

## Article

# Plato's Shadow: The Encroaching Doctrine of the Soul's Immortality in the Early Church

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**Abstract:** The influence of Plato's concept of the soul as innately immortal and indestructible had a profoundly unbiblical influence upon many of the early church fathers' views regarding human nature, the final judgment of the wicked, and God's gift of immortality to believers. I will argue my thesis by initially defining the nature of the soul according to the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, with an emphasis on its mortality. I will primarily utilize Scripture itself, although secondary sources—such as commentaries on the Hebrew and Greek versions—are essential due to interpretational differences. This will help to demonstrate how the Biblical view differs significantly from the Platonic view. Likewise, I will explore the Platonic view of the nature of the soul through the use of various primary and secondary sources. Additionally, I will use the writings of many early church fathers to highlight various instances in which the early church adopted the Platonic view of the soul and applied it to areas of their theology. Lastly, I will use both primary and secondary sources to make the case that the adoption of Platonic doctrine on the immortal soul has had an 'unbiblical' influence on how many Christians have viewed human nature, which alters the views of the final judgment of the wicked as well as the concept of God's gift of immortality to believers in Christ. Ultimately, I will argue that this issue is important because it affects how we see the character of God and is, therefore, related to how we worship him.

**Keywords:** immortality; soul; Christianity; Hellenism; church fathers; hell



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## 1. Introduction

Mortimer Adler beautifully wrote, "Love wishes to perpetuate itself. Love wishes for immortality". Immortality is the desire not only for the meaningfulness of perpetuity and continuance but, more specifically, for a joyous perpetuity and a perfected continuance. It is both quantitative and qualitative, yet the predominant meaning of immortality is a quantitative one. Therefore, the discussion on whether man is innately immortal and imperishable is of the utmost importance. This discussion of immortality usually takes shape in a narrower form, e.g., the immortal soul. What the soul consists of and whether it is perishable or imperishable has been considered for millennia.

Although the Greek philosopher Plato is the preeminent—through nuance and broad readership—voice on the nature of the soul, he is not the first to assert its innate immortality. Ancient Egypt may rightly be hailed as the birthplace of the view of the soul as an immortal, corporeal aspect of a person that lived on after death in an active and imperishable form (David 2003, pp. 116–18). This *Ka* resembles Plato's latter idea of the soul, yet with less nuance and definition. The purpose of this paper is not to trace the many varied conceptions of the soul throughout ancient history but rather to focus specifically upon Plato's conception of it as immortal and imperishable and discuss how this view was adopted by key early church figures of Christianity. Some limited discussion will also be given to how the adherence to the view of the soul as innately immortal and imperishable has specifically affected aspects of Christian theology, namely the fate of the non-believer. The overall structure of this paper is to address the Biblical view of the soul, contrasting this with Plato's conception, then to demonstrate that Plato's view was adopted by key

early church writers, as well as being rejected by other early church writers, culminating in a brief discussion on the way in which Plato's 'shadow' has affected Christian theology regarding the fate of the lost.

## 2. The Soul in the Bible

A remarkable fact worth considering is that in spite of the length of time in which the Israelites were captive to the Egyptians, the Hebrew Bible shows no sign of 'cross-contamination' from concepts of the Egyptian underworld or the immaterial *Ka*. Although there are clear examples of pagan influence regarding the soul and afterlife found within later Jewish apocryphal writings, such metaphysical postulations are absent from the Bible. To be transparent from the outset, this paper asserts the view that the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) does not have a Hebrew term that is analogous to the "soul" of Greek philosophy. Oftentimes, the word נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*) is translated as soul; however, this word also denotes the physical throat, life, people, and animals. The Old Testament contains the uniquely holistic definition of a living being (*nephesh*) as a term that denotes an entire living being. This is visible beginning in Genesis where, "Adam named every living creature (*nepes*)", or "The angels told Lot and his family to flee for their lives (*nephesh*)", or even the exhortation to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul (*nepes*) and with all your strength" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Genesis 2:19, Genesis 19:17, Deuteronomy 6:5). This final verse from Deuteronomy carries the powerful meaning of loving the Lord with all of your very self (*nephesh*). Although this is using "soul" in a different way—more poetic and more emotional—than the previous passages from Genesis, the fundamental meaning of the soul representing the whole entirety of a living being remains intact.

Professor of Religion and Humanities Angela Sumegi provides a helpful and concise summary of the uniqueness of the Bible's view of the soul:

*For Biblical traditions, God's role in human life and death would be compromised if the soul were naturally immortal. Both Jewish and Christian understandings of "soul" retained the emphasis on the whole person that comes into being due to God's life-giving action. Whatever immortality is attributed to the person is equally a result of God's action and not an intrinsic quality. Nevertheless, the notion of the soul continuing after death as a separate if immaterial entity does become entrenched in both Judaism and Christianity (Angela 2014, pp. 91–92).*

This quote emphasizes that the Bible does not view the person—nor any specific part of them—as "intrinsically immortal" but rather immortality can be granted through God's "life-giving action". This arouses the hope of the resurrection of the dead, which is how the Bible pictures immortality and the defeat of death. This hope is juxtaposed with the idea that the immaterial soul alone—due to its superiority as the seat of reason—is worthy of immortality, while the body is discarded as rubbish.

It is important to note that the Bible is clear that mankind was originally created for immortality before sin brought death into the world. Death is certainly two-fold in its meaning and its effect upon humanity. Sin brings spiritual death that harms the relationship between God and man; hence, Jesus declares that all must be spiritually "born again". The other meaning of death in Scripture is the death of the person as a whole, which the Bible depicts as the opposite of activity, thought, planning, etc. (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Ecclesiastes 9:10, Job 3:17, Psalm 31:17, 49:15, Isaiah 38:18). Qoheleth declares that "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit (*ruach*; God's breathe) returns to God who gave it" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Biblical Scholar Dr. Heber Peacock explains the Old Testament writer's usage of the word soul (*nepes*): "In a number of passages in the Old Testament it is clear that "soul " or "life" is not something that man possesses. The idea, rather, is that man as a whole is life; he is a living thing. This means that often the word for "soul" will have to be translated as "person" or "being" (Peacock 1976). When Greek mythology and Platonist philosophy think of the soul after death, they speak in terms of either activity, thought, freedom, or

punishment. However, as previously mentioned, the Hebrew Bible's concept of the realm of the dead is a place of inactivity and silence, void of thought or action. The word *Sheol* can rightly be translated as "place of the dead" or, more accurately, left as *Sheol*, which is a transliteration rather than a translation.

Other scholars have argued that *Sheol* carries a more nuanced meaning in certain passages in which the dead are akin to shadows or shades of their former selves. This is similar to the view of the dead found in Virgil's *Aeneid*: "Thus having said, the father spirit leads the priestess and his son thro' swarms of shades, and takes a rising ground, from thence to see the long procession of his progeny" (Virgil 2008, Book VI). The Catholic poet Dante mirrors Virgil's view of the dead in his *Divine Comedy*: "But all the shades, naked and spent with dool, stood chattering with their teeth, and changing hue as soon as they heard the words unmerciful" (Alighieri n.d., III:100). These descriptions of people existing in Hades as a shade of their former self is not what the Bible describes for those who go down to *Sheol* (place of the dead).

The overwhelming usage of *Sheol* in the Old Testament supports the interpretation of the realm of the dead as an inactive one, which exemplifies the opposite characteristics of human life and existence. As Qoheleth declares, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Ecclesiastes 9:10). Only in one passage of poetic irony is *Sheol* described as an active place of the dead: "The realm of the dead below is all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you—all those who were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their thrones—all those who were kings over the nations" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Ecclesiastes 9:10). This is an ironic statement intended to make a dramatic point. The irony is that *Sheol* is referred to uniformly throughout Scripture as a place of silence, with no thought or activity, and a place to which both the wicked and the good were destined, i.e., the grave (Ibid, Ecclesiastes 9:10, Job 3:17, Psalm 31:17, 49:15, Isaiah 38:18).

Lastly, *Sheol* is viewed by Biblical authors in a negative light because death deprives man of the opportunity of fellowship with and to praise God. King David—fearing for his life—laments before the Lord, saying, "Will Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave (*Sheol*), your faithfulness in Abaddon? Will Your wonders be made known in the darkness? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?" (Ibid, Psalm 88:11–12, 146:4). To David and the Biblical authors, the hope is to be freed from death, whereas to Plato, the hope is to be freed through death. The difference here is paramount.

The first-century Jewish writer and contemporary of Jesus, Philo of Alexandria, promoted a Hellenized conception of the soul and afterlife, which he described as being united with the other "unbodied" dead, who were "without composition". He also included the assumption of the immortality of the soul in his view of anthropology (Angela 2014, p. 92). However, confusion quickly emerges when attempting to find the soul in the New Testament. This confusion is a result of the New Testament authors using the Greek *psychē* as the closest fit for a concept of 'very self' or 'life.' Problematically, Plato uses the same term (*psychē*) to describe his profoundly different view of 'very self' or 'life' than that of the New Testament. Jesus, however, did not argue specifically for or against the concept of a disembodied soul, but he did address the soul's (life, *psychē*, ψυχή) nature specifically. He said that you could lose it, God can destroy it, and inquired what one would give in exchange for it (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Mark 8:36, Matthew 10:28). Christ's words in Matthew 10:28 are most essential to note: "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Hell (Gehenna)". The Greek word for "destroy", ἀπόλειαν (*appolumi*), used in this verse carries within the context the connotation of total destruction or killing. As Alexander Sand writes in his *Expository of the New Testament*, "Jesus juxtaposes God, who can destroy both soul and body with humans who can only destroy the body, but not the soul. God can destroy the entire person...not limited to earthly existence, but also the entire, actual life that God originally gives to a person" (Sand 1966, 3:502).

Jesus' words of destruction show that he did not view man's nature as innately immortal apart from God's grace. His words are mirrored by the Apostles when they speak about immortality as a unique gift of God. Paul writes of God's grace in his second epistle to Timothy, "Which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, 2 Timothy 2:10). This passage places death and life as opposites, with immortality as a gift now made possible through Jesus and the hope of resurrection.

The early church father, Irenaeus, extrapolates on this same concept: "It is the Father of all who imparts continuance for ever and ever on those who are saved ... [who] shall receive also length of days for ever and ever. But he who shall reject it ... deprives himself of [the privilege of] continuance for ever and ever... shall justly not receive from Him length of days for ever and ever" (Schaff 2001, pp. 411–12). Traditionalist scholars such as Phillip Schaff argue that Irenaeus is speaking of "continuance for ever and ever" in a qualitative sense rather than quantitative. However, the great student of Polycarp is writing these words with Psalm 21:4 in mind. In this Psalm, David is writing prophetically of the Messiah, saying, "He asked life of you; you gave it to him, length of days forever and ever". It is clear from the context that "length of days forever and ever" is used in the quantitative sense, just as Irenaeus uses it.

The Apostle Peter views the ψυχήν (soul; *psychē*) as 'something' that needs saving. He writes joyfully, "You believe in Him and rejoice with an inexpressible and glorious joy, now that you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, 1 Peter 1:8–9). It is most likely that Peter is asserting the need for the entirety of the human person to need salvation. Some traditionalist scholars—holding to the Neoplatonist view of innate immortality—would argue that this salvation is more a matter of 'soul placement,' i.e., where the soul will go after death is, therefore, a qualitative meaning of salvation. However, it appears more likely that Peter had his master's words in mind when he wrote this. Since Peter would have understood the soul as the entirety of one's being, he would have recalled Jesus' warning of the destruction of one's entire self (soul). Therefore, it is more likely that in the above passage, he writes of the salvation of one's entire self from destruction or perishing. This includes the quantitative sense of receiving the "length of days" (immortality) and the qualitative gift of eternal life, which the Apostle John says is to "know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, John 17:3).

Lastly, Old Testament and New Testament scholars hold varied positions on the meanings of both נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*) and ψυχήν (*psychē*); however, it is clear that the majority of Biblical scholars do not view either of these terms as representative of the immaterial and immortal 'soul' which Plato postulates. Although there is a majority position on the terms, not all scholars croon the same melody. Robert A. Di Vito, in his *Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity*, explains the conflicted landscape on the topic:

*James Barr has taken issue with this notion of the OT's "totality thinking" and its understanding of the person as a psychosomatic unity. His thesis is that in certain contexts, Hebrew נֶפֶשׁ is not a unity of body and soul or a totality of personality but rather does on occasion actually mean "soul" in something like the traditional sense (i.e., something which is immortal, the principle of personal unity, distinct from the body and at death finally separable from it). However, with few unambiguous data to support Barr's analysis and numerous biblical texts that, on his admission, speak of the death of the 'soul' one is unlikely to infer the meaning "immortal soul" from the use of נֶפֶשׁ in the OT without a predisposition to find it. What Hans Walter Wolff said on the subject a number of years ago remains valid, namely, that נֶפֶשׁ "is never given the meaning of an indestructible core of being, in contradistinction to the physical life, ...capable of living when cut off from that life (Di Vito 1999).*

Remaining in the realm of the Hebrew Bible: James Heller argues that the "soul" is best represented by נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*); however, he is not arguing that the Platonist conception

of ‘soul’ is represented by *nephesh*. Heller makes clear that *nephesh* “is the most comprehensive term for man in his wholeness, and its meanings range from neck, life, self, and person to what seems like the opposite of life, ‘corpse’ (Num. 19:13)” (Heller 1958). Additionally, Johannes Pedersen writes in regard to the Bible’s view that the *nephesh* can die, saying, “This does not mean *nephesh* means life or soul interchangeably” (Pedersen 1947, p. 179).

Regarding *ψυχήν* (*psychē*) in the New Testament, it is again important to note that the authors do not use *ψυχήν* as an equivalent to Plato’s understanding of the soul; therefore, there is no word in the New Testament for such a conception. This may seem like a strange argument; however, it is supported by the context of the New Testament passages themselves. When the authors of the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation use the term *ψυχήν*, they are not contemplating a separate and immortal essence of man. Hanhart observes, “The ‘soul’ does not stand in direct contrast to the body but signifies man himself whom God seeks and saves for eternal life” (Hanhart 1966, pp. 238–39). Jan Bremmer asserts that the ‘soul’ for the New Testament writers stood for “the natural life of man...in his limitedness and humanity over against the divine possibilities and realities” (Bremmer 1995, p. 3). Bart Ehrman agrees with Bremmer that the concept of a unique part of man that exists beyond death and apart from the body is not a Biblical view (Ehrman 2022). It might tenably be argued that such a view became part of the Jewish and Christian anthropological framework over the course of time; however, such a view cannot be properly identified as representative of Biblical anthropology nor of early Jewish or Christian thought.

### 3. Plato on the Soul’s Immortality

Many of Plato’s prognostications on the nature of the human soul may sound surprisingly familiar to the Christian reader who has never read a sentence of his dialogs. His views on the soul have had the most noteworthy effect on the minds of great Christian thinkers, such as Origen, Saint Basil, and Tertullian, to name a few prominent examples. Many of these Christian writers were steeped in Greek philosophy prior to their conversion to Christ, making the acceptance of Plato’s doctrines almost facile.

Plato’s understanding of the soul was nuanced, clear, and assertive. Within what is arguably Plato’s most influential and widely read book—*The Republic*—Socrates asks Glaucon, “But should an immortal being care about anything short of eternity?” To which Glaucon honestly replies, “I do not understand what you mean?” Socrates then—almost bemused—answers him, “Do you not know that the soul is immortal?” Glaucon answers with a degree of shock, saying, “Surely you are not prepared to prove that?” (Plato 1952b, p. 434). This short discourse between Plato and Glaucon demonstrates two things: Firstly, the concept of the immortality of the soul has not always been the entrenched view of the human being that it became following Plato’s popularization of the idea. Secondly, Plato was dogmatically confident that the soul is immortal, a confidence that grew even stronger with time. Plato argues the exact opposite of Jesus, asserting that nothing can destroy (*appolumi*) the soul. His reasoning in *The Republic* is that no bodily harm—which is an external force—can ever dissolve the soul since the soul has never even been destroyed by an internal force of evil, intemperance, ignorance, etc. (Plato 1952a, p. 435). After these thoughts, just a few short paragraphs later, Socrates victoriously declares, “The soul, I said, as is now proven immortal...” (Ibid, p. 436).

Perhaps, if most Christians today were in Glaucon’s sandals during a conversation with Socrates about the nature of the soul, they might find very little to debate. Maybe they would answer his question, “Do you not know that the soul is immortal?” with a reply such as, “Certainly!” Although this is obviously not true of all Christians today or throughout history—as this paper will expound upon—it might arguably be the consensus response.

Plato further developed the certainty of his view of man’s immortality over time. This becomes clear when reading the greater level of confidence with which he speaks of the subject in one of his later works entitled *Phaedo*. Indeed, Plato deepens the discussion of the immortality of the soul significantly in *Phaedo*. When Socrates’ friend Cebes states that he

is unsatisfied with the evidence for the existence of the soul after death—hence he doubts the soul’s immortality—Socrates responds with a long elocution which culminates with his statement, “And the same way it may be said of the immortal: if the immortal is also imperishable, then the soul will be imperishable as well as immortal” (Ibid).

Socrates speaks with his friends as he awaits his death sentence and illuminates the deeper implications of an immortal human essence with an argument that would sound very common to the modern Christian; he states, “But then, O my friends...if the soul is really immortal, what care should be taken of her, not only in respect of the portion of time which is called life, but of eternity!...if death had been the end of all, the wicked would have a good bargain in dying” (Plato 1952a, p. 246). How often are words akin to these preached from the pulpit with fine intentions, yet this logic completely misses the Biblical view of life and death as opposites, in that the latter is not merely an extension of the former in another form or realm? Admittedly, these are compelling words from Plato, as he draws the mind to eternal things, yet they are actually a diminution of God’s design of life and death found in the Judeo-Christian scriptures.

Within *Phaedo*, Socrates is vigorously engaged in discourse regarding the immortality of the soul and its actions following death with his visiting friends. The closeness of Socrates’ death could certainly be a factor that drove Plato to write with more detail and confidence regarding his belief that the soul will live on imperishable after death. Plato writes, “The soul is immortal because it contains a principle of imperishableness” (Ibid). This “principle of imperishableness” is the rational nature of the soul, which Plato thinks is equated with reason itself. Likewise, if the soul is the producer of life, it cannot be affected by death. Plato writes further on the immortal and rational nature of the soul, “That soul, I say, herself invisible, departs to the invisible world—to the divine and immortal and rational: thither arriving, she is secure of bliss and is released from the error and folly of men” (Ibid). A modern translator of *Phaedo*, Benjamin Jowett, states that “the truth is, that Plato in his argument for the immortality of the soul has collected many elements of proof or persuasion, ethical and mythological as well as dialectical, which are not easily to be reconciled with one another” (Plato n.d.). This quote reinforces Plato’s multi-pronged apologetic for the soul’s immortality.

In conjunction with Plato’s insistence on the soul’s immortal nature, he explains its superiority to the body in an answer to Cebes’ question of why suicide is thought to be wrong if death is thought of as good. Socrates explains to him that man is a prisoner of his body, and it is not fitting that he open the prison door himself and run away (Plato 1952a). This is a classic Platonist diminution of God’s created world, and in particular, the human being in his fullest form of existence. It is clear from Plato’s “prison” metaphor that he does not merely think the soul is superior to the body; he rather disdains the body. He demonstrates this in his dialog about the “true philosopher” with Simmias, “Would you not say that he is entirely concerned with the soul and not with the body? He would like, as far as he can, to get away from the body and to turn to the soul” (Plato 1952a). Likewise, “Is not temperance a virtue belonging to those only who despise the body, and who pass their lives in philosophy?” (Plato 1952a). This view of avoiding the body is further developed in *Phaedo*, with Socrates viewing everything from eating to sleeping to hearing as annoyances that interfere with the soul gaining wisdom. Plato asks, “Is the body, if invited to share in the enquiry, a hinderer or a helper?... Then when does the soul attain truth?—for in attempting to consider anything in company with the body she is obviously deceived...and thought is best when the mind is gathered into herself and none of these things trouble her—neither sounds nor sights nor pain nor any pleasure,—when she takes leave of the body, and has as little as possible to do with it, when she has no bodily sense or desire” (Plato 1952a).

The reason that this negative view of the body and physical life is so antithetical to Scripture is that it is truly an anti-life, anti-creation philosophy. At its core, it rejects the design and intention of God’s physical world, with its primary attack against ‘Adam’ himself. Also, Plato is wrong to insist that a person achieves greater truth when they “take leave of

the body"; rather, the opposite is true. Plato is saying that ignoring the desires of the body, including the attendance to physical necessities such as eating, sleeping, etc., allows the greater grasping of truth. While this is true in some instances, such as fasting, it is not true that his extreme version of a "life of the mind" achieves greater truth over a life that embraces the beauties that make existence lovely, adventurous, mysterious, and worthwhile, which are discovered and understood fully only when physical senses, relationships, love, passion, play, and adventure are involved. Plato, especially in *Phaedo*, depressingly limits life to merely the engagement of thought. However, a life of pure thinking is a profoundly unlivable life, which demeans the magnificence of God's created experience.

Plato's—and many other ancient pagan religions'—concept of death as a mere extension of life in another form is not the Biblical view. To cement the point, the rational and immortal soul—in Plato's perspective—is the most real and important aspect of the human being. Viewing the soul as consisting of three parts (reason, spirit, and appetite), he creates a hierarchy out of the three, in which the physical body (appetite) occupies the lowest stratum due to its prerogative toward physical desires. However, a disparate conception of physical creation is seen throughout the Bible, beginning with God's proclamation that his physical world and all the physical creatures within it were "very good" ([ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015](#), Genesis 1:31).

Lastly, imagine Plato's potential terror at the thought of all of his life's learning, thoughts, wisdom, and actions perishing upon death. For someone obsessed with the pursuit of knowledge and truth, to lose all continuity of his life's work would be a tortuously unthinkable proposition. While Epicurus and his followers might shrug at this proposition of perishing, with a distinguished sense of acceptance, Plato would likely shed a tear of sorrow. Indeed, spending eternity in Dante's Limbo—conversing with and questioning fellow minds of history—would likely please Plato's heart far more than truly be swallowed by a real death. A death in which words and questioning cease; a death in which the seeker has nothing more to seek (*Ibid*, Ecclesiastes 9:10). Plato approves of Cebes' reflection on this matter during their conversation recorded in *Phaedo*, "But if he (man) cannot prove the soul's immortality, he who is about to die will always have reason to fear that when the body is disunited, the soul also may utterly perish" ([Plato 1952a](#)). Thankfully, the Bible provides hope for those who fear the thought of perishing.

As has already been discussed, the Jewish/Christian hope is the physical resurrection from the dead of the entire person (body, mind, and spirit), and immortality is granted to those who place their faith in the Savior of the world. Paul wrote, "But it has now been revealed through the appearance of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" ([ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015](#), 2 Timothy 1:10). Likewise, Jesus spoke "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me but *raise* them up at the last day" (*Ibid*, John 6:39). The resurrection of the dead is the hope of immortality and eternal life with God.

#### 4. Justin Martyr's Early Resistance to the Doctrine

Justin Martyr (100 to 165 AD) is considered by some to be one of the first apologists of the post-apostolic Christian Church. He also treasured his background in Greek philosophy so dearly that he continued wearing his philosopher's robes following his conversion. His acclamation of Plato is enthusiastic as he grants a voracity to the sayings of Plato that seems to rival that of Jesus Christ:

*And I confess that I both pray and with all my strength strive to be found a Christian; not because the teachings of Plato are different from those of Christ, but because they are not in every respect equal...For each person spoke well, according to the part present in him of the divine logos, the Sower, whenever he saw what was related to him (as a person)... Whatever things were rightly said among all people are the property of us Christians. For next to God, we worship and love the logos who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God ([Martyr n.d.](#)).*

Although Justin Martyr revered the teachings of Plato and often interpreted Scripture through a Neoplatonist lens, he rejected the teaching that the soul was immortal. Fascinatingly, he explains that it was an old man who convinced him that the soul was not immortal. The old man approached Justin and inquired whether the soul was divine and immortal, to which Justin replied, “assuredly”. Then, the old man gave an argument to prove that the soul is not immortal which convinced Justin so strongly that he never recanted his new position on the matter. Justin records the argument in detail:

*Now the soul partakes of life since God wills it to live. Thus, then, it will not even partake [of life] when God does not will it to live. For to live is not its [the soul’s] attribute, as it is God’s; but as a man does not live always, and the soul is not for ever conjoined with the body, since, whenever this harmony must be broken up, the soul leaves the body, and the man exists no longer; even so, whenever the soul must cease to exist, the spirit of life is removed from it, and there is no more soul, but it goes back to the place from whence it was taken (Martyr n.d., Book IV).*

If this fine argument were reduced to its simplest form, it could be stated that God is the giver of life, both to the body and to the soul. Therefore, God can take away his *ruach* (life-giving breath) from both body and soul equally and easily. There is no special element to mankind apart from God’s life-giving *ruach*; we are God’s handiwork, and without his merciful granting of eternal life, we will perish with all the rest. Regarding the fate of the believer and the unrepentant, Justin eventually concluded that “Thus some which have appeared worthy of God (believers in Christ) never die; but others are punished so long as God wills them to exist and to be punished”. Here, Justin makes it clear that God is the guarantor of immortality.

### 5. Tertullian’s Dogmatic Stance

One of the most influential and fiery writers in the early church was Quintus Tertullianus. Tertullian—with his “devoutly ferocious” disposition—was profoundly influential in promoting both the concept of the soul’s immortality within the Christian Church during the beginning of the third century and had an equal influence in the development of ‘eternal suffering’—he called it eternal killing—as the punishment of the wicked (Farrar 1881, p. 232). Throughout his early life, Tertullian had been searching for truth and hoping to find true power in pagan philosophy. This went on for a considerable time since he was not converted to Christ until the age of forty. His tasting of the wisdom of the world left him thirsty for God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. The great irony of Tertullian is his staunch defense against pagan philosophy and yet his embrace of Plato’s teaching that the soul is immortal and imperishable. He famously said, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church? What have heretics to do with Christians?” (Tertullian 2014).

As already noted, Tertullian was firmly opposed to the entanglement of Greek philosophy in Christian theology. However, he was a nuanced and conflicted character who often spoke harshly against Plato’s teachings—calling him the father of heresies—yet incorporated the Neoplatonist view of innate soul immortality. Truthfully, Tertullian claims his view of the soul as immortal comes solely from Biblical revelation. He writes in his *A Treatise on the Soul*, “The soul, then, we define to be sprung from the breath of God, immortal, possessing body, having form, simple in its substance...” (Tertullian 2018, p. 41). Even more directly, Tertullian says, “I may use, therefore, the opinion of Plato” when he writes that “the soul is immortal” (Fudge 2011, p. 30). Tertullian’s understanding of the soul was the catalyst that formulated his view of the endless punishment of the wicked. His conception of the soul as immortal and indestructible led him to argue that it was only the physical body in need of salvation from death; therefore, the soul was not in need of salvation. He states, “It is not the soul which salvation will affect, since it is safe already in its own nature by reason of its immortality” (Tertullian 1881, 15:274). However, such unscriptural postulations would not go unnoticed. The Anglican theologian Henry Constable retorts that Tertullian introduces a language that is entirely absent from Scripture:

“They tell us that the soul is immortal and cannot die...that the wicked will never die, never perish, never be consumed, never be destroyed. To appearance, this language contradicts that of Scripture...What does it arise from? Surely the language of Scripture is sufficient to express the doctrine of Scripture” (Fudge 2011, p. 270). The Apostle Peter is also in opposition to Tertullian’s view of the soul not in need of salvation, as discussed earlier in reference to 1 Peter 1:9.

This discussion of the potential destruction of the soul is not a diversion from the topic at hand; rather, it is directly linked to the doctrine of the soul’s immortality. Contrary to Tertullian’s ‘eternal killing,’ the Bible speaks of the destruction (annihilation) of the body and soul as the ultimate punishment of the unrepentant sinner. As Paul reminds the Thessalonians, “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction (*apoleia*), away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, 1 Thessalonians 1:9). Contemporary theologian—and prominent proponent of conditional immortality—Dr. Edward Fudge explains concisely:

*We have seen this in regard to eternal salvation (not an eternal act of saving), eternal redemption (not an eternal process of redeeming), eternal judgment (not an eternal act of judging), eternal destruction (not an eternal process of destroying), and eternal punishment (not an eternal act of punishing). This punishment, more specifically identified as this destruction, will last forever. Those who are punished with everlasting destruction will cease to exist* (Fudge 2011, p. 41).

This may explain why Jude considers the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to be a pinnacle example to use in the explanation of the future judgment that awaits the wicked. Jude writes that Sodom and Gomorrah “serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire”. Their destruction was accomplished by the eternal fire. Clearly, that same fire is not burning in the land where Sodom once proudly stood, but the effects of the fire are eternal. The fire was not quenched (actively extinguished), but it naturally went out after its purpose was accomplished. There is a meaningful difference between the two previous connotations. Enough on this topic for now; there is a great need to discuss the most influential Post-Apostolic Father on the advancement of the doctrine of the innate immortality of the soul in early Christianity.

## 6. Origen’s Profound Influence

One of the most influential Christian paragons on the issue—and in support of the soul’s immortality—was Origen, nicknamed Adamantius, a name that literally means ‘man of steel. This superman of Biblical exposition was Clement of Alexandria’s prized pupil at the Catechetical School of Alexandria. What is ironic is that the strongly Hellenistic Clement rejected the innate immortality of the soul, yet his favorite student embraced it completely. Clement writes in his comments on the first epistle of Peter, “Hence it appears that the soul is not naturally immortal; but is made immortal by the grace of God, through faith and righteousness, and by knowledge” (Clement of Alexandria 2023). Clement here is worthy of emulation, as he refuses the influence of Plato and chooses to embrace the teachings of Peter at face value.

Although Christian theologians through the ages owe Origen a great debt of gratitude for his systematic theology and nuanced exegesis, he nonetheless perpetuated the unbiblical view of innate immortality in an impactful way. Plato’s shadow looms large over Origen’s thinking on human nature. Origen’s view of the origin of the soul is problematically unscriptural. In alignment with Plato, Origen writes in *De Principiis* that rational beings (disembodied souls) were punished with enslavement in physical bodies as a result of their rebellion against their creator (Origen 2013). Here, he directly borrows a position held by Plato and does not make any adjustments to it. Origen explicitly references Plato’s account of the pre-existent, immortal soul when discussing his nearly identical understanding of the doctrine. Suffice it to say, there is no plausibility that Origen arrived at the doctrine of soul immortality through a purely Biblical lens since his references to the Neoplatonist doctrine are clear and precise (Origen 1660).

Upon comparison of the accounts of the nature of the soul found in both Origen's *De Principiis* and Plato's *Phaedo*, the specific areas in which they parallel are striking. In both accounts, the soul exists independent of and prior to the body's existence; the soul escapes the body following death, and the soul is immortal and cannot perish (Martens 2015). Origen writes in his *Against Celsus* of the "rational soul" nearly verbatim of Plato. He repeatedly references Plato's *Phaedo* in his argument for the contrast between pure and impure souls, then relying on Plato's myth of the soul's ascent to argue that souls can take on "higher forms", which are angelic in nature (Origen 1660, 7:5, 8:50). These two references are specifically to *Phaedo* 80d-81d and 247b-c. Origen's direct reliance on and incorporation of Plato's teachings has led to many scholars referring to him as a "Christian Platonist".

The doctrine that Origen came to be most known for is *Universal Reconciliation* (*apokatastasis*). However, it has been notably argued that Origen is merely being inquisitive about the idea of all souls being eventually reconciled to God through Christ in his book *De Principiis*. Regardless of whether this book contained mere speculations or his actual beliefs on the subject, it is clear why he arrived at the conclusion of *apokatastasis*. Origen begins with the unalterable premise that the soul is immortal and cannot perish, which leaves him only two options for its destiny. The first option—perpetually impelled into the minds of Christians following Augustine's *City of God*—is the endless punishing and or conscious separation of the unrepentant sinner from God. The second option Origen is forced to consider is that God will use corrective punishment—endorsed as the preferred method of punishment by Plato in the *Republic*—to bring all mankind to repentance and trust in Christ's atonement. Certainly, this is a beautiful hope, however, universal salvation is somewhat scarce of transparent Biblical support. Indeed, Origen is cornered into accepting one of these two outcomes for human destiny.

### 7. Saint John Chrysostom: The Unwilling Proponent

John Chrysostom—The 'golden-mouthed' preacher of the East—held enormous influence both during his time as the Archbishop of Constantinople and throughout the centuries within the Eastern Orthodox Church and its tributaries. Chrysostom studied under the Greek sophist philosopher Libanius, through whom he gained a strong understanding of the pagan philosophies. Chrysostom clearly had a very low view of Plato and even mistakenly predicted the future obscurity of Plato's teachings, saying, "Where now is Plato?" and "Plato's teachings have been lost in silence" (Coleman-Norton 1930, p. 310). However, Plato's teachings became anything but obscure, and their influence has been felt for millennia. Ironically, Plato's most preeminently dogmatic postulation—the immortality and indestructibility of the soul—was the one teaching that Chrysostom admits into his own theology and preaching. It is unlikely that Chrysostom views his belief in the immortality of the soul as deriving from Plato's teachings; however, the influence had done its work in a way that was perhaps unnoticed by the great saint. When any person formulates a view on a complicated subject, there are a myriad of influences that direct the individual's thinking toward the end conclusion, and this often precludes the identification of one definitive influence.

Defense of the immortality of an immaterial soul is found within the homilies of Chrysostom. In his brilliant collection of homilies on the Gospel of John, Chrysostom's view of the soul is clearly seen: "That this was so is proven, also, by the fact that He granted us the "essence" (hypostasis) of the soul to be "forever immortal...The soul is of course a creation of God, but it is incorporeal, rational and immortal. As such it is superior to the material body and gives life to the body". Elsewhere, he echoes Saint Basil when he writes that man "was created neither totally mortal nor altogether immortal. Thus, if he had resolved to keep the commandment of God freely and without coercion, he would have received the reward of immortality of the body. But if he were to disobey the divine commandment, he would himself have become the cause of his death" (Ibid, pp. 16–218). Notice here that Chrysostom asserts the familiar misnomer, the distinction between the

body and the immaterial soul; because he holds that the soul is already inevitably immortal, he speaks of the granting of immortality to the body alone. This false distinction is the bedrock of this paper's thesis. The Scripture speaks of immortality of the person as attainable through the Messiah and does not endeavor to distinguish if such immortality applies to the body or 'soul'. This leads the careful observer to perceive that the Scripture does not view man in possession of a distinct entity that lives on apart from the body after death. The Bible alludes much to the immortality of the holistic human person yet speaks nothing of the immortality of the 'soul'. Nonetheless, certain church fathers such as Basil and Chrysostom speak of both the soul and body as distinct entities that possess or lack immortality. As Christian history progressed, influential figures would champion this distinction of the body and soul ever more ardently, and the 'giant' of theology discussed next may have held the strongest influence of all.

### 8. Augustine's Stamp of Approval

Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis (Saint Augustine) was steeped in Manicheism prior to his inspiring conversion to the Lord Jesus. In his earlier years as a Christian, he held a Neoplatonist, two-substance (dualistic) anthropology, with the soul seen as a "rider" on the inferior body or as a "lantern" to the body (Augustine 2006). Likewise, his cosmic dualistic views—as seen in the *City of God*—are also due to his strong ties to Neoplatonism (Brown 1967). Augustine thinks fondly of Plato's work as he expresses in his *Confessions*, "I found that whatever truth I had read [in the Platonists] was [in the writings of Paul] combined with the exaltation of thy grace" (Augustine 2013). Augustine sounds nearly verbatim of Plato in his explanation of why the soul must be immortal. He writes, "Consequently, if...the soul is a subject in which reason is inseparably (by that necessity also by with it is shown to be in the subject) neither can there be any soul except a living soul, nor can reason be in a soul without life, and reason is immortal; hence, the soul is immortal" (Augustine 2006, p. 306).

Augustine, however, was a humble theologian who was willing to consider other alternatives and even adjust his stances on various aspects of theology. In one of those moments, Augustine writes inquisitively and contemplatively on the concept of immortality and whether mankind—in the form of their rational soul—can truly perish.

Where a very serious crime is punished by death and the execution of the sentence takes only a minute, no laws consider that minute as the measure of punishment, but rather the fact that the criminal is forever removed from the community of the living. And, in fact, the removal of men from mortal society by the penalty of the first death is the nearest parallel we have to the removal of men from the immortal communion of the saints by the penalty of the second death, for, just as the laws of temporal society make no provision for recalling a man to that society once he is dead in body, so the justice of the eternal communion makes no provision for recalling a man to eternal life once he has been condemned to the death of his soul (Fudge 2011, p. 303).

Although Augustine views the soul as a specific aspect of an individual, which is different from the language of the Hebrew Bible, it must be admitted that his above words on the "death of the soul" are reminiscent of Jesus' warning in Matthew 10:28. In this language, Christ and Augustine are in agreement; however, that is not the normal way in which Augustine spoke of the soul.

Augustine majoritively spoke that it was a certainty that all people (both redeemed and unredeemed) possessed an immortal and imperishable soul. His most targeted work on this was *On the Immortality of the Soul*. Here, he writes definitively, "Since the truth can only exist in an incorporeal substance that is alive, and is inseparably connected with it as with its subject, this incorporeal substance, i.e., the soul, must everlastingly live" (Augustine 2006, p. 306). This concept once again borrows from Plato's view that the soul is the rational (truth-seeking) aspect of the person, and this cannot perish since it is 'reason' itself. William Patrick O'Connor addresses Augustine's logic for the soul's immortality in his work, *The Concept of the Human Soul According to Saint Augustine*. He explains, "The soul

of man is immortal because it is the seat of Reason which is immortal. Reason is another of those things which exists in the soul in an inseparable manner, but Reason can exist only in a living subject, and since it must exist always, its subject must be immortal, therefore the human soul is immortal" (O'Connor 1921, p. 60). Here, O'Connor explains that identical to Plato, Augustine bases his argument for the soul's innate immortality on the soul being the "seat of reason". Plato writes again on the soul as the, "But when returning into herself (the soul) she reflects, then she passes into the other world, the region of purity, and eternity, and immortality, and unchangeableness, which are her kindred, and with them she ever lives, when she is by herself and is not let or hindered; then she ceases from her erring ways, and being in communion with the unchanging is unchanging. And this state of the soul is called wisdom". This detached form of 'immortal reason', which Plato enumerates, is the foundation for Augustine's earlier statement that truth must be immortal and, therefore, the soul. The arguments are varied and complex, yet it is abundantly obvious that Augustine's stream of logic regarding the soul's innate immortality stems from Plato directly.

Even though Augustine was in agreement with Plato in many regards, he did vary from Plato's view in one important manner: when he spoke of the immortal, immaterial soul, he always viewed it as being necessarily connected with the body. His Christian faith forbade him from accepting the view that the soul's proper place could be apart from the body, nor that the soul should endeavor to escape the body as soon as death provides that opportunity. Because of this nuance in Augustine's view, he believes it is the resurrected man (body and soul) that is immortal (Augustine 2021). He applies this to both saved and lost individuals; hence the famous dualistic premise of *City of God*, which has affected centuries of Christian thought on eschatology (Augustine 2009, pp. 46–60). Augustine scores a victory for Christian anthropology here and is owed a debt of gratitude for insisting on the hope of the physical resurrection of the dead. He writes of Christ's death and resurrection securing our hope of eternal life with God, "Therefore, for this double death of ours the Savior paid out His own single death; and to affect our resurrection too, He set before and offered His own one resurrection both as a sacrament and as an example" (Alfeche 1986).

### 9. Plato's Doctrine and the Fate of the Unsaved

From time immemorial, the preacher sincerely warns attentive ears of the choice between the two eternal destinies of their soul: Heaven or Hell. The preacher is cornered into this view of 'soul placement' not because it is the best interpretation of the Scripture's teaching on the final judgment but because the soul is assumed immortal, and therefore, it must always exist in one of these two conditions. If the soul cannot be destroyed, as Jesus clearly warns that it can, then it must be placed somewhere in some eternal state of existence. This view—regardless of how popularized—may not necessarily be the best understanding of the final judgment according to Scripture. However, Plato's influence on the early church and its subsequent momentum has made alternative readings of the Scripture unnecessarily difficult.

Theologian and Presbyterian minister W.G.T. Shedd writes with a hint of confusion—in his work *Dogmatic Theology*—of the inescapable reality of the immortality of the soul. He writes:

*But irrepressible and universal as it is, the doctrine of man's immortality is an astonishing one, and difficult to entertain. For it means that every frail and finite man is to be as long-enduring as the infinite and eternal God; that there will no more be an end to the man that died today than there will be of the Deity who made him. God is denominated "The Ancient of Days". But every immortal spirit that ever dwelt in a human body will also be an "ancient of days" ... Yes, man must exist. He has no option. Necessity is laid upon him. He cannot extinguish himself. He cannot cease to be.*

The way in which Shedd marvels at the admitted difficulty of this concept speaks for itself. Yet, this Neoplatonist doctrine leads him to devote fifty-six pages of his *Dogmatic*

*Theology* to arguing for the conscious eternal tormenting of the soul as the only option for unrepentant sinners.

Another alternative that has been proposed as a viable reading of the Scripture's warnings of the final judgment of the lost is that of conditional immortality, also called annihilationism. This is no new wind of doctrine; rather, its breeze of thought had blown strongly in the third century with Arnobius. Arnobius arrives at his view primarily due to his rejection of the view of the soul as immortal. He asserts candidly in his *1st Disputation Against the Pagans* that Christ has made possible the immortality that many had supposed they already possessed. Likewise, he speaks of the nature of death as an evil that "ends all things" and "takes away life from every sentient being" (Arnobius 1949, 64:8). Additionally, he writes of what he considered to be a "debate" on the issue of the immortality of the soul, in his *2nd Disputation Against the Pagans*: "Thence it is that among learned men, and men endowed with excellent abilities, there is strife as to the nature of the soul, and some say that it is subject to death, and cannot take upon itself the divine substance; while others maintain that it is immortal and cannot sink under the power of death.... because, on the one hand, arguments present themselves to the one party by which it is found that the soul is capable of suffering, and perishable; and, on the other hand, are not lacking to their opponents, by which it is shown that the soul is divine and immortal" (Ibid, 31:2–3). Here, Arnobius helps the modern scholar to glimpse the nature of the debate on this important issue. Once again, the purpose of this paper is not to propose a thorough argument for the view of conditional immortality but rather to demonstrate how this view is not able to receive even the remotest consideration if the doctrine of the soul's immortality is given unwavering allegiance.

Scripture uses fire as the method of God's judgments upon the wicked. In the majority of cases, this fire is a consuming fire. In fact, God himself is referred to in the book of Hebrews as a consuming fire, "Our God is a consuming fire" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Hebrews 12:29). The writer of Hebrews may have had Psalm 97:3 in mind as he wrote the previous passage. The psalmist explains of God, "Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around". Hebrews 10:27 speaks of the fate of those who continue in sin, saying, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume God's adversaries". Lastly, hear the words of Jesus' forerunner John the Baptist as he speaks of the Messiah's judgment on the unrepentant, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire" (Ibid, Matthew 3:12). This unquenchable fire is said to consume God's adversaries, yet the fire is often referred to as eternal, which has caused significant confusion for Bible students for two millennia.

An understandable leap of thought for a reader of "eternal fire" might be to assume that the fire must be eternal to properly accommodate the immortal souls that it will engulf. There is, however, a more contextually faithful explanation. For this explanation, it may prove helpful to examine a larger context of not only the eternal fire but to include the Biblical meaning of destruction and perishing. Theologian John Stott has a helpful explanation:

*The vocabulary of 'destruction' is often used in relation to the final state of perdition. The commonest Greek words are the verb *appolumi* (to destroy) and the noun *apoleia* (destruction). When the verb is active and transitive, 'destroy' means 'kill', as when Herod wanted to murder the baby Jesus and the Jewish leaders later plotted to have him executed (Mt 2:13, 12:14, 27:4). Then Jesus himself told us not to be afraid of those who kill the body and cannot kill the soul. 'Rather', he continued, 'be afraid of the One [God] who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Mt 10:28); cf. Jas 4:12). If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being. When the verb is in the middle, and intransitive, it means to be destroyed and so to 'perish', whether physically of hunger or snakebite (Lk 15:17; 1 Cor. 10:9) or eternally in hell (e.g., Jn 3:16, 10:28, 17:12; Rom. 2:12; 1 Cor. 15:18; 2 Pet.*

3:9)... The fire itself is termed 'eternal' and 'unquenchable', but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed forever, not tormented forever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which 'rises for ever and ever' (Rev 14:11; cf. Rev 19:3).

This opinion—which Stott arrived at over decades of study and ministry—brought upon him the scorn and ostracization by many in the same evangelical community that he helped to revive and solidify during the second half of the twenty-first century.

Once again, there is no space for a thorough defense of conditional immortality, rather simply an abbreviated opportunity to assert that Plato's shadow has loomed large over this area of Christian theology. One last brief confabulation on the Bible's view of the final punishment of the unrepentant is in Matthew 8:29, where the demons cry out to Jesus, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment (*basanisai*) us before the time?" This *basanisai* is the Greek word for torment or torture. Therefore, there is indeed a word to easily describe torment; the question is, why do the inspired writers of the New Testament not use it anywhere, with the sole exception of Revelation 14:10-11, when they write of the punishment of the unsaved in over forty instances? This question is not semantic, rather, it is essential in understanding how the Scripture speaks of God's judgments on the unrepentant and the view of man's nature as mortal. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul could have just as easily written, "They will be punished with everlasting torment (*basanisai*)", yet he does not. If the meaning of destruction was actually torment—as Neoplatonist-leaning scholars often infer—then this is an embarrassing blunder on Paul's part. However, the truth is that Paul was well aware of *basanisai* as a word choice and instead chose to intentionally express the concept of *appolumi*, which denotes utter destruction, death, and killing.

Likewise, in the Hebrew Old Testament, the inspired writers could have chosen to say, "the soul (person) that sins shall *te'une* (be tortured)", yet it does not. *Te'une* is a word choice that the Hebrew authors could have used to describe the torture of the wicked; however, they choose the words *ta-mut* (die) and (*le-hi-sha-me-dam*) destroyed, annihilated. "Behold, all souls (*han-ne-fesh*; living beings) are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die (*ta-mut*)" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Ezekiel 18:20). Likewise, "...though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be destroyed (*le-hi-sha-me-dam*) forever" (Ibid, Psalm 92:7).

When scholars adhering to the doctrine of the immortal soul examine many of these above passages in the Hebrew Bible, they are unknowingly coerced into viewing these statements of destruction as only applicable to a physical judgment. Thus, they create a distinction between the judgment of the body and the judgment of the immortal soul. However, this distinction is a misnomer. Such a distinction is not asserted within the Bible. This distinction is likely produced as an honest attempt to deal with the implications of the immortal soul and how it is to be punished. Therefore, passages that promise that the "wicked will be destroyed forever" (ESV Reformation Study Bible 2015, Psalm 92:7) must be explained as references to physical judgment only; the distinction originates with the underlying assumption of the soul as immortal and imperishable.

## 10. Conclusions

Plato's doctrine of the immortal and imperishable soul has greatly influenced Christian thought on the nature and destiny of man. Although there were very early Hellenistic church leaders such as Justin Martyr who did not accept this teaching nor its implications, as the third century approached, a dramatic shift in thought on the nature of the soul took place. Historian of early Christianity, K.R. Haugenbach, argues that before Clement of Alexandria, eighteen prominent Christian writers were Conditionalists (believers that immortality is conditional upon faith in Christ), and only one prominent writer who held that the soul of both believers and nonbelievers was immortal and imperishable (Tertullian). However, following the rise of Origen, the above numbers reversed dramatically, sustaining only two prominent Conditionalist authors and eight who held to the doctrine

of the immortal soul (Haugenbach 1880, p. 233). This “shift” in thinking is an example of the power of an idea and its ability—through able champions—to alter the thoughts of the majority to accept a convincing, albeit scripturally questionable doctrine.

Thomas Gilmartin explains in his work, the *Manual of Church History Volume II*, a view that considers the Alexandrian Church Fathers to be Christianity’s “ablest champions”, waging a spiritual and intellectual battle with the philosophical creeds of the pagan world (Gilmartin 1890). Indeed, the Alexandrian Fathers were staunch defenders of the Christian faith and bold in the face of pagan mockery and heresy. Yet, sometimes, in war, one side may ingest methods or strategies from the opponent. For all of their preeminent contributions to early Christianity, it was these great men who opened the door to a doctrine that would impact Christian anthropology and eschatology for millennia to come. Future geniuses of theology, such as Thomas Aquinas, would help to further cement Plato’s doctrine as the correct view of the soul.

Likewise, the Roman Catholic Church made great efforts to stifle opposing viewpoints regarding the soul’s immortality. By the sixteenth century, the view of the soul as mortal and perishable would be ‘officially’ condemned as heresy. During the Council of Lateran, Leo X issued the *Apostolici Regiminis*, which condemned any proponents of theological views that did not accept the immortality of the soul, stating “...all who adhere to such erroneous assertions shall be shunned and punished as heretics” (US Catholic Church 1995, pp. 32–36). The later reformer, Martin Luther, spoke rebelliously on the matter, saying that the doctrine of the immortal soul was one of the “monstrous fables that form part of the Roman dunghill of decretals” (Luther 2012, pp. 131–32).

Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine were the post-apostolic fathers who had the most profound influence on carrying Plato’s doctrine into Christianity. This itself has had a significant impact on Christian theology in the scholarly realm and among laypersons alike. This was not done as an intentional attempt to undermine Scripture teaching on the nature of man, death, or final punishment, yet it had a significant impact on all three of those areas. The transmission of the doctrine into the early church was done via osmosis, through Biblical commentaries, written debates, and other theological works from the pens of well-intentioned Hellenistic Christian leaders. There is no injury in the varied views and interpretations of Scripture that do not harm the core doctrines of the faith. However, there are always inevitable repercussions to the inclusion of a ‘foreign substance’ into the body.

In the last decade, the debate among theologians has intensified over whether the immortality of the soul is an authentic Christian teaching. Traditionalist theologian Larry D Pettegrew confidently asserts that “The traditional doctrine of the immortality of the soul is correct”. He goes on to say that “The Westminster Confession states the doctrine simply: ‘After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls’” (Fudge 2011, p. 23). On the other hand, F.F. Bruce warns that our “traditional thinking about the ‘never-dying’ soul, which owes much to our Greco-Roman heritage makes it difficult to appreciate the Apostle Paul’s point of view” (Fudge 2011, p. 28). Likewise, Anthony A. Hoekema says that “we cannot point to any inherent quality in man or in any aspect of man that makes him indestructible” (Ibid). Regarding the future of this debate over the immortality of the soul, Dr. Edward Fudge presents a keen observation to close with: “Although the doctrine that every soul is immortal is still the majority view, it is increasingly regarded as a post-apostolic innovation...the feeling persists that something does not fit” (Fudge 2011, p. 23).

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