon Platonism. Plutarch clearly posits that the body is inferior to the soul, and asserts a dualistic understanding of body and soul, seeing the body as part of the negative, material realm of being. Plutarch goes so far to suggest that a soul dies when "incarnated" or born into the world.

The Middle-Platonic and Platonic perceptions of body and soul contradict their contemporary Jewish counterparts. The Jewish understanding, contained in the Hebrew Bible regarding *σώμα* and *ψυχή*, was that these two elements were completely and inseparably united.¹³ The early development of Patristic doctrine seems to emphasize the separation of soul and body, but this is not to say that the Church did not believe in a corporeal resurrection. A corporeal resurrection elevates *σώμα* from being unnecessary to being redeemed, which would

¹² Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, "Plutarch's Anthropology and its Influences on His Cosmological Framework," in *Natural Spectaculars: Aspects of Plutarch's Philosophy of Nature*, ed by Michiel Meeusen and Luc Van Der Stockt (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 184.

¹³ Sidnie Ann White, "Human Person," in *The Oxford Guide to the Ideas & Issues of the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 207.

contradict Platonic thought. Early orthodox Christian writers did not regard the body as evil or as a hindrance, this was the position of the Gnostics.

The text of Matthew clearly contradicts these Greek writers, while employing much of the standard NT Koine language concerning the human body and the soul. Whether Gnosticism or any form of proto-Gnosticism is present the Matthean community, the Gospel writer of Mathew presents an understanding of *σωμα* and *ψυχή* that contradicts Platonic, Middle-Platonic, and Gnostic positions, that emphasize the separation of body and soul. The writer shows that the *σωμα* is capable of being full of light or darkness (Mt 6:22-23), which implies that the Matthean community believed the *σωμα* could be full of goodness. There is also a difference between the words body and soul. The *ψυχή* is incorporeal but cannot be regarded as separated from the corporeal *σωμα*. Matthew 6:25 states, “For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your soul (*ψυχή*), as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body (*σωμα*), as to what you will put on. Is not soul (*ψυχή*) more than food, and the body (*σωμα*) more than clothing?” The author of Matthew deliberately uses *ψυχή* and *σωμα*, but they should not be read as synonyms. Throughout the Matthean Gospel, *σωμα* is usually referencing a physical body (Mt 5:29-30; 27:52, 58-59), while *ψυχή* does not have an explicit example of being used as the body. To be fair, Matthew 6:25 does indicate that in the Matthean Gospel, *ψυχή* cannot be thought of as completely incorporeal. The narrative language and precise use of body and soul, that is *ψυχή*, may suggest that *σωμα* is partitive of soul, but not the full expression of a unified *σωμα* and *ψυχή*.

One should also note that humanity only has the ability to kill the *σωμα*, while God has the ability to utterly destroy *ψυχή* and the *σωμα* in Gehenna.¹⁴ The author of Matthew writes, “Do not fear those who kill the body (*σωμα*) but are unable to kill the soul (*ψυχή*); but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul (*ψυχή*) and body (*σωμα*) in hell” (Matthew 10:28). This clearly contradicts the Platonic and Middle-Platonic understanding of an immortal *ψυχή*. Luz highlights the Jewishness of this verse, by stating, “What is important is that the Greek concept of the immortal soul is not taken over here. God can also destroy the soul in hell”¹⁵ Adding to his statement, the author of Matthew may be suggesting that God would not separate the *σωμα* and *ψυχή* during that destruction because they are inseparable. The body is not a prison of the soul. Humans have no dominion over the destruction of a body because only a creator can destroy what has been created. Killing a body and causing a body and soul to be destroyed are entirely different. On the other hand, God as the creator and author of life, who brought everything from nothing-ness has complete and total authority over his creation of body and soul. The Jewish-Christian audience of the Matthean community would not consider the *σωμα* to be separated from the *ψυχή* because *ψυχή* refers to the entire being, which would include the body. Luz makes another interesting claim about the relationship between “fear of God” and the destruction of the soul. He writes, “The comfort for the disciples lies not in the indestructibility of the soul but in the power of God. From the perspective of the power of God, human power is limited to the visible body and does not encompass the entire human self, the ‘soul’.”¹⁶ This adds to the claim

¹⁴ This text seems to suggest that God also has dominion over Gehenna, which is a topic that should thoroughly be explored.

¹⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20 a Commentary*, Hermeneia - a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

that *σωμα* is partitive of the all-encompassing concept of being, which is *ψυχή* and *σωμα* together.

The Gospel writer of Matthew also employs a frequent use of the word *ψυχή* without *σωμα* being used explicitly alongside it in the text. The relationship between *σωμα* and *ψυχή* is a presupposition of the Matthean community. For example, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (*ταῖς ψυχαῖς ὑμῶν*)” (Mt 11:29). Obviously, following Torah requires a physical body to fulfill the demands of the Law. This is also an example of Jesus exercising his role as rabbi in this passage. He suggests that the *ψυχή*, and the implied *σωμα*, will find rest in his yoke, that is, his interpretation of what is the most important, central teaching of Torah. This passage’s interpretation changes drastically based upon the reader’s understanding of the person of Jesus. People who did not regard Jesus as Jewish, such as Cyril of Alexandria, insist that the acceptance of Christ’s light yoke was a sign of accepting a new law over the Jewish Law. Cyril writes:

As the Maker and Lord of all, he spoke to the weary Jews who did not have the strength to bear the yoke of the law... To Jews he said, “Obtain the profit of my coming to you. Bow down to the truth. Acknowledge your Advocate and Lord. I set you free from bondage under the law, bondage in which you endured a great deal of toil and hardship, unable to accomplish it easily and accumulating yourself a very great burden of sins.”¹⁷

The author of the Gospel of Matthew would not agree with Cyril’s 5th century CE worldview, because the Matthean community viewed Jesus as a Jew who followed Torah, while Cyril and many of his contemporaries viewed the man Jesus as a God-man bringing a new law. They believed this new law which was superior to Jewish law. Thus, it is imperative to maintain the

¹⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, Fragment 149 in *Matthew 1-13*. Ancient Christian Commentaries on Scripture, 232.

position that Christ was in fact a Jewish person, who came to fulfill, not abolish the law. Christ is suggesting an alternative interpretation to the Law, he is not instituting a new law (Mt 5:17ff).¹⁸

One fascinating usage of *ψυχή* is found in Matthew 12:18. “behold, my servant whom I have chosen; my beloved in whom my soul is well-pleased; I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.” Here the author also is quoting the LXX of Isaiah 42:1-4. The Matthean writer is asserting that Christ is the chosen servant of God. Interestingly, this verse seems to imply that God possesses a *ψυχή*. Commentating on Matthew 5:8b, Dale C. Allison reveals that it would have been commonplace for the Matthean community to assume that God had a corporeal body.¹⁹ He writes further stating, “Up through the fourth and fifth centuries, however, Christian belief in corporeal God was quite widespread.” Continuing with this idea, he summarizes his position saying, “Nothing to my knowledge speaks against the possibility that Matthew and his first readers believed God to be embodied.”²⁰ Thus, it would be proper to hypothesize that God has an innermost being (*ψυχή*), keeping in mind that humans do as well, since humanity was made in the image of God (c.f. Gen 1:27). After the *ψυχή* of God is pleased, he then places his *πνευμα* upon his servant. The spirit, or *πνευμα*, in this context is referring to the anointing of Christ with the God’s spirit (c.f. Mt 4:17).

The author of Matthew uses many other references from the LXX version of Isaiah. Matthew’s understanding of *ψυχή* and *σωμα* is influenced by the LXX of Isaiah. Richard Beaton highlights the central role that Isaiah played in the early Church:

¹⁸ Donald Alfred Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 33a, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 324.

¹⁹ Dale C. Jr. Allison, "Seeing God," in *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present*(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 45.

²⁰ Ibid.

The book of Isaiah exerted a compelling influence on Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. One of the most frequently cited texts within the extant literature of the Second Temple Judaism, it recurs time and time again in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other literature. Authors found it a rich source of material with which they could construct their various critiques of particular elements within Judaism. Its eschatological language proved irresistible to those writers intent on describing the day of the Lord. Matthew and the compilers of the traditions employed in the writing of his gospel were not to be excluded from their number.²¹

Although Beaton does not make a clear distinction of the Matthean tradition being Christian or Jewish, he demonstrates the necessity of comparing the text of Isaiah with Matthew.

Isaiah in the LXX suggests a unified understanding of body and soul, which is shared with the Gospel of Matthew. Isaiah 3:9 is an example of *ψυχή* being used with an implied *σώμα*. The section of text is, “οὐαὶ τῇ ψυχῇ αὐτῶν”. Within the context of Isaiah 3:9-10, *ψυχή* is being referenced to as the deepest part of a Isaiah’s *σώμα*, within which a person grieves. Isaiah 42:25 suggests that the people of Israel do not understand the sin they commit against God, and God poured out his anger, but Israel did understand or place this upon their *ψυχή*, that is they did not understand their sin on a fundamental, interior level. In Isaiah 21:4, Isaiah the Prophet has a vision in the desert where his heart wanders (*ἡ καρδία μου πλανᾶται*), and his *ψυχή* is occupied with fear (*ἡ ψυχή μου ἐφέστηκεν εἰς φόβον*). These uses of *ψυχή* focus on the incorporeal interior of Isaiah, which is found within his *σώμα*. Unfortunately, the book of Isaiah does compare *ψυχή* and *σώμα* explicitly. However, the author of Isaiah does employ the word *σὰρξ* and *ψυχή* together. Although typically translated as “flesh”, *σὰρξ* is in the same semantic range as *σώμα*. The author writes, “In that day the mountains shall be consumed, and the hills and the forests, and fire shall devour both *ψυχή* and *σὰρξ*” (Isaiah 10:18). Writing on Isaiah 10:17, Roberts

²¹ Richard Beaton, "Isaiah in Matthew's Gospel," in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J.J. Menken (New York and London: T&T Clark International A Continuum imprint, 2005), 63.

states, “the fire is said to be God himself.”²² Thus, God displays that he has dominion over both body and soul, similarly to Matthew 10:28. This also contradicts the Platonist and Middle-Platonist idea of an immortal soul, and surely influenced the Matthean communities’ understanding of body and soul. The book of Isaiah holds the body and soul together, suggesting a non-dualistic reading.

After reviewing the Greek dualistic perspective on body and soul and the Matthean-Jewish understanding, this paper will now consider the usage of *ψυχή* in the context of Matthew 10:39, which must be read with v38.

Καὶ ὅς οὐ λαμβάνει τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθεῖ ὀπίσω μου, οὐκ ἔστιν μου ἄξιος. ὁ εὐρών τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἀπολέσει αὐτήν, καὶ ὁ ἀπολέσας τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ εὐρήσει αὐτήν. (Mt 10:38-39)

In this pericope the Matthean author insists that being a disciple of Christ requires a committed willingness to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. Luz writes, “Verses 38-39 once again shift the focus. They speak no longer of the relationship of the disciples to other people but of the consequences this has, including the break with one’s family, for one’s own life.”²³ He then proposes three interpretations for taking “up one’s cross”, but concludes that one is the most probable. He writes, “Entering the way of the cross is a matter of being ready for martyrdom as a condition of discipleship.”²⁴ Disciples should not just be willing to carry the cross, but *ἀκολουθεῖ ὀπίσω μου* (Christ). *Ακολουθεω* was the common phrase of Christ to call his disciples into an

²² J.J.M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, Hermeneia - a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 169.

²³ Luz, *Matthew 8-20 a Commentary*, 113.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

intimate relationship of discipleship (Mt 4:20, 22, 25) so the Matthean author is suggesting a literal following of radical commitment, which may likely include martyrdom.

After looking more closely at verse 38, and the meaning behind taking up one's cross, verse 39 makes a strange comparison between finding (*εὐρίσκω*) and apocalyptic destruction (*ἀπόλλυμι*) of one's soul. Hagner suggests, "in a real sense v39 is a kind of exegesis of v38."²⁵ The relationship between *εὐρίσκω* and *ἀπόλλυμι* can only be understood in light of verse 38, because it reveals where one must look to receive their eternal reward. This reward can only be found through a radical relationship with Christ, because Christ will only acknowledge before the Father those who acknowledged him (Mt 10:32). A thoroughly Jewish understanding for soul (*ψυχή*) is contextually necessary to understand the depth of Christ's words. In verse 39, *ψυχή* must have deliberately been used by the Jewish author, with an understanding that body and soul cannot be split. The Jewishness of the Matthean Gospel's author should be constantly maintained because the Matthean author seems to use *ψυχή* consistently in a Jewish sense. The severity of *ἀπολέσει αὐτήν (ψυχή)* in verse 39a is contested, but most commentators, such as Luz, suggest that losing one's life is synonymous with the *ψυχή* being lost in hell.²⁶ English translations often soften the translation of *ἀπολέσει* as "lose", but this would be inconsistent with the eschatological nature of the Matthean Gospel and of a more literal translation of *ἀπόλλυμι*, which *BDAG*

²⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 293.

²⁶ If a literal translation of *ἀπόλλυμι* is maintained, i.e. absolute destruction, with a Jewish understanding of *ψυχή* in Mt 10:28, annihilationism may have been a position of the Matthean community, but this does not affect the Matthean understanding of *ψυχή*, only the destruction of it.

defines as, “eternal destruction.”²⁷ Verse 39a explains the consequences of misplaced commitment, while 39b shares the implications of a correctly placed commitment.

Those who destroy their souls for the sake of Christ (*ἀπολέσας αὐτοῦ τὴν ψυχὴν ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ*) will find their lives (*εὕξει αὐτήν*). Jesus is asking for his disciples to deny themselves and their earthly attachments, even to the point of being willing to be martyred in his name. Although martyrdom is not guaranteed for the disciples, a willingness to be martyred is the demand, and historical tradition suggests that martyrdom was often the end of Christ’s disciples. The precedent of impending persecution is found throughout Matthew, such as 10:22, which says, “You will be hated by all because of my name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.” Christ is not promising that following him will lead to strife, but warning his disciples that following his teachings will most likely lead to enduring persecution for his sake. Failure to comply with this demand, suggests that one must then face the apocalyptic *ἀπόλυμι*.

This paper has demonstrated that the Plato understood the *σωμα* as a prison of the soul, and believed the *ψυχή* as being more like the divine, which implies that the *ψυχή* is more valuable than the *σωμα*. Plutarch suggested that the *ψυχή* holds authority over the *σωμα*, which also implies that the *σωμα* is subordinate to the *ψυχή*. The Septuagint translation of Isaiah does not align with these perspectives, and Richard Beaton gives a strong witness for the necessity of considering the LXX of Isaiah when reviewing the uses of *σωμα* and *ψυχή* in Matthew. Isaiah 10:18 states that God has dominion over human’s body and soul, similar to Matthew 10:28. Other passages in Isaiah reference *ψυχή*, but with an implied *σωμα*, because *ψυχή* is used in a

²⁷ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. F.W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker, 2nd ed.(Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 94-95.

way that focuses on an interior that requires an exterior, a *σωμα*. Passages in Matthew have more in common with the LXX of Isaiah than the Platonic, dualistic position that the body is a hindrance and prison of the soul. Body and soul is presented in a non-dualistic way in the Gospel of Matthew, which emphasizes the substantial demand of discipleship, which requires the entire being of a person, body and soul.

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