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# On Bodily Immortality in the Eastern Church Fathers

Nathan A. Jacobs  
Scholar in Residence  
Philosophy & Religion in the Religion  
in the Arts in Contemporary Culture Program  
Vanderbilt University Divinity School  
Nashville, Tennessee  
[nathanandrewjacobs@gmail.com](mailto:nathanandrewjacobs@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This essay examines what the Eastern Church fathers have to say about bodily immortality by discussing (1) Adamic immortality and the Fall and (2) Eastern patristic understanding of resurrection as immortality. This bodily immortality is the true hope of immortality, according to the Eastern fathers. And it is this immortality, not the indissolubility of the soul, which humanity has been created to attain, and which the work of Christ restored.

In a previous essay,<sup>1</sup> I examine whether the Eastern Church fathers believe the soul is immortal. We saw that the terms *mortal* and *immortal* have a variety of meanings, and the answer depends on which meaning one has in mind. The Eastern fathers affirm that the soul is immortal in the sense that it is immune to organic dissolution, but the soul does not exist *a se*, nor is it immune to corruption in the sense of divergent from its proper end.

An important distinctive of the Eastern patristic understanding of immortality not discussed in the previous essay is the role of the body. Unlike the pagan philosophers, for whom immortality concerns the soul only, the Eastern fathers understand true immortality to require resurrection. In what follows, I will examine what the Eastern Church fathers have to say about bodily immortality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Psychic Immortality in the Eastern Church Fathers,” [http://epsociety.org/userfiles/Jacobs%20\(Immortality%20of%20the%20Soul-122219\).pdf](http://epsociety.org/userfiles/Jacobs%20(Immortality%20of%20the%20Soul-122219).pdf) (accessed: April 19, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> The following is a portion of a much longer treatment of immortality in the Eastern fathers: “On Whether the Soul Is Immortal According to the Eastern Church Fathers,” *St. Vladimir’s Quarterly* (forthcoming). Patristic citations reference Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 161 volumes (Paris: Imperimerie Catholique, 1857-66), cited as “PG,” with the exception of Nemesius, which references *Nemesius: On the Nature of Man*, trans. R. W. Sharples and P. J.

## Adamic Immortality and the Fall

I previously examined three possible meanings of the Greek words for death. A fourth meaning I there neglected is “death” as the separation of soul from body. This is perhaps the most common meaning of the word amongst ancient writers. It is the presumed definition in Plato’s *Phaedo*; it is common amongst the Stoics; and it appears in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> The presumption is that a fleshly body is a vessel that lives and moves because of a life-force within it, namely soul or spirit.<sup>4</sup> Hence, when this animating life-force departs from the fleshly vessel, the body ceases to live.

This same definition of *death* appears frequently in the Eastern fathers. For example, in John of Damascus we read, “death [θανατον], that is, the separation of soul from the body [ψυχης εξ του σωματος]... In this sense we say that our Lord’s body was subject to corruption [φθορατον].”<sup>5</sup> Here, John, like James, defines “death” as the separation of soul and body, and he uses θανατος (typically translated “death”) interchangeably with φθορα (often translated “corruption”) to refer to this phenomenon. According to John, while Christ’s body did not undergo decay—one meaning of φθορα—Christ did give up his soul, and in this sense, the body of Christ was subject to φθορα.

The negation of this type of “mortality” would mean that a body is immune to separation from its soul. Notice that immortality so defined is applicable only to bodies having a soul; neither “mortality” nor “immortality” in this sense is applicable to souls. Bodily immortality must therefore be treated separately from the question of the immortality of the soul, as per our present investigation. And it is worth noting that to neglect the question of bodily immortality when looking at the Eastern fathers on immortality would be an act of negligence. For the Eastern fathers insist that *man* is not just a soul, but a body and soul. For a *human person* to be immortal, the body too must participate in immortality. So this particular type of death (i.e., body-soul separation) must be overcome if man it to have any real hope of immortality.

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Van Der Eijk (Liverpool University Press, 2008), in the series *Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 49.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Socrates, *Phaedo*, 64c; Hoven, *Stoïciens face au problème de l’au-delà*, passim; James 2:26.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Athanasius, *Contra gentes*, 33 (PG 25.65b-8b).

<sup>5</sup> John Damascene, *Expositio fidei orthodoxae*, 3.28 (PG 94.1100a); also 4.27 (PG 94.1220a); Epiphanius, *Ancoratus*, 88 (PG 43.1380); Methodius, *De resurrectione* (PG 18.285).

The importance of the body to immortality is evident when considering Eastern patristic replies to the question, *Was man created mortal or immortal?* The answers never appeal to the immortality of the soul. Rather, the Eastern fathers consistently reply that Adam, body and soul, was potentially immortal through deification (i.e., partaking of the divine nature) and potentially mortal through retreat from God. The latter was realized in the Fall and with the pronouncement, *Dust you are, and to dust you will return* (Gen 3:19). With this pronouncement, Adam became subject to bodily death: i.e., separation of body from soul. But this did not affect his soul's indissolubility. By implication, the potential for immortality here lost was bodily immortality.

Nemesius of Emesa summarizes the view nicely. After raising the question of whether man was created mortal or immortal, he writes:

The Hebrews say that man came into existence in the beginning as neither incontestably mortal nor immortal, but at the boundary of each nature, so that, if he should pursue bodily affections, he would be subjected also to bodily changes, while, if he should estimate more highly the goods of the soul, he might be thought worthy of immortality. For if God had made him mortal from the beginning he would not have condemned him to death when he had sinned: for nobody condemns the mortal to mortality. If, however, he had rather made him immortal, he would not have made him in need of food, since nothing immortal needs bodily food. Nor would he have so easily changed his mind at once made mortal what was born immortal.... So it is better to consider the matter before us either in that way, or else [to suppose] that [man] was created mortal, but capable of becoming immortal if perfected by progress: in other words, potentially immortal.<sup>6</sup>

Nemesius' reference to the Hebrews is an appeal to Philo, who writes, "one might properly say that man is the *boundary* between mortal and immortal nature, sharing in each to the extent that is necessary, and that he has been made mortal and immortal together, mortal in his body, immortal in his reason."<sup>7</sup> Nemesius advocates something similar. Adam was created in equilibrium between mortality and immortality, not yet subject to bodily decay and in right relationship to God, such that deification and immortality

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<sup>6</sup> Nemesius, *De natura hominis*, I.6.5-2.

<sup>7</sup> Philo, *De opificio mundi*, 135.

(inclusive of the body) was possible. Yet, such immortality was not yet attained; it required progress, a growing into it, which Adam's retreat from God halted.<sup>8</sup>

Nemesius was not the first to assert this view. As early as Theophilus of Antioch (2nd century), we find the same:

But someone will say to us, *Was man made by nature mortal?* Certainly not. Was he, then, immortal? Neither do we affirm this. But one will say, *Was he, then, nothing?* Not even this hits the mark. He was by nature neither mortal nor immortal. For if he [God] had made him immortal from the beginning, he would have made him God. Again, if he had made him mortal, God would seem to be the cause of his death. Neither, then, immortal nor yet mortal did he make him, but, as we have said above, capable of both; so that if he should incline to the things of immortality, keeping the commands of God, he should receive as reward from him immortality, and should become God; but if, on the other hand, he should turn to the things of death, disobeying God, he should himself be the cause of death to himself. For God made man free, and with power over himself.<sup>9</sup>

Several of the Eastern writers link this potential to be mortal or immortal with man's composite nature. Man was formed from the dust of the earth, giving him a lower nature susceptible to mortality and dissolution, but his soul is an icon of God, who breathed into him life from above, granting the capacity to partake of the divine nature and attain immortality. Cyril of Alexandria explains,

Man, then, is a creature rational but composite, that is, of soul and of perishable and earthly flesh. And when it had been made by God, ... it was sealed with the spirit of life, by participation with divinity, gaining the good that is above nature (for it says, *He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul*). But when he was being punished for his transgressions, then with justice hearing *Dust you are and unto dust shall you return*, he was bared of the grace; *the breath of life*, that is the Spirit of him who says *I am the Life*, departed from the earthly body and the creature falls into death, through the flesh alone, the soul being kept in

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<sup>8</sup> Nemesius, *De natura hominis*, I.7.8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Libri tres ad Autolyicum*, 2.27 (PG 6.1093b-6a).

immortality, since to the flesh too alone was it said, *Dust you are and unto dust shall you return.*<sup>10</sup>

Such passages locate mortality in the pronouncement upon the body—it will return to dust. As Methodius notes, resurrection refers to that which is fallen, and it is the body, not the soul, that falls back to dust.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, a second type of death took hold of humanity in this moment, namely the spiritual death of turning away from God. As Basil of Caesarea explains,

And immediately he [Adam] was outside paradise and outside the blessed way of life ... and he died through the sin. “For the wages of sin is death.” For to the extent that he withdrew from life, he likewise drew near to death. For God is life, and the privation of life is death. Therefore Adam prepared death for himself through his withdrawal from God.<sup>12</sup>

Both facets of the death of Adam are relevant to the Eastern patristic understanding of the Fall. Since the Eastern fathers understand the soul to supply the hope of deification and immortality,<sup>13</sup> when this higher nature is subjugated to the lower, mortal nature, humanity’s hope of (bodily) immortality is undermined. A common metaphor may help illustrate the point. The Eastern fathers often illustrate man’s participation in the divine nature (deification) using a fire-metal metaphor: Just as metal participates in the nature of fire when fire’s heating and lighting “energies” take up residence within metal, so the soul partakes of the divine nature when the divine “energies” take up residence in man. And one such energy is immortality. Employing this same metaphor, Gregory of Nyssa describes the subjugation of the soul to the passions as a blackening of metal that hinders its receptivity to fire: “Then that godly beauty of the soul that was an imitation of the Archetypal Beauty, like fine steel

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<sup>10</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarium in evangelium Joannis*, I.9, v.1:14 (PG 73.160a-b). Also: Methodius of Olympus, *De resurrectione*, 1.12-3 (PG 18.281d-84b)

<sup>11</sup> Methodius, *De resurrectione*, 1.12-3 (PG 18.281c-4b).

<sup>12</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia quod Deus non est auctor malorum*, 7 (PG 30:345a).

<sup>13</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetica magna*, 6 (PG 45:25d-28a); Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 3; Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 9.23 (PG 32:109b-c); Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus* (PG 44.1272bc); Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes*, 2.17; Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum*, 7.1 (PG 91.1077a-b); Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarium in evangelium Joannis*, 10, v.14:21 (PG 74.284a-5c).

blackened with the vicious rust, preserved no longer the glory of its familiar essence, but was disfigured with the ugliness of sin.”<sup>14</sup>

In summary, the soul is that part of human nature that bears God’s image, and this image is what makes it possible for man to partake of the divine nature and become immortal. Had Adam’s higher nature (his soul) done so, this would have raised up his lower nature (his body) to also partake of immortality. But the Fall buries and distorts the image of God, crippling the soul’s capacity to participate in divine life and attain immortality.

## Resurrection as Immortality

Such is the context for the Eastern patristic understanding of the work of Christ. Because our concern here is with the results of Christ’s work—namely immortality—I will not belabor the details of the Eastern patristic Christology. I will only say, by way of summary, that, negatively, the work of Christ includes a defeat of the passions (which enslave our higher nature to the lower) through Christ’s resistance to temptation and ultimately his martyrdom.<sup>15</sup> Positively, by joining the divine nature to our human nature in the Incarnation, the Son of God energizes the latter, deifying and vivifying it. This twofold work is the unmaking and remaking of man. As Cyril of Alexandria explains,

It needed therefore that that in us which was specially imperiled, should ... be restored, and by intertwining again with Life that is by Nature be recalled to immortality: it needed that at length the sentence, *Dust you are and to dust you will return* should be relaxed, the fallen body being united ineffably to the Word that quickens all things. For it needed that becoming his flesh, it should partake of the immortality that is from him.<sup>16</sup>

Or to quote Athanasius on the same:

...[I]t was in the power of none other to metamorphosize the corruptible into incorruption [το φθαρτον εις αφθαρσιαν μεταβαλειν],

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<sup>14</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate*, 12 (PG 46.372b).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 7-9 and 44; Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium*, 42 (PG 90:405b-9a).

<sup>16</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarium in evangelium Joannis*, I.9, v.1:14 (PG 73.160c). Also: Irenaeus, *Fragmenta*, 28 (PG 7.1244c); Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 3.1.1 (PG 8.856c-d).

except the Savior himself, that had at the beginning also made all things out of nothing [ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων] and that none other could recreate the “according to the image” for human beings, except the Image of the Father; and that none other could resurrect the mortal immortal [θνητον αθανατον αναστησαι], except our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Life itself...<sup>17</sup>

Because, on this view, Christ restored the immortality that Adam forfeited, this immortality must be bodily, as per the Eastern patristic reading of the Adamic story. And since Christ does not deliver the Christian from the return to dust, the hope of immortality through Christ is a hope of resurrection. Therefore, the nature of bodily immortality post-Fall is necessarily an inquiry into resurrection. So what is resurrection? Is it merely the reanimation of the body? Does this immortality simply mean an indefinite extension of the body-soul union? Or is resurrection something more?

Both Eastern patristic anthropology and the New Testament give reason to think there is considerable difference between reanimation and resurrection. Beginning with the latter, consider three Pauline statements on resurrection. First, in his epistle to the Romans, Paul declares, “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:9). Can the same be said of Lazarus? If we presume that Lazarus rose only to die again, then Paul’s statement requires that we differentiate between reanimation, which apparently does not deliver one from the dominion of death, and resurrection, which does.

Second, and along similar lines, Paul says, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have died” (1 Cor 15:20). Again, we might ask, in what sense is Christ the firstfruits of those who have been raised if he is not the first to be raised?<sup>18</sup>

A third noteworthy statement, appears in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. He writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I might attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:10-11). Notice that Paul’s conditional language does not refer to a hope of being judged righteous after he is resurrected—vindication being unsure, while resurrection is sure. Rather, his conditional language applies to resurrection itself. This is particularly

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<sup>17</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 20 (PG 25.129c-d). Also: *Epistola ad Adelphium episcopum et confessorem, contra Arianos*, 4 (PG 26.1076c-7b).

<sup>18</sup> The same question emerges in light of Colossians 1:17-18, where Paul identifies Christ as “the firstborn from the dead.”

noteworthy, since the universal reanimation of humanity, righteous and wicked, for judgement is advocated by the Old Testament and the New Testament, and was held amongst many Jewish sects.<sup>19</sup> Given this common belief, Paul's hope only makes sense if there is a difference between the resurrection from the dead, which is unique to the saints, and reanimation for judgment, which all experience.

The Eastern fathers recognize the distinction between reanimation and resurrection, often drawing the very distinction suggested above between reanimation before the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope of resurrection held by the believer. For example, Methodius writes, "Among [those raised prior to the resurrection of Christ] is the son of the widow of Sarepta, and the son of the Shunammite, and Lazarus. We must say: These rose to die again; but we are speaking of those who shall never die after their rising."<sup>20</sup> The same point echoes in Irenaeus and Chrysostom.<sup>21</sup> So what is the difference between reanimation and resurrection?

Resurrection, according to the Eastern fathers, is a type of metamorphosis. The body, with the soul, is deified, transcending its innate limitations and its susceptibility to dissolution and death. John of Damascus, after quoting Paul on the body being sown in corruption and raised in incorruption, explains:

...[S]uch was our Lord's body after the resurrection, which passed through closed doors, was untiring, had no need of food, or sleep, or drink.... The divine apostle, in truth, says, *For our conversation is in heaven, from whence we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus, who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body; not meaning change into another form (God forbid!), but rather the change from corruption into incorruption.*<sup>22</sup>

Many Eastern fathers refer to this change in Christ's body using μεταστοιχειω, literally "transelement,"<sup>23</sup> and understand this same change to

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<sup>19</sup> Dan 12:1-3; Is 66:22-24; Wis 2:24-3.10; 4:15-5.15; 2 Macc 7:9; *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 4Q521; Josephus, *Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades*, 1-2; Mark 12:18; Acts 23:6-8.

<sup>20</sup> Methodius, *De resurrectione*, 3.2.14 (PG 18.320b-1a).

<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 5.13.1 (PG 7.1156b-57a); Chrysostom, *Homilia de capto Eutropio et de divitiarum vanitate*, 2.13 (PG 52.408).

<sup>22</sup> John Damascene, *Expositio fidei orthodoxae*, 4.27 (PG 94.1225a-b).

<sup>23</sup> Anastasius of Sinai, *Hodegus*, 13 (PG 89.209c); Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis* (PG 44.336a).

be the hope of the Christian who awaits resurrection.<sup>24</sup> This metamorphosis is the “being made God” that the Eastern fathers consistently speak about. The point is significant. For the temptation is to read the Eastern patristic descriptions of deification as isolated to the soul. Whether it is Basil’s talk of “foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden”<sup>25</sup> or Maximus the Confessor’s talk of the acquisition of “wisdom, goodness, power, beneficence, generosity,”<sup>26</sup> it is easy to read these as traits of the soul only. Yet, as John of Damascus clearly explains, the body itself also participates in deification. Or to quote Pseudo-Macarius on the same, [The body of Christ] in its own nature has been enriched with the Word who is united to it. It has become holy, life-giving, full of divine energy. And in Christ we too are transfigured. Just as the *body* of the Lord was glorified on the mountain when it was transfigured in the glory of God and infinite light, so the *bodies* of the Saints will be glorified and shine like lightning. . . . Our human nature is transformed into the fullness of God; it becomes wholly fire and light.<sup>27</sup>

Such metamorphosis is what differentiates reanimation from resurrection. In reanimation, the soul reenters the body, but both body and soul remain as they were before the separation. In resurrection, the body is transformed, putting off the corruption common to organic matter, by partaking of the divine energies of incorruption and immortality—a metamorphosis first beheld in the resurrected Christ.

This, then, explains what the Eastern fathers mean when saying that Adam’s higher nature was able to raise up his lower nature: His soul, being an icon of God, capable of participating in the nature of his divine Archetype, was capable of participating in the divine attributes of incorruption and immortality. And because the nature of man is one, Adam’s lower nature (i.e., his body) would also participate in incorruption and immortality. But Adam forfeited this metamorphosis in the Fall. We see this metamorphosis restored and on full display in the person of Christ, who bestowed immortality upon our nature in his own resurrection. And it is this same metamorphosis the believer hopes to attain in the resurrection.

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<sup>24</sup> Methodius, *Symposium*, 2.7 (PG 18.60b); Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* (PG 91.1332d).

<sup>25</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 9.23 (PG 32:109b-c).

<sup>26</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *De charitate centuria*, 3.52 (PG 90.1001b).

<sup>27</sup> Pseudo-Macarius, *Homiliae*, 15.38 (PG 34:602) (emphasis added).

This bodily immortality is the true hope of immortality, according to the Eastern fathers. And it is this immortality, not the indissolubility of the soul, which humanity has been created to attain, and which the work of Christ restored.

*Dr. Nathan A. Chief Creative Officer, Maximos Media Scholar in Residence of Philosophy and Religion in the Religion in the Arts in Contemporary Culture Program (RACC), Vanderbilt University, Divinity School.*