

The Destiny of the Soul after Death in the writings Fathers of the Church of the East

Introduction

Life after death is an elusive reality; there is no clear dogmatic teaching in Christian tradition on what happens when we die. Theologians of various traditions – Assyrians, Greek and Latin—have elaborated about the soul after death and its intermediate state (i.e. the period between when we die and the world's end) and life in heaven.

There are four everlasting aspects to be remembered when pondering this subject, which are: *Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven*. The study of these is called eschatology, which comes from the Greek word, *eschata*, which means “the final things.” We have to bear in mind that the reality of heaven and hell is a speculative theology that is found implicitly in Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition.

Traditionally, judgment is divided into two parts: individual (particular) judgment and final (general) judgment. The greatest example of Particular Judgment is that of the Good Thief, who was promised paradise right after death by Jesus Christ. The latter is what might be called the cosmic perspective – the big picture about history, the end of time, and the manifestation of the new heavens and new earth, the final judgment, which is given on the Last Day, when all men are summoned before the Judgment Seat of Christ.

It has to be clear that the *essential* characteristics of paradise, hell, and heaven is that they are *states* of being rather than *places*, which is what is commonly perceived and represented in human language. This language of *place* is inadequate to describe the realities involved, since it is tied to the temporal order in which this world and we exist.

This article represents a modest attempt to present the teaching of the Church of the East concerning what awaits a man after death. We shall use of the patristic sources of the Church of the East reflecting on the state of the soul after death.

Common Elements among Church fathers of the East

Generally, Syriac fathers held a tripartite division of man: body, soul and spirit. This is based on St. Paul's triad of body, soul and spirit (1 Thess 5: 23). Death is referred to as a state of sleep, in which there is a semiconscious knowledge of what is happening, as in the case of a habitual 'light sleeper.' Though dead, there is a sense of being “asleep;” the body which diseases can plague has come to an end. It becomes a corpse and decomposes, passing away into dust, but it is not altogether lost. The time will come when it will be resurrected, spiritualized and made incorruptible, at the time of the final judgment. But the soul, preserved in life, as it is now, is without corruption. Syriac tradition portrays Paradise as a sacred temple, a cosmetic mountain, and a Garden of Eden. The Syriac fathers, in their view of humans in tripartite divisions of the body, the soul and the Holy Spirit, therefore portend that the body dies yet the soul and spirit live.

Syriac fathers, like Aphrahat (d. 345), Ephrem (d. 373) and Narsai (d. 502/3), refers to Adam prior to the Fall as *šabrā*, which can refer to infancy, yet which is used here only to connote Adam's naivety, a lack of experience and discernment. Before the Fall, Adam was not perfect in terms of spiritual maturity; he only had the potential to *become* the heir to Eden. For instance, Ephrem describes Adam and Eve as a “young couple” in direct contrast with the serpent's cunning wisdom, which implies that *young* has a connotation of “gullibility or

inexperience.”¹ Narsai, does not recommend his readers to go back to the original Adamic state, and he is not interested, in imitating children in order to enter the kingdom.

For Narsai, ‘Eden is but the waiting room’² for the righteous: the state of things in Eden did not represent God’s final and perfect will. “The life which Adam may have had, had he not eaten from the tree, is not the same life which the righteous will lead in the kingdom on high.” To the early Syriac fathers, humanity's perfection is seen as a final, ultimate goal which can only be attained after a life has transpired and at the end of time.

To the Syriac fathers, humanity's perfection is seen as a final goal ultimately realized at the end of time, not at the starting point or at the moment of creation. God intends to guide humanity through a process of learning and education in order to reach its final objective, heaven. The first couple's short stay in Paradise is part of this process aimed at giving them a foretaste of a perfect life. Hence, humanity's perfection is the final, ultimate goal, only able to be achieved in the hereafter, not at the starting point and certainly not, then, at the moment of creation.

1. Tatian the Assyrian (d. 173)

Tatian was born in Assyria of pagan parents, and received a rhetorical education, acquiring a reputation for learnedness. He travelled widely, and in Rome became a student of Justin Martyr, and a member of the church. He was considered an apologist for the deity of Christ, along with Justin and Clement and others. Tatian later broke away from the Roman church and returned to Mesopotamia, where he exerted considerable influence around Syria and Antioch. His writings exercised a strong influence over the Syrian church up until the fourth and fifth centuries.

Tatian maintained a tripartite division in mankind, which was comprised of the soul, the body and the spirit. In regard to the relationship among these three components, Tatian emphasized the closeness of body and soul and the predominant role of the spirit.

According to him, “the human soul is complex, not simple. It is composite in order to be manifest through the body. For it [the soul] could never appear by itself, without the body; nor will the flesh rise again without the soul.”³ *Tatian affirms that the soul and body are inseparable in thought, in fact and in hope. The soul is what binds the flesh and the flesh is the dwelling place of the soul.* His writings mention that the body cannot rise without the soul seeing by means of the physical eyes of the body. The spirit takes the central position; in fact, the soul is preserved by the spirit, for the spirit comes from above at Baptism while the soul’s birth comes at the time of earthly existence begins at birth.

He further explains that the image of God in man is not identified with rational and immortal soul, as held by many early fathers, but being the temple of the Holy Spirit. He states: “The character of man’s nature is such if it is like a temple, God is pleased to dwell in it by the Spirit, His Ambassador. But if it is not such a dwelling, man is superior to the beasts only by virtue of articulate speech; otherwise his way of life is like theirs, as one who is not an image of God.”⁴

¹ *Ibid.*, hymn 15, stanza 12.

² J. Freshman, *The ways of Means of the Divine Economy. An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai*, [doctoral dissertation in Leiden/ the Netherlands], Part 3, pp 1-6.

³ J. Pelikan, *The Shape of Death: Life, Death and Immortality in the Early Fathers*, Nashville 1961, 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

Titian's rejection of the immortality of the Soul

Tatian rejects the natural immortality of the soul held by Greek philosophers who believed in the pre-existence of the soul and its survival after death due to its superior part of its being. Tatian ironically stating that if the Greeks maintains that only the soul becomes immortal, "I declare that the flesh also does with it."⁵ He explicates his standpoint by claiming that if the soul had no need to God's creator act in order to come into existence since it is endowed with power of pre-existence, as claimed by Greeks, then it does not need an act of creator in order to come to life after death since it can continue living on its own power.

Hence, Tatian affirms that the "soul is not immortal, but mortal O Greeks. Nevertheless, it is capable of not dying. If it does not know the truth, it dies and is dissolved with the with body."⁶ The soul is capable of dying and not dying is based depends upon its relation to God. The life giving spirit of God grants the soul the capability life after death.

Fate of the Body and the Soul after Death

At the time of one's death, there is a dissolution of the soul and body; the body and soul, in life, must abide together because they are so closely united and complementary. However, death holds an immortal punishment. At the Resurrection, the spirit comes back to raise the bodies of the righteous up while the wicked are condemned to death in immortal punishment. Whereas the righteous will rise up with the body and soul reunited, the wicked must face eternal death.

According to Tatian, the eternal life doesn't mean living for ever in heaven after our earthly existence comes to end. It means living alive now and always. Although for Christians, death is a dreadful reality to contemplate or masticate, nevertheless, it is far less appalling prospect when a person dies with total separation with God. Hence, death for Christians, is a door to access to the life and joy eternally with God while for non-believer is a complete frustration and emptiness of life without God.

2) Aphrahat the Persian Sage (d. 345 AD)

Aphrahat was a prominent Christian figure and renowned Syriac writer, in the first half of the fourth century⁷ in the Persian Empire. Ephrem's contemporary, Aphrahat initiated a native Syriac literature. He is best known for his twenty-three *Demonstrations* or treatises on theological, ascetical and disciplinary subjects. He wrote his *Demonstrations* between 336 AD and 345 AD.

The Tripartite Division of Man

Like Tatian, Aphrahat set forth a viewpoint of the existence of a tripartite division of humanity: the body, the soul and the Spirit (the third person of the Trinity). Aphrahat stated that a person at his natural birth (physical birth) is endowed with a soulish spirit (*rukha nawshanaita* ܪܘܚܐ ܢܘܫܝܢܝܬܐ) which is the principle of natural life (Genesis 2:7). At baptism (spiritual birth), a person is then endowed with the heavenly spirit, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity (1

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ We do not have any precise information about his life time or the date of his death; however, his writings reveals that he lived in the first half of the fourth century. Cf. BURKITT, *Early Eastern Chritianiy*, 81; DUNCAN, *Baptism in Demonstrations*, 3-8.

Cor 15: 44), through which we become the sons and daughters of God by adoption (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ) and are incorporated into Christ's body and share in His mission. Hence, until Baptism, the Spirit is absent from all born of the body and will remain absent unless they come to this regeneration of baptism.

Aphrahat states in *Demonstrations* VI:

The Spirit is absent from all born of the body until they come to the regeneration of baptism. For they are endowed with the soulish spirit [from] the first birth, which [spirit] is created in man, and is immortal, as it is written, "Man became a living soul" (Gen. 2. 7, cf. I Cor. 15. 45). But in the second birth—that is, of Baptism—they receive the Holy Spirit, a particle of the Godhead, and it is immortal. When men die the soulish spirit is buried with the body and the power of sensation is taken from it. The Heavenly Spirit which they have received goes back to its own nature, to the presence of Christ. Both these facts the Apostle teaches, for he says: "The body is buried soulish, and rises spiritual" (I Cor. 15. 44). The Spirit returns to the presence of Christ, its nature, for the Apostle says: "When we are absent from the body we are present with the Lord" (II Cor. 5. 7). Christ's Spirit, which the spiritual have received, goes back to the Lord's presence; the soulish spirit is buried in its own nature, and is deprived of sensation.' (293. 2-24, Parisot's edition)

The State of the Body and Soul after Death

At the state of death, which Aphrahat refers to as "sleep," the spirit, which was added through baptism, goes back to Heaven, its original habitat. The heavenly spirit returns to "its own nature, at the presence of Christ." This concept is based on 1 Corinthians 15:44 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-7. 2 Corinthians 5:6 states when we are absent from the body, we are present with the Lord.

With death, the soulish spirit (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ) is buried with the body and the power of sensation is taken from it. At death, the soul doesn't depart from the body. Similar to Tatian, Aphrahat argues that they are buried together. However, Aphrahat continues to discuss the lack of sensation. The soulish soul is deprived of the faculty of distinguishing between good and evil. This means that after death a person cannot tell what is good from what is evil in this state of sleep, since the soul is buried in its own nature and is deprived of sensation.⁸ However, a lack of sensation doesn't mean an absolute emptiness of consciousness during the sleep.

This theory also asserts that the righteous men rest with a good conscious and sleep well, walking alert and refreshed at the Resurrection. They are expecting their future of salvation even while they are sleeping. To the contrary, the wicked men are restless and disturbed, for they are uneasy with a sense of foreboding and impending doom. To a certain degree, then, the soul remains active in the period of death.

Two Types of People: awaiting Praise versus Punishment

Aphrahat uses the parable of the two servants (Matthew 24:45-51) and the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) in elaborating about two groups of people who are awaiting praise and punishment. Although, according to Aphrahat, after death the soulish spirit (*rukha nawshanaita*) is buried with the body, nevertheless the condition and the state of soul—blessedness or tormented—is determined by the soul's relationship to God and by the way it has spent its earthly life. Aphrahat on the parable of the ten virgins, he demonstrates the final destiny of the

⁸ Aphrahat, *Demonstration VIII*, (of the Resurrection of the Dead).

two groups is based on the manner of which they were waiting for the second coming of our Lord. The people who ready for the arrival of Jesus will admitted to Heaven and those who are not will be destined to hell. Aphrahat illustrates this notion of expectancy based on the parable of the two servants in Matthew 24: 45-51, one of whom is expecting punishment and the other praise from their lord in the morning.

Aphrahat states in *Demonstrations* on Faith

And when you have read and learned the works of faith, you may be made like that tilled land upon which the good seed fell, and produced fruit a hundred-fold and sixty-fold and thirty-fold. And when you come to your Lord, He may call you a good servant and prudent and faithful, who on account of His faith, that abounded, is to enter into the Kingdom of his Lord.⁹

Hence, we find an allusion to particular judgment, which is the experience of the individual at the time of his or her death, at which time God will decide how the soul is to spend its time until the Second Coming of Christ. In Syriac tradition, this judgment occurs on the third day, while for Eastern Orthodox on the fortieth day, after death.

3) St. Ephrem (d. 373)

St. Ephrem of Nisibis,¹⁰ acclaimed as the “Harp of the Spirit,” the “Pillar of the Church,” the “prophet of the Syrians,”¹¹ is one of the most prominent theologians, exegetes and, above all, religious poets of early Eastern Christianity, and the best known of the Syriac Fathers in the Western world. St. Ephrem is increasingly recognized as one of the greatest theological poets in history as well as a source of inspiration for sacred literature.

The Tripartite Division of Human Nature

Similar to Tatian and Aphrahat, Ephrem holds as truth that there is a tripartite division of man: the body, the soul and the Holy Spirit. When Ephrem speaks of the three persons of the Trinity, he relates their activity to a tripartite view of humans, namely, that they are spirit, soul and body: “The three Names are sown in three ways, in the spirit, the soul and the body, mysteriously. When this trinity within us is perfected by the Three it dominates even the sword.”¹²

The soul loves its dwelling place, the body. When the soul gets on well with the body, the soul expels the evil, indwelling demon, and finally invites the Holy Spirit to dwell within both—the soul and the body.¹³

Unlike Aphrahat who connects the spirit to Baptism, Ephrem traces the root of the spirit back to Genesis 1: 27 which states that God “fashioned him with His hands and He breathed a

⁹ Aphrahat, *Demonstration I* (on Faith).

¹⁰ Ephrem was born in Nisibis about 306 and died in Edessa in 373. He served the Church of Nisibis as a deacon. For a comprehensive life history and works of Ephrem: cf. BECK, “Éphrem,” 788-791; GWYNN, “Hymns of Ephrem,” 120-152; DUVAL, *Littérature*, 329-335; ORTIZ de URBINA, *Patrologia syriaca*, 56-83.

¹¹ ORTIZ de URBINA, *Patrologia syriaca*, 56; BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte*, 34.

¹² *HFid* 18:3. Quoted from Yousif, “St. Ephrem on Symbols of Nature,” 54.

¹³ Ephrem, *Carmina Nisibena*, XLVII, CSCO 103, 48-51.

soul in him.¹⁴ In his *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem underlines the important of the soul to enhance and complete humanity. He says:

When the hand of Creator fashioned and formed the body so that it might sing hymns to its Maker, this lyre was silent and had not voice, until at last. He breathed into it the soul which sang therein. Thus the strings acquired sound, and the soul, by means of the body, acquired speech to utter wisdom. When Adam was in all things complete, then the Lord took him and placed him in Paradise. The soul could not enter there of itself for itself, but together they entered, body and soul.¹⁵

Hence for Ephrem, God fashioned Adam's body outside of Paradise. Yet, when God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life, that is when he became a complete living being. God placed man inside Paradise when he had both—a body and a soul.

The State of Death

For Ephrem, death is the split of the three parts of humanity, the body, the soul and the Holy Spirit. While the Holy Spirit returns to its original place in Heaven near God, as we observed in Aphrahat, the body and soul have to begin another long journey. Unlike Aphrahat, Ephrem argues that the body and soul must separate in death. At the Resurrection, they will recover their initial companionship.

Sleeping of Souls at Death

For Ephrem, the departed faithful are not dead but immersed in a deep sleep that lasts up until the final judgment. The entire state of being after death and before the Resurrection is defined as sleep. Ephrem says: "Your deeper sleep prevents you from seeing the multitude of symbols how she speaks loudly of the Resurrection."¹⁶ Death is the period of the soul sleeping. Sometimes this period of sleep is described as rest. By speaking of sleep in terms of overnight rest of the day laborers, Ephrem articulates his idea by stating that "just as in the eventide laborers rest, so do they rest for a time in death, until like sleepers waked from their sleep in the tomb, they shall don glory."¹⁷

Light Sleeper (a semiconscious knowledge) of the Soul at the State of Death

For Ephrem, the soul remains active even in sleep. The concept of *light sleeper* highlights Ephrem's position toward the issue of soul sleeping. He notes, therefore, *there could*

¹⁴ Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis*, Vol 91, 94; Sebastian, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns of Paradise*, 200.

¹⁵ Sebastian, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise, hymn 8, stanza 8*.

¹⁶ Ephrem, *Carmina Nisibena* LXV. 9, CSCO 103, 91.

- ¹⁷ Quoted from F. Gavin, "The Sleep of the Soul in the Early Syriac Church," in *JAOS*, Vol 40 (1920), p 105. The period of sleeping is often identified by Church fathers as the interim or intermediate period. The state of men's souls after their departure from the body and before the Resurrection of bodies at the Second Coming of Christ is referred to as *the intermediate state of souls*. Tertullian (d. 230) speaks about the interim state of the soul. To him, the period of death is viewed as the soul being in exile until the time of its Resurrection. Similarly, Origen (d. 253/4), in his *Dialogue with Heracleides*, speaks about the interim state of the soul. Hence, Ephrem also speaks of the soul in its interim stage.

be a semiconscious knowledge of what is happening, just like “a light sleeper.” At the state of death, “the body which diseases bring to an end—while the soul preserved in life, as it is now, [is] without corruption.”¹⁸ However, the soul at death will not possess its own senses since it is not united to a body wherein the senses can be actualized.

If the soul, while in the body, resembles an embryo and is unable to know either itself or its companion, how much more feeble will it then be once it has left the body, no longer possessing on its own the senses which are able to serve as tools for it to use. For it is through the senses of its companion that it shines forth and becomes evident.

The blessed abode is in no way deficient, for that place is complete and perfected in every way, and the soul cannot enter there [Paradise] alone for in such a state it is in everything deficient—in sensation and consciousness; but on the day of Resurrection, the body with all its sense, will enter in as well, once it has been made perfect.¹⁹

For Ephrem, the soul after the separation from the body (= death) is still endowed with the power of reason identified metaphorically as a light sleep, a semiconscious knowledge; however, the soul in this stage lacks any faculty of perception and memory of the past world. He argues in his homily *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan* that “if its companion left it when rational and went to sleep, it lost all its memory... when it entered the body and was clothed with their senses, then it gained perception, and it sees even in a dream because it has the body; but it loses its senses in death.”²⁰ He indicates although the soul has semiconscious knowledge, it loses its senses and all memory in death.

The Place of the Souls of the Departed

It is now understood that death means the split of the three elements of humanity between the body, the soul and the Holy Spirit. We know that the spirit returns to heaven, the body is deceased but the soul is still alive. Where will the souls of the departed go?

Ddelightful Mansions (ante-room)

Ephrem speculates about the fate of the soul after death based on the story of the repentant Thief who was crucified with Christ (Luke 23:39-43). When Jesus was on the Cross, he said to the repentant Thief, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43). At first glance, Ephrem imagined that he would be in Paradise; then immediately, he raised this important question: how could a soul enter Paradise without a body? For Ephrem, the soul without a body lacks perception to be able to know Paradise and lacks “true existence.”²¹

Blessed is the Thief who has freely received the keys to Paradise. I imagined that he was already there, but then I considered how the soul cannot have the perception of Paradise without its mate, the body, its instrument and lyre.²²

¹⁸ Ephrem, *Necrosima, Opera Omnia*, Rome, Ed. 4, p 225. Quoted from Gavin, “The Sleep of the Soul,” 105.

¹⁹ Sebastian, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise*, No 8, 133-34.

²⁰ St. Ephrem, *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*, cvii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, hymn 8, stanza 4.

²² *Ibid.*, hymn 8, stanza 2.

.... See how each looks and attests to the other, how the body has need of the soul in order to live, and the soul too requires the body in order to see and to hear.²³

.... Though the soul exists of itself, yet without its companion it lacks true existence; it fully resembles an embryo still in the womb, whose existence is as yet bereft of word or thought.²⁴

The soul cannot enter Paradise right after death for nothing imperfect enters Paradise; being separated from the body, the soul is in a state of deficiency in sensation and consciousness. He states:

That blessed abode [Paradise] is in no way deficient, for that place is complete and perfected in every way, and the soul cannot enter there alone, for in such a state it is in everything deficient—in sensation and consciousness; but on the day of Resurrection the body, with all its senses, will enter in as well, once it has been made perfect.²⁵

Then, the question remains, where is the soul going to await while sleeping from death to Resurrection?

In his *Hymn on Paradise*, Ephrem indicates that since the soul cannot enter Paradise without its body, it has to wait for the final Resurrection in an ante-room to Paradise.²⁶ He states:

Thus in the delightful mansions on the borders of Paradise do the souls of the just and righteous reside, awaiting there the bodies they love, so that, at the opening of the Garden's gate, both bodies and souls might proclaim amidst Hosannas "Blessed is He who has brought Adam from Sheol and returned him to Paradise in the company of many." of paradise to await his final bodily Resurrection.²⁷

At the opening of the gates at the end of time, the just and righteous souls will be together and will rejoice together. At the final Resurrection, the body and soul become perfect and, as a result, can enter Paradise, united.

The Imagery in the Story of Gehenna

Ephrem's work in the hymn cycle group named *Carmina Nisibena* gives a glimpse into the meaning of Gehenna. For him, Gehenna is described as a holding room of all souls, good and bad, until the final Resurrection. Ephrem makes no distinction between the place of good and bad souls after death; in fact, both types of souls go to Gehenna. The holding imagery of Gehenna is similar to the ante-room imagery.

Satan and Death are personified as guardians of the souls in Gehenna. Just like a guardian at the grave of the crucified Jesus, Satan and Death guard all the souls until Jesus descends and asks His souls to be freed from them. Here the guardianship is rather passive,

²³ *Ibid.*, hymn 8, stanza 4

²⁴ *Ibid.*, hymn 8, stanza 5.

²⁵ Sebastian, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise*, No 8, stanza 6-7.

²⁶ F. Gavin, "The Sleep of the Soul in the Early Syriac Church," JSTOR, 105

²⁷ *Ibid.*, hymn 8, stanza 11.

although portrayed through the foreboding figures of Satan and Death. Satan and Death must obey and fall to their knees when Jesus orders them to release all the captives.²⁸

The Imagery in the Story of Sheol

Similar imagery is found in the *Hymn on Paradise*; Ephrem narrates that “Adam’s Lord came out [of heaven] to seek him; He entered Sheol and found him there, then led and brought him out to set him once more in Paradise.”²⁹

Ephrem echoes the ransom theory elaborated by early Church fathers like Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Augustine of Hippo who all viewed the atonement as “Christus Victor” (the Victory of Christ). Essentially, this theory claimed that Adam and Eve sold humanity over to the Devil at the time of the Fall; hence, justice required that God pay a ransom to free us from the Devil's clutches. God, however, tricked the Devil into accepting Christ's death as a ransom, for the Devil did not realize that Christ could not be held in the bonds of death. Once the Devil accepted Christ's death as a ransom, this theory concluded, justice was satisfied and God was able to free us from Satan's grip.

The State of the Body and Soul at Resurrection

At the time of the Resurrection, “the body and soul enter again together.”³⁰ To Ephrem, the union of body and soul plays a crucial role in entering to Paradise. The final union of the body and soul echoes the Genesis story: “When Adam was complete, then the Lord took him and placed him in Paradise.”³¹ Similarly, at the Resurrection, a faithful being is complete since the soul returns to the body and enters Heaven reunited. As Adam in creation was not placed in Paradise until his body and soul were sanctioned, which resemble purity and perfection in God’s creation of man, similarly, “at the Resurrection they [body and soul] enter again together.”

Ephrem implies that death is akin to sleeping and awakening to the Resurrection: “One road, my brethren, lies before us all: from childhood unto death, and from death unto the Resurrection; thence branch out two ways, the one to the flames, the other to Paradise”³² Only at the final Resurrection, “the body with all its senses, will enter in as well, once it has been made perfect.”³³

The Final Judgment

Ephrem doesn’t mention where the souls reside after Christ’s conquest of death in Sheol or Gehenna. However, he gives a description of punishment for the wicked and reward for the good. He states “Behold how [the dead] are encompassed in Sheol, and awaiting the great day, till He comes to delight in them, and brings hope to the hopeless.” In *Carmina Nisibenus*, St. Ephrem makes a distinction between what he calls the flames and Paradise. “One road, my brethren, lies before us all: from childhood unto death, and from death unto the Resurrection; thence branch out two ways, the one to the flames, the other to Paradise”³⁴ He is herein clearly suggesting that Sheol is temporary, while Paradise and the flames are eternal.

²⁸ *Carmina Nisibena* 73, 11, 24-28; Gavin, “The Sleep of the Soul,” 105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, hymn 8, stanza 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, hymn 8, stanza 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Ephrem, *Carmina Nisibena* LXXIII. 4, CSCO 103, 110.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Carmina Nisibena* 73, 11, 24-28; Gavin, “The Sleep of the Soul,” 105.

The Letter to Publius, which mainly deals with the last judgment for the good and the wicked, begins with mirror imagery.³⁵ He denotes that the souls of the wicked will bear a terrible time in Gehenna. In the Letter to Publius 3, Ephrem further demonstrates this concept. Even the promise for the wicked will be grievous when they see their masters abased in stature.³⁶ On the other hand, Ephrem acutely describes the reward of the good stating that the judge of righteousness portrays all the riches in the treasure house for the divine children (Letter to Publius 6-8).

Solomon of Basra (13th century)

Solomon of Basra was the metropolitan of Prath d-Maishan (Basra) in 1222. In the Catalogue of Ecclesiastical Works compiled by Abdisho bar Brika, he is stated to have written a number of works but his main piece is the *Book of Bee*. It is a collection of theological and historical texts that consists of 60 chapters discussing various topics including the creation story, heaven and earth, the angels, darkness, paradise, Old Testament patriarchs, New Testament events, lists of kings and patriarchs, and the final day of Resurrection. A Latin translation of the *Book of Bee* by Dr. J. M. Schoenfelder appeared at Bamberg in 1866; it is based upon Munich MS only, and is therefore faulty in many places. An English translation made by Wallis Budge from four manuscripts is available online.

The State of the Soul after Death

In Chapter 56 of the *Book of Bee* called “Of Death and the Departure of the Soul from the Body,” Solomon of Basra doesn’t specify exactly where the soul abides after death till the time of Resurrection. He attempts to indicate various opinions that might be stated by Syriac tradition or Greek or Latin tradition.³⁷

- 1) Some would say that the departed souls “are taken up to heaven, the region of Spirit.”
- 2) The soul might go to “Paradise, that is to the place which is abundantly supplied with the good things of the mystery of the revelation of God,” and the souls of sinners lie in darkness in the abyss of Eden outside Paradise. This concept is held by Eastern Orthodox tradition.
- 3) The souls are buried with their bodies. Since souls are granted by God at the time of baptism, so in death the souls dwell in Him until the day of Resurrection. This concept was elaborated by Aphrahat (d. 345).
- 4) The souls will stand at the mouth of the graves and await their Redeemer, that is to say they possess the knowledge of the Resurrection of their bodies. This notion is attributed to St. Ephrem (d. 373).
- 5) The souls are in a state of deep sleep, which will account for a shortness of time; for some point out that what seems to us on earth to be a very long time is to those resting as if it is merely momentary. According to Syriac tradition, especially to Ephrem, the soul is in a state of sleep after Death and awaiting Judgment Day. After death, the souls have

³⁵ Letter to Publius, FC vol. 91, 336; Beck, Das Bild vom Spiegel bei Ephraem, in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 19 (1953): 5-24.

³⁶ Letter to Publius 3, FC vol. 91, 340

³⁷ Solomon of Basrah, the *Book of Bee*, E.A.W.BUDGE (ed. & ET), Oxford 1886, 132.

“an intermediate knowledge” which is a higher mental attitude than that of this world and yet do not attain consciousness until after the Resurrection.

- 6) Some say that departed souls are like infants which have no knowledge. Even knowledge of the truth by some faithful is ultimately ignorance in comparison with the intimate experience in knowledge of the truth which shall be bestowed upon souls after Resurrection. Solomon draws this concept most probably from early Syriac fathers such as Aphrahat, Ephrem, Book of Steps and Narsai.
- 7) Solomon draws a point from early Syriac fathers such as Ephrem, Aphrahat, and Narsai. As aforementioned, the early Syriac fathers described Adam and Eve before the Fall as *šabrē*, which we now understand does not convey the meaning of childhood or a single stage of life but rather it conveys the meaning of childishness, naivety, a lack of experience and a lack of discernment.

The State in which Men will Rise in the Day of the Resurrection

Solomon describes how the Resurrection is going to be. First, Elijah will come and conquer the son of destruction and encourage the believers, in a period of space and a time which is known to God alone. Then, the living sign of our Lord’s Cross will appear, honored and borne by Archangel Gabriel. Its light will overpower the light of the sun, to reproach and put to shame the infidels and the crucifying Jews. He quotes Theodore of Mopsuestia³⁸ who said that “Christ’s victory comes before Him.”³⁹ He goes on to say:

Then the first trumpet of the Archangel be heard, as typifies the parable of the wise and foolish virgin “At midnight there will be a cry, ‘Behold the Bridegroom comes go you to meet him.’” (Matt 25: 1-13). “At first trumpet, the sun shall become dark the moon shall not display its light, the earth shall totter and tremble, the mountains and hills shall melt and everything shall be destroyed except few human beings who shall remain alive, and whom the Resurrection shall overtake of whom Paul has said “We who are left shall not overtake them that sleep (Thes 4: 15), meaning to say that those who are found alive at the time of the Resurrection will not sleep the sleep of death; as the apostle says again “Behold I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed...

At the sound of the trumpet the firmament will be opened and our Lord will appear from heaven in splendor and great glory. He will come down with the glory of His divinity as far as two thirds of the distance between the firmament and the earth. It is the place where St. Paul was taken. (2 Cor 12: 2). Christ will make an end to the son of perdition, and destroy him body and soul, and he will hurt Satan and the devils in Gehenna.

³⁸ Theodore (350-428) was acclaimed in the late fourth and early-fifth centuries as the preeminent exegete of the School of Antioch as well as one of the most respected theologians of his day. He was honored by the authors of the Church of the East as the *interpreter*, one who became a model for subsequent East Syrian biblical commentators. According to tradition, Theodore’s works were translated into Syriac by Mar Ābā I and Thomas of Edessa in the early sixth century. However, the Syriac translation of Theodore’s writings along with the works of Paul of Samosātā, Diodore of Tarsus and Nestorius had already been carried out by ʾĪbas of Edessa (d. 457) with the aid of his contemporaries Probus and Kūmī. They also devoted themselves to the task of translating into Syriac the works of Theodore.

³⁹ Solomon of Basrah, the *Book of Bee*, 133-134.

The third trumpet is the last, at which the dead will rise, and the living will be changed, as St. Paul says, "Swiftly, as in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet when it sounds; and the dead shall rise without corruption, and we shall be changed."⁴⁰

According to the opinion of the faithful and general, widespread perception, the Resurrection of the whole human race will take place faster than lighting. The generation of Adam to the latest generation shall arise at the last trumpet. Solomon states:

For Christ will not make the world pass away before the vivification of the dead, but first he will raise the dead and men will see with their eyes the passing away of the world, the uprooting of the elements, and the destruction of heavens and the earth and the sun and the moon and the stars; and from here sorrow will begin to reign in the mind of the wicked and endless joy in the mind of the righteous.⁴¹

After elaboration on various modes of man's Resurrection, he states:

St. Paul shewed plainly and laid down an example of the Resurrection in the grain of wheat: just as that grows up entirely with all its glory, without any portion of it having perished, even so we; for the whole of man shall rise with all his limbs and parts, ordered in his composition as now, only having acquired purification from the humors. ***And this is not surprising, that if an earthen vessel acquires firmness and lightness when it goes into the fiery furnace, without any change taking in its shape or form but it is lightened of its heaviness and density, whilst it preserves its shape uninjured, so also should the Holy Spirit burn us in the furnace of the Resurrection and drive forth from us all the foul material of the present (life) and cloth us with incorruptibility.*** It is sown an animal body; it raises a spiritual body. We shall neither see nor hear with all our bodily members although some men have thought that the whole man will be sight and hearing; but we shall carry out action with these same usual limbs, if it happens to be necessary; although we shall not there need speech and conversation with one another, because each other's secrets will be revealed to us.⁴²

When we die, we undergo what is called the particular, or individual, judgment. Scripture says that "it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). We are judged instantly and receive our reward, for good or ill. We know at once what our final destiny will be. Solomon of Basra describes the condition of men after the Resurrection before the final judgment: "he (Christ) will raise the dead and men will see with their eyes the passing away of the world...and from here sorrow will begin to reign in the mind of the wicked and endless joy in the mind of the righteous."⁴³ He quotes from the book of memorials: "This world is the world of repentance but the world which is to come is the world of retribution. In this world, repentance is saved until the last breath, so in the world to come justice will be exacted to the uttermost farthing. As it is impossible to see here strict justice unmingled with mercy, so it is impossible to find there strict justice mingled with mercy."⁴⁴

Hence, at the end of time, when Jesus returns, a time of general judgment will come, to which the Bible refers, for example, in Matthew 25:31-32: "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be

⁴⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁴¹ Ibid., 135.

⁴² Ibid., 136.

⁴³ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 139.

gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." In this general judgment, all our sins will be publicly revealed (Luke 12:2–5).

Does the Church of the East Believe in Purgatory?

The Assyrian Church of the East has no formal doctrine about Purgatory as it is believed in the Roman Catholic Church.⁴⁵ However, it acknowledges that the souls undergo a process of purification after death, which is widely attested by Church fathers. In fact, Solomon of Basra quotes several of these forefathers. Solomon of Basra states that “the Holy Spirit burns us in the furnace of the Resurrection...”⁴⁶ In the *Book of Bee* Chapter 60, he raises a question as to whether mercy will be shown to sinners and the devils in Gehenna, after they have been tormented and suffered and been punished, or not. He makes references to Church fathers who allude to the cleaning and purification of the souls after death. He quotes Mar Isaac of Nineveh (7th century)⁴⁷: ***“Those who are to be scourged in Gehenna will be tortured with stripes of love; they who feel that they have sinned against the love will suffer harder and more severe pangs from love than the pain that springs from fear.”***⁴⁸ Solomon makes the following attestation based on Theodore of Mopsuestia’s writings:

Those who have here chosen fair things will receive in the world to come the pleasure of good things with praises; but the wicked who have turned aside to evil things all their life, become ordered in their minds by penalties and the fear that springs from them, and choose good things, and learn how much they have sinned, and by these things receive the knowledge of the highest doctrine of the fear of God, and become instructed to lay

⁴⁵ To the Roman Catholic Church, Purgatory is really a blessing, for not only does the soul know that it is destined for heaven but Purgatory purges anything from the soul which would limit its vision and enjoyment of God in heaven. Catholics base their beliefs on the doctrine of Purgatory on the Second Book of Maccabees (12:39-46), which tells of when Judas Maccabeus found pagan amulets on the bodies of dead Jewish soldiers – a sign that they had sinned by practicing idolatry. Judas “then took up a collection among all his soldiers....Which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice....Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.” The passage concludes: “It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead.” Catholics also claim that the New Testament speaks about Purgatory implicitly. In Mathew’s Gospel, Jesus says that “whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12: 32). They also quote St. Paul who taught that Christians who are less than completely faithful “will be saved, but only as it were through fire” (1 Cor 3:15). That metaphorical ‘fire’ is the purification of Purgatory. In the Book of Revelations (21:27), it is stated that “nothing unclean will enter” heaven. Hence for Catholics, Purgatory is a state of purification of all uncleanness—the effects of a lifetime of sins.

⁴⁶ Solomon of Basrah, the *Book of Bee*, 139.

⁴⁷ Isaac of Nineveh is considered the most famous Syriac monastic writer of the 7th century. He was born in Qatar and entered the monastery of Mar Matthew, along with his brother, near Ninevah, and received the monastic tonsure. He was consecrated bishop of Ninevah, near modern day Mosul, Iraq, around the year 670. However, after only five months as bishop, St Isaac resigned and went into the mountains to live with the hermits. Later, he went to the monastery of Rabban Shabur, where he lived until his death, attaining a high degree of spiritual perfection. Isaac devoted himself to writing on mystical themes that became a fundamental source for both Eastern and Western Christians. He died around 700 near Susa in Umayyad, Iran.

Isaac believes in the trichotomic conception of man. He writes that there are three elements in man: body, soul and spirit. Isaac calls the presence of this union of the elements a “Trinitarian union.” He writes, “prefer to make peace with thyself, in harmony with the trinity within thee: body, soul and spirit.” [Isaac, *Mystical Treatises* in A.J. Wensinck, *Mystical Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, ET of Bedjan’s ed. Of Syr. Text, Amsterdam, 1923; reprint Wiesbaden, 1969. 32; Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies* in D. Miller, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery’s ET from Greek Text and Excerpts from Bedjan’s Syr. Text, Boston, 1984, 32.]

⁴⁸ Solomon of Basrah, the *Book of Bee*, 139-140.

hold of it with a good will and be deemed worthy of the happiness of the Divine liberality. For He (Christ) would never have said, 'Until thou payest the uttermost farthing' unless it had been possible for us to be freed from our sins through having atoned for them by paying the penalty; neight would He would have said "he shall be beaten with many stripes," or "he shall beaten with few stripes" unless it were that the penalties being meted out according to the sins, should finally come to an end. These things the Expositor (Theodore) has handed down in his books clearly and distinctly⁴⁹

He quotes Diodore of Tarsus's⁵⁰ writing, saying:

A lasting reward which is worthy of the justice of the Giver, is laid up for the good, in return for their labors; and torment for sinners, but not everlasting, that the immortality which is prepared for them may not be worthless. They must however be tormented for a short time, as they deserve, in proportion to the measure of their iniquity and wickedness, according to the amount of the wickedness of their deeds; but immortal and unending happiness is prepared for them.⁵¹

God's Mercy overshadows the sinners of Gehenna

According to the above attestations, God intends to save everyone and God's mercy exceeds His Justice. Solomon goes on to quote Diodore of Tarsus: "God pours out the wages of reward beyond the measure of the labors (wrought), and in the abundance of His goodness He lessens and diminishes the penalty of those who are to be tormented, and in His mercy He shortens and reduces the length of the time."⁵²

Solomon considers the idea that the eternal ('alam) punishment for sinners in Mathew 25:46 is not everlasting. He says that the New Testament (*le-'alem* everlasting) is not without end."⁵³ He supports his position with the aid of Biblical verses: "... for if it be not so, how did Peter say to our Lord, 'Thou shalt never wash my feet,' (John 13: 8) and yet He washed him? And of Babylon He said, 'No man shall dwell therein for ever and ever,' and behold many generations dwell therein.' (Isa 13: 20)"

Does the Assyrian Church of the East believe in Toll-houses?

The subject of toll-houses is not specifically a topic of much discussion within the Assyrian Church of the East: it is not a dogma of the Church, but it comprises material of a moral and edifying character, and one might say is pedagogical. The "toll-houses" are the experiences of the Christian soul immediately after death, as described by the Fathers of the Church and Christian ascetics like John Chrysostom, St. Ephrem, St. Athanasius, John of Damascus and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁰ Diodore of Tarsus (d. ca. 390) was a Christian bishop, a monastic reformer, and a theologian. He was born in Antioch. During his priesthood, Diodore founded a monastery and catechetical school near the city of Antioch. It was through this school that Diodore became the mentor of the controversial theologian and liturgist Theodore of Mopsuestia and also of John Chrysostom. Diodore's works were translated into Syriac by 'Ības of Edessa (d. 457) with the aid of his contemporaries Probus and Kūmī. They also devoted themselves to the task of translating into Syriac the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia. A strong supporter of Orthodoxy in Nicaea, Diodore played a pivotal role in the Council of Constantinople and opposed the anti-Christian policies of Julian the Apostate. Diodore founded one of the most influential centers of Christian thought in the early church, and many of his students became notable theologians in their own right.

⁵¹ Solomon of Basrah, the *Book of Bee*, 140.

⁵² Ibid., 141.

⁵³ Ibid., 142.

others. Among the Syriac fathers, I'll provide attestation from St. Ephrem and Solomon of Basra's writings.

The departure of the soul from the body is a great mystery. We must keep in mind that there is a process involved in the passage from this life to the next. And, how we live here in this life determines our condition in the next.

As the soul departs from the body, something mysterious and terrifying occurs. We know from the Scripture that the soul will be tested as it passes from this life to the next. St. Paul tells us, "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). For those who are pure, nothing, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, not things present, nor things to come...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate [them] from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). They will be accompanied by angels into the Presence of God there to await the Resurrection and their eternal reward. However, for the souls of the unrighteous, the demons will meet them and taunt them for the passions which the person cultivated in this life through their "inspiration" and of which they never repented or overcame. The Church fathers especially of Greek tradition speak about the 'Taxing of the souls.'

We have to keep in mind the so-called toll houses are not material. Rather, they are the passions rooted in the soul and the demons who inspired their cultivation in our lives. The language used is only symbolic, but reflects an actual experience. These demons have no authority over the souls of the righteous since the righteous did not cultivate the demon-inspired passions but overcame them by God's grace. We should not be afraid of demons as long as we live in God's grace and attempt to repent and cure our soul and cleanse our minds and wills from defilements. While we are alive, we should always thereby live with the Church faith and do spiritual work to ward off such passions.

Ephrem makes a reference about the journey of the soul after departing from the body. He describes the hour of death and the hour of judgment at the toll-houses:

While the dying person addresses his last words to us, suddenly his tongue is at a loss, his eyes dim, his mouth falls silent, his voice paralyzed when the Lord's troops have arrived, when His frightening armies overwhelm him, when the divine bailiffs invite the soul to be gone from the body, when the inexorable lays hold of us to drag us to the tribunal... Then the angels take the soul and go off through the air. There stand principalities, powers and leaders of the adverse troops who govern the world, merciless accusers, strict agents of an implacable tax bureau, like so many examiners that await the soul in the air, ready to demand a reckoning, to examine everything, brandishing their claims, that is to say our sins: those of youth and of old age, those intentional and those not so, those committed by actions and those by words or thoughts. Great then is the fear of the poor soul, inexpressible its anguish when it sees itself at grips with these myriads of enemies, who stop it, push and shove it, accuse it, hinder it from dwelling in the light, from entering into the land of the living. But the holy angels, taking the soul, lead it away.⁵⁴

Solomon of Basra, in chapter 56 of the *Book of Bee*, describes what actually happens to the soul once it has departed the body. He states:

⁵⁴ J.S. Assemani, *Biblioteca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, vol 3, Roma, 1719-1728, 275-276. Excerpted from Jean-Claude Larchet, *Life After Death According to the Orthodox Tradition*, ET by G. John Champoux, Orthodox Research Institute 2012, 90-91.

When the soul goes forth from the body, as Abba Isaiah⁵⁵ says, the angels go with it: then the hosts of darkness go forth to meet it, seeking to seize it and examine it, if there be anything of theirs in it. Then the angels do not fight with them, but those deeds which the soul has wrought protect it and guard it, that they come not near it. If its deeds be victorious then the angels sing praises before it until it meets God with joy. In that hour the soul forgets every deed of this world. Consequently, no one who does not obtain remission (of sins) in this world can be free from the penalty of examination in that day. Not that there is torture or pleasure or recompense before the Resurrection; but the soul knows everything that it has done whether of good or evil.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The Fathers of the Church of the East have illustrated various theories about the concept of death and life after death. They have expressed their theological stands, in rich pedagogical ways that underscore the importance of living one's life on earth with morality, about: the distinction between soul and body and similarly even Spirit, the soul and its intermediary state, the period between when we die and the world's end, and life after death. Nevertheless, the Church of the East has never formulated a dogma, as has been expressed in Catholicism, which speaks expressly about Purgatory, and in Protestantism, which expressly maintains that once a person is saved, he/she will always be saved (or, in other words, once a person has confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and God and Savior, that person is and will be saved). Whereas the latter churches have a written dogma on the subject, the Church of the East leaves room for mystery.

In this article, we have attempted to illustrate how a deceased person may endure two types of judgements. Individual judgment focuses on what awaits each man after his death. When we die, we begin to immediately experience a foretaste of heaven or hell. This foretaste experience, based on the general character of our lives in regard to our behavior, character and communion with God, is known as the partial judgment. We do not know exactly what death is doing. But, our faith affirms that the last enemy, death, is destroyed in Christ. Christ is risen, and life lives.

On Good Friday, the stone was rolled in front of Jesus's tomb (darkening it), while on Sunday, the stone was rolled away (bringing about enlightenment) and the Resurrection of Christ takes place, which points to the non-finality of death. When death is viewed from a scientific and/or naturalistic standpoint, death signifies a terminable end; it is the final station of life and this ending is absolute. From the standpoint of the Christian, on the other hand, death is something more than mere sleeping. Death is the transitional state to a greater and richer mode of existence. Death is, therefore, akin to a period of sleeping that will lead to an awakening, to those who have faith. Why? Because, before witnessing the resurrection of our Lord, the Prophet Ezekiel had foretold this: "I will open your graves and have you rise from them." (Ezekiel 37: 12) What was dreamed about in the past has become a living reality through the figure of Jesus Christ. God, through opening the grave of his Son, and bestowing life upon those in the tombs, the bonds of death have been shattered forever.

⁵⁵ Abba ('Father') Isaiah, late 4th century A.D., author of Christian ascetical texts; from these it appears that he was a hermit who lived in the desert of Scete in Egypt.

⁵⁶ Solomon of Basra, the *Book of Bee*, 132.