



Article

Asceticism in Old English and Syriac Soul and Body Narratives

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Abstract: A great deal of scholarship on Old English soul-body poetry centers on whether or not the presence of dualist elements in the poems are unorthodox in their implication that the body, as a material object, is not only wicked but seems to possess more agency in the world than the soul. I argue that the Old English soul-body poetry is not heterodox or dualist, but is best understood, as Allen J. Frantzen suggests, within the “context of penitential practice.” The seemingly unorthodox elements are resolved when read against the backdrop of pre-Conquest English monastic reform culture, which was very much concerned with penance, asceticism, death, and judgment. Focusing especially on two anonymous 10th-century Old English poems, *Soul and Body I* in the *Vercelli Book* and *Soul and Body II* in the *Exeter Book*, I argue that both body and soul bear equal responsibility in achieving salvation and that the work of salvation must be performed before death, a position that was reinforced in early English monastic literature that was inspired, at least in part, by Eastern ascetics such as fourth-century Syrian hymnologist and theologian, St. Ephraim.

Keywords: poetry; hymns; Near East; Old English; Syriac; theology

1. Introduction

Scholarship on Old English soul and body narratives largely assumes a kind of dualism whereby the body is an inherently corrupt material object that has more agency than the soul. I argue against this interpretation by suggesting that there is no dualistic inversion of the body-soul hierarchy if one reads these narratives in the context of penitential Christian practice informed by Eastern asceticism. Building on scholarship that focuses on body-soul narratives in Western and Eastern medieval cultures, I examine two anonymous 10th-century Old English poems, *Soul and Body I* in the *Vercelli Book* and *Soul and Body II* in the *Exeter Book*, in order to demonstrate that both body and soul bear equal responsibility in achieving salvation, a position that was reinforced in pre-Conquest English monastic literature by Eastern theologians such as fourth-century Syrian hymnologist and theologian, St. Ephraim.

I will begin by briefly discussing Eastern analogues to Western versions of body-soul and afterlife narratives before transitioning into a more detailed discussion of how and when Ephraim’s works were introduced into pre-Conquest England. I will then analyze ascetic themes in *Soul and Body I* and *II* and Ephraim’s hymns and prose works, including Hymn 69 in *Carmina Nisibena*, a poem that features a body and soul who take each other to court. What Ephraim’s hymns make explicit—and what the Old English poems only imply—is that body and soul learn that they are both to blame because each possesses free will. It is original and individual sin, therefore, that separate body from soul and set them at odds with one another and with God. The Syriac ascetic tradition, in which Ephraim was writing, posits that there is no conflict between soul and body, as the work of salvation is equally spiritual and physical and can best be achieved when body and soul work in concert to pray, fast, and perform penance. This, of course, appealed to the English monastic culture that produced *Soul and Body I* and *II*.

In the final section, I will argue that *Soul and Body I* and *II* are penitential rather than dualistic¹ poems because they emphasize the importance of doing the work of salvation before death. I will note how the poems' exclusion of purgatory in the description of the space between death and judgment reflects an ascetic understanding of the process of salvation that underscores the importance of working toward salvation before death. Purgatory, which was imagined as a place of transient post-mortem punishment and purification that prepared imperfect souls for heaven, allowed the salvation process to continue long after death. This concept originated in the Near East, took root in pre-Conquest England, and gained currency in the Middle Ages until it became doctrine in 1215. I argue that the body-soul poems' implicit rejection of purgatory, despite its growing popularity in religious and popular culture in the Middle Ages, not only reflects Ephraim's influence, but firmly situates this body of Old English literature in the context of penitential Christian literature that is heavily influenced by Eastern asceticism.

2. Soul and Body Narratives in Medieval England

The relatively large number of extant texts and text fragments that feature soul-body narratives in pre-Conquest England and in the later Middle Ages, attest to their popularity and importance in the Western Christian tradition. These narratives typically feature a soul addressing its body either shortly after death, at the Last Judgment, or at regular interludes during the body's taphonomic process.² The body-soul-themed narratives are written in both verse and prose and are generally classified as debate literature, despite the body's non-verbal responses to the soul's diatribe in earlier versions.³ Although body-soul stories have their roots in the ancient Near East, developing "within the Middle Eastern, especially Mesopotamian, debate genre, the oldest examples of which date as early as the end of the third millennium B.C."—the mostly likely source for Old English body-soul narratives is a Latin translation from Greek of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, also known as the *Visio Pauli*, which features the prophet's underworld encounter with good and sinful souls.⁴ The earliest vernacular attestations of the body-soul theme in Western European literature are in Old English⁵ and include at least four homilies, a riddle, as well as poems and poetic fragments.⁶

Of the many extant Old English soul-body debate texts, I will focus on *Soul and Body I* in *The Vercelli Book* and *Soul and Body II* in *The Exeter Book*. These anonymous works were set down in writing in the second half of the 10th century and are among the most often published poems in this tradition. Although *Soul and Body I* and *II* likely have earlier composition dates, their compilation in the *Exeter* and *Vercelli* codices sets them firmly within the context of the Benedictine Reform, and as such, were

¹ The term dualist (or dualism) in this essay refers to anthropological dualism, which posits a distinction between the body as a material object and the soul as spirit, favoring the latter. While many past readings of the soul-body poems focus on the seemingly heterodox inversion of the soul-body relationship, whereby the body is cast as an all-powerful corrupting agent, I argue that the address of the saved soul to its body refutes this reading. The good soul's speech depicts the body as an active agent in the process of salvation because of the penitential life it led while alive. Rather than reading this poetry solely through the lens of heterodox dualism, it can be better understood, perhaps by considering its emphasis on the importance of penance as a means of salvation. For more information about anthropological dualism in soul-body poetry and the emphasis on penance in process of salvation, see (Riyeff 2015, pp. 455–56).

² (Willard 1935, p. 965).

³ For a fuller treatment of this argument, see (Ferguson 1970, pp. 72–80).

⁴ (Di Sciaccia 2006, pp. 366–67). Additionally, see (Batiouchkof 1981); (Brock 1989); and (Brock 2013, pp. 9–10); and see Rudolph Willard's article, which mentions that there are Greek, Syriac, and Slavic analogues to the western versions of the *Visio Pauli* and the *Soul and Body* poems (p. 967). See (Willard 1935).

⁵ (Di Sciaccia 2006, p. 367).

⁶ See (Moffat 1987, pp. 39–51); (Willard 1935); and (Heningham 1940) for more detailed discussions about manuscripts that contain soul and body narratives; see Heningham "Old English Precursors of the Worcester Fragments" for more information about the "Soul's Address to the Body" from the Worcester Fragments and for a full list of publications of Old English homilies that include body-soul narratives, including: homilies in Corpus Christi College, MS. 201; from Bodleian Library, MS. Hatton 113 (*Junius 99*); from MS. *Junius 85*, fol. 2v ff.; from Cambridge University, MS *li.1.33*; from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 302 and MS 41 and MS. 367; and from British Museum, MS. *Cotton Faustina A 9*; also, see Riddle 43 in *The Exeter Book*, which focuses on the soul and body as its subject.

likely influenced by Reform ideas, that emphasized penance, contemplation, and prayer.⁷ *Soul and Body I* and *II* both feature a damned soul returning to its body once a week in order to chastise it for its sinful behavior while alive.⁸ *Soul and Body I* is slightly longer and includes an address by a saved soul to its body at the end of the narrative. *Soul and Body I* and *II* include grisly details about the punishments which the damned body undergoes as a result of its earthly transgressions. In line 65 in *Soul and Body I* and line 60 in *Soul and Body II*, the soul reminds the body of its helplessness in death: “Eart ðu nu dumb ond deaf, ne synt þine dreamas awiht [You are deaf and dumb—you no longer possess any of your joys].” Unable to speak or comfort the damned soul who berates the body for its suffering in hell six days of the week, *Soul and Body* ends with the body’s silent statement of isolation and decay:

Bip þæt heafod tohliden, honda tohleopode,
geaflas toginene, goman toslitene,
seonwe beoð asogene, sweora bicowen;
rib reafiað reþe wyrmas,
drincað hloþum hra, heolfres þurstge.
Bið seo tunge totoƿen on tyn healfe
hungrum to hroþor. Forþon heo ne mæg horsclice
wordum wrixlan wið þone wergan gæst. . .
Bið þonne wyrmes giefl, æt on eorþan. (*Soul and Body II* [10th century] 1936, p. 177)

[Its head is broken open, hands corrupted,
jaws gaping, throat torn apart,
sinews sucked out, neck gnawed up,
ribs ravaged by fearsome worms,
drinking the corpse in plunder, thirsty for gore.
That tongue has been devoured in ten directions,
hungrily as their sole comfort—
therefore it cannot so briskly bandy
about words with that accursed spirit. . .
Now it is a dish for worms, eaten in the earth]. (*Soul and Body II* [10th century] 1936, p. 177)

In *Soul and Body I*, the above description is followed by a passage where the saved soul comforts and thanks its decaying body for sacrificing earthly pleasures for heavenly reward. The saved soul assures its body that its suffering in the grave is temporary and that they will be united in heaven on Judgment Day (*Soul and Body I* [10th century] 1932, p. 58).

The emphasis in both poems is eschatological. Upon death, souls are immediately judged and confined to an interim state of either reward or punishment until they are sorted into heaven or hell after a second universal judgment at the end of time. Penance, therefore, should be completed before death, as the poems offer no evidence of a penitential middle state in the afterlife for imperfect souls. In *Soul and Body I* and *II*, the soul visits its body at the grave every seventh night and must return to a place of punishment (or reward, if saved) for the remainder of the week:

Sceal se gast cuman geohðum hremig,
symble ymbe seofon niht sawle findan
þone lichoman þe hie ær lange wæg,
þreo hund wintra, butan ær þeodcyning,

⁷ (Moffat 1987, p. 6); Additionally, for a discussion about *The Exeter Book*’s dates of compilation and its connection with the Benedictine Reform (focusing specifically on ‘wisdom’ poetry), see (Drout 2007).

⁸ All citations of *Soul and Body I* in *The Vercelli Book* are taken from (Krapp 1932), and *Soul and Body II* in *The Exeter Book* are taken from (Krapp and Van Kirk Dobbie 1936).

ælmihtig god, ende worulde
 wyrcan wille, weoruda dryhten. (Soul and Body II [10th century] 1936, p. 175)

[The soul must come, clamorous with cares,
 always finding every seventh night
 its body home, that it earlier bore for a long while,
 for three hundred winters,
 unless before then the lord of the people,
 Almighty God, should bring about the end of the world
 lord of the multitude]. (Soul and Body II [10th century] 1936, p. 175)

Although it is not clear where the dead go when they are not visiting their bodies, the interim state is certainly not purgatory, as there seems to be no possibility of salvation for souls who had sinned in life. The interim space is temporary and permeable, but both features are reminders that the work of penance should have been done prior to death. The damned soul is released from its prison once a week so that it may witness the suffering of its body and share details of the horrors both will experience in hell once they are united in 300 years, or on Judgment Day, whichever occurs first. The time between death and final Judgment punishes through anticipation and offers no hope of salvation for sinful souls.

Other early English accounts of the dead returning to the world of the living do, however, include the idea of purgatory, or an interim space where penitential work can be carried out after death as long as the decedent expired in a state of contrition. The belief in purgatory gave rise to the belief in purgatorial apparitions who could inhabit the spaces of the living either to receive punishment or to petition the living for help in mitigating their suffering in purgatory through prayers and almsgiving. The early Christian Church initially discouraged belief in purgatorial apparitions. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), whom Jacques Le Goff calls the “Father of Purgatory,”⁹ argued in *De Cura pro Mortuis*, that the spirits of the dead have no reason to concern themselves with the living and those who claim to have had encounters with ghosts were really seeing images of the dead (or *imago*), rather than real ghostly apparitions. Augustine argued that these images were presented to the minds of dreamers and visionaries by good and evil angels.¹⁰ Although he promoted the idea of an interim space of cleansing punishment between heaven and hell, he never fully committed to defining that space as purgatory and he discouraged the idea of purgatorial ghosts altogether. Later theologians disregarded Augustine’s ideas and affirmed that the souls of the departed not only visited the living but also had a kind of material existence that made them vulnerable to corporeal pain.¹¹ Pope Gregory the Great (540–604 CE) elaborated on these points in Book IV of the *Dialogues* by including a number of ghost stories that illustrated the importance of prayer, masses, and almsgiving for the salvation of the dead and an easement of their suffering.¹² Gregory’s influence and the development of the Office of the Dead in the ninth century set the groundwork for “the entire apparatus—institution, liturgical, narrative . . . St. Augustine’s hesitations regarding apparitions of the dead, reservations expressed five centuries earlier, were now definitely discarded. It was henceforth admitted that the dead could indeed appear to the living, such to the benefit of both groups.”¹³ Theologians revised Augustine’s perspective because ghost stories offered the theologians a means of earthly control. By the ninth century, stories about purgatorial ghosts and their places of punishment began to flourish.

⁹ (Le Goff 1984, pp. 61–84).

¹⁰ (Augustine 1651).

¹¹ (Bruce 2016, p. 55).

¹² (Gregory 1911, pp. 177–258).

¹³ (Schmitt 1998, p. 34). The Office of the Dead is a set of prayers in the Catholic Church’s Divine Office that are recited for individuals who had passed on, or read more generally on All Souls’ Day for all of the deceased. The prayer cycle is closely connected with purgatory.

Old English soul and body narratives, however, resist the idea that souls of the dead can return to the living world to complete the work of salvation. These narratives reflect the older theology of Augustine instead of the newer theological model inspired by Gregory's *Dialogi*. It is noteworthy that the concept of purgatory and the cult of the dead were slowly gaining currency in pre-Conquest England while at the same time the Benedictine Reform—which was very much concerned with monasticism, penance, and ascetic life—was also well underway. The two theological currents that seemed at odds with one another in the early Middle Ages would eventually resolve as the more flexible model of post-mortem penance and salvation afforded by the concept of purgatory gained popularity and eventually became doctrine in 1215. Although *Soul and Body* focuses on the afterlife and features a disembodied spirit visiting its body, its emphasis on asceticism and the importance of performing penance within one's lifetime classify it as penitential, rather than purgatorial literature, and is perhaps best considered within the context of the 10th-century Benedictine Reform.¹⁴ Michael Drout argues that "*The Exeter Book* was copied between 968 and 975, which makes the text fully within the period in which the Reform came to Exeter."¹⁵ The composition of *Soul and Body I* and *II* in all likelihood predates the Benedictine Reform, but both versions of the poem were collected and compiled in their respective codices in late 10th-century monasteries where contemplation, prayer, and penance were increasingly promoted according to the rules of the reform.

3. Ephraimic Influence in Pre-Conquest England

Monastic reformers concerned with establishing asceticism in religious life in pre-Conquest England often "looked for inspiration from the Eastern fathers," drawing on the ascetic writings of Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianz, and St. Ephraim the Syrian.¹⁶ Much of the penitential literature composed or compiled during this period reflected the teachings of the Eastern fathers, especially St. Ephraim the Syrian (306–373 CE), a hymnographer and theologian of the Syriac Orthodox Church. While there is a great deal of debate surrounding whether and to what extent St. Ephraim's works influenced Anglo-Saxon culture, most scholars agree that his works and the works attributed to him were accessible to and circulated among monasteries in pre-Conquest England. Thomas Bestul points out that Albert S. Cook, Gustav Grau, and Pamela Gradon were among the first to argue that St. Ephraim influenced and was a possible source for Old English poetry—specifically Cynewulf's *Elene* in *The Vercelli Book* and *Christ III* in *The Exeter Book*. Bestul refutes those arguments based on the paucity of manuscript evidence, arguing instead that "Ephraim's most significant role in Anglo-Saxon culture is more likely to have been a later contribution to the development of the monasticism given new life by the 10th-century Benedictine revival. Ephraim's works would have been useful in such a culture, preoccupied as it was with eschatology, penance, and asceticism."¹⁷ Bestul posits that there were several possible routes of transmission for Ephraim's works, including a route to England through Gaul; another route through Ireland via Spain "which had continuous contact with Syria"; and a route through Corbie, which was the primary route in the Middle Ages between Italy and Britain.¹⁸

Other scholars, who argue that Ephraim could have had a much more direct influence on Anglo-Saxon culture and Old English literature, favor an entirely different and more plausible route of transmission for Ephraimic texts. The most convincing argument is made by Bernhard Bischoff and Michael Lapidge in *Biblical Commentaries Canterbury*, wherein they discuss the establishment of the Canterbury School in England by Theodore of Tarsus during his tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury from 668 to 690. Theodore received his education in Constantinople after fleeing his homeland when the Persians invaded Tarsus and eventually moved to Rome before his appointment to the Archbishopric

¹⁴ (Frantzen 1982).

¹⁵ (Drout 2007, p. 452).

¹⁶ (Bestul 1981, p. 6).

¹⁷ (Bestul 1981, p. 22); also see (Cook 1900, pp. 187–89, 210); (Grau 1908, p. 31); and (Cynewulf 1958, pp. 21–22).

¹⁸ (Bestul 1981, pp. 1–24).

of Canterbury in 668. Theodore was accompanied to England by Hadrian, a scholar-theologian from North Africa, who served as an abbot in Canterbury until his death in 710.¹⁹ Both Theodore and Hadrian established the Canterbury School, which became one of the greatest centers of learning and a major site for the production and dissemination of scholarship in pre-Conquest England. Bischoff and Lapidge suggest that Theodore had some knowledge of Syriac and “was probably the agent of transmission of certain aspects of Syriac learning to Anglo-Saxon England,” and that a small group of Ephraimic texts that had been translated from Syriac into Greek were “available at the school of Canterbury in the late seventh century and was used selectively for various exegetical and devotional purposes, including translation into Latin.”²⁰ Furthermore, due to their presence in the library of Canterbury, they do not rule out the possibility of Ephraim’s influence on Cynewulf’s *Christ III* in *The Exeter Book* and other Old English verse and prose works.²¹

Jane Stevenson is also reluctant to rule out Ephraimic influence on English vernacular poetry, stating that while she does not think it probable that Cynewulf had a stack of St. Ephraim’s texts in front of him while composing *Elene*, *Christ III*, or *Guthlac*, one cannot dismiss the possibility “that some part of the education the poet in question had received derived, perhaps at second or third hand, from Ephraim,” because Ephraimic texts in Latin and Syriac were probably in common circulation in England and Western Europe having entered the West via various channels.²² Whether Ephraimic elements were incorporated directly into Old English poetry at the time of composition or whether they served as a kind of guiding principle for scribes and compilers charged with selecting and copying works to be included in codices, such as *The Exeter Book* and *The Vercelli Book* for monastic houses under reform, will probably never be determined with any degree of certainty.

What is clear, however, is that Ephraim’s influence came at a time when the early English Church was attempting to reestablish and define its boundaries in the wake of the Danish invasions. The Benedictine Reform sought to put an end to certain elements of worldliness and even paganism that had crept into religious life over the years by attempting to reverse the decline of learning and scholarship and by replacing secularized clergy with contemplative (and celibate) monasticism. The body-soul verses, if read as penitential literature, speak directly to those efforts and include several Ephraimic elements. At first glance, however, it appears that the body-soul verses are doing just the opposite, as both versions of the poem seem to portray the body as an evil and corrupt material object that has far more agency than its soul. In lines 17–19 of *Soul and Body I* and *II*, the soul immediately begins its address to the body with a bitter tirade, chastising it for damning them both to eternal punishment: “‘Hwæt, druþ þu dreorega, to hwan drehtest þu me, / eorðan fulnes eal forwisnad, / lames gelicnes [What have you have labored, blood-stained, towards that torments me so, / O full of earth, entirely decayed, / the likeness of loam].’” The soul blames the body entirely for their fallen state and almost gleefully points out that for all of the wicked pleasures it enjoyed in life, it is now nothing more than a decaying heap of loamy earth.

¹⁹ (Bischoff and Lapidge 2007, pp. 1–133).

²⁰ (Bischoff and Lapidge 2007, pp. 237–39).

²¹ (Bischoff and Lapidge 2007, p. 239); Lapidge and Bischoff make a strong case for the presence of Ephraimic texts translated into Greek in pre-Conquest England, stating in part that “... a small corpus of Greek Ephraimic texts—including the *Sermo Aduersus haereticos* (cited in Evl 19), the *Sermo asceticus* (partly used in a prayer in the Book of Cerne, no. 45), the *De paenitentia* (partly used in a prayer in the Harley Prayerbook) and perhaps the *De iudicio et compunction* (? Used in *Christ III*)—was available at the school of Canterbury in the late seventh century and was used selectively for various exegetical and devotional purposes, including translation into Latin” (p. 239).

²² Jane Stevenson also argues for the presence of Ephraimic texts in pre-Conquest England in “Ephraim the Syrian in Anglo-Saxon England,” stating in part that “I am convinced that some texts wrongly attributed to Ephraim came to various parts of England in the seventh century in Greek dress, and perhaps, that some rightly so attributed also came to Canterbury. I also think it just plausible that some Syriac texts came to England in Syriac, and were translated, ad hoc and on the spot, into Theodore’s vigorous, demotic Latin. It also seems clear that Latin versions of prayers attributed to Ephraim formed part of the common stock of material circulating between private prayer books in Western Europe around the year 800 (p. 272). For more reading on the topic of Ephraimic and Syriac texts in Anglo-Saxon England, see (Lapidge 1986) and (Di Sciaccia 2006, pp. 365–87).

The soul's angry address continues as it uses several vitriolic words to describe the body and its relationship to the soul in the afterlife. The soul calls the body "weriga [cursed]" and "wlanc [arrogant, proud]" (*Soul and Body I*, p. 55; *Soul and Body II*, p. 175) and accuses the body of damning them to hell because it did nothing to control its "fyrenlustas [wanton lusts]" while alive (*Soul and Body I*, p. 55; *Soul and Body II*, p. 175). The soul complains that part of its punishment is to seek out the body with great "unwillum [repugnance]" (*Soul and Body I*, p. 56; *Soul and Body II*, p. 176) each week until Judgment Day. By the soul's account, not only did the body give in to the enticements of the material world, but it was also all-powerful, trapping the helpless "gast on ðe fram gode sende [ghost sent into you from God]" in a body that constantly indulged in sin (*Soul and Body I*, p. 56; *Soul and Body II*, p. 175). The soul mournfully tells the body "Ne meahte ic ðe of cuman, / flæsce befangen, ond me fyrenlustas / þine geþrungon [I could not exist without you, / enclosed in flesh and your wanton lusts / crushed me]" (*Soul and Body I*, p. 55; *Soul and Body II*, p. 175). The damned soul places the blame for their fallen state entirely on the depraved body who indulged in the delights of a wicked material world. It is no surprise, therefore, that many scholars have read *Soul and Body* as a dualistic poem that echoes Manichean ideas that both Augustine and Ephraim refuted in their writings.²³ In light of *Soul and Body*'s unorthodox implications about the material world and the deep division that exists between the body and soul, the poem's placement in *The Exeter Book* and *The Vercelli Book* is puzzling to say the least.

Allen Frantzen was the first to suggest that there is no dualistic inversion of the body-soul hierarchy if one reads *Soul and Body* "in the context of penitential practice" rather than as a heterodox poem that presents an inherently wicked material body that exerts its considerable power over the soul in order to ruin it.²⁴ Frantzen argues instead that through the grateful soul's enumeration of the saved body's good deeds during their lifetime together at the end of *Soul and Body I*, the poet depicts the body as an "agent of penance."²⁵ He points out that the key to reading *Soul and Body* as a penitential poem is the good soul's address to its body in *The Vercelli Book*. The good soul thanks its body for their salvation, crediting the body's poverty, prayer, and fasting for their happy state: "Fæstest ðu on foldan ond gefyldest me / godes lichoman, gastes drynces. / Wære ðu on wædle, sealdest me wilna geniht [You fasted on earth, and filled me / with God's body, the drink of the soul. / You accepted your poverty, granting me your portion of desire]" (*Soul and Body I*, p. 58). Frantzen argues that "the poet exaggerates the body's responsibility in order to underscore the necessity of physical commitment to goals which the mind readily approved. Given a choice between heaven and hell, his audience naturally preferred the former; the poet's stress on body's duty conforms to a Christian commonplace inherent in penitential practice: strength of spirit alone cannot achieve salvation."²⁶ The key to salvation, therefore, is the unity of purpose and action in body and soul.

Read as a penitential poem, *Soul and Body*'s precepts are consistent with early medieval homilies and penitential handbooks of the period.²⁷ Its emphasis on fasting, praying, and temperate living are also consistent with the teachings of the Eastern Christian fathers and the principles of Eastern asceticism. In the Syriac Christian tradition, living an ascetic life by praying, fasting, and practicing celibacy and penance, involved the body and the soul and ensured salvation. The Syriac ascetic tradition, in which St. Ephraim was writing, posits that there is no conflict between soul and body, as the work of salvation is equally spiritual and physical. Susan Ashbrook Harvey states that "... the most influential and enduring aspect of early Syrian Christianity was the concept of the essential 'oneness' of the believer's self, a 'oneness' of the body and soul. The importance of religious behavior is here placed in context: what one does with one's body is indistinguishable from what one believes."²⁸

²³ (Frantzen 1982, p. 78).

²⁴ (Frantzen 1982, p. 85).

²⁵ (Frantzen 1982, p. 85).

²⁶ (Frantzen 1982, pp. 81–82).

²⁷ (Frantzen 1982, p. 85).

²⁸ (Harvey 1990, p. 8).

The conflict in *Soul and Body* occurs when the “oneness” of the body and soul is broken by original and individual sin that separate and set them at odds with one another.

These ideas are present in Ephraim’s writings and the works attributed to him that were circulated in Anglo-Saxon England during the period of Monastic Reform. Although Ephraim’s hymns and homilies predate the Benedictine Reform by six centuries and were written in the distant land of Edessa, those works were composed in a time when his homeland and religion were frequently under attack by the Persian Empire and the growing influence of Persian Manichaeism. Perhaps the emphasis Ephraim placed on penitential living as a response to these invasions appealed to early English monastics who were also besieged by foreign invaders. It should be noted here, however, that although it is tempting to draw parallels between Ephraim’s writings in defense of Christianity against the Persian invaders and literature compiled during the Benedictine Reform as a response to the Viking invasions, the Persians and Vikings presented two very different kinds of threats that should not be conflated. What is evident in both Ephraim’s works and in the body-soul poetry is that they reflect a deep anxiety about what each author perceived as a dangerous moral and spiritual decline caused by foreign invasions in their respective time periods. According to Brock, Ephraim conceived the subject matter for the *Carmina Nisibena*, also known as the *Nisibene Hymns*, while his native city, Nisibis, suffered a number of attacks by King Shapur II of Persia.²⁹ When he moved to Edessa, Ephraim encountered an altogether different kind of threat in the form of dualist heresies that flourished all over the Near East and throughout the Roman Empire. His hymns and homilies were written in defense of Christianity against the three of the most popular religions: Manichaeism (a syncretic anti-materialist religion founded in the third century CE by Mani who equated the material world with darkness and evil and the world of spirit with goodness and light); Marcionism (a second-century religion founded by Marcion that combined elements of Christianity with Gnosticism); and Bardaisanism (a third-century religion founded by Bardaisan that is similar to Valentinian Gnosticism and Manichaeism).³⁰

Ephraim defended Christianity in poetry and prose, writing in Syriac, an Aramaic dialect. His most comprehensive arguments against Manichean and Gnostic heresies are outlined in his refutations against Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan. He is best known, however, for his poems, which fall into two categories: stanzaic hymns (*madrashê*) and verse homilies (*memrê*). Brock states that “Bardaisan and Mani had propagated their doctrines in popular poetic form, and Ephrem (like Augustine after him) provided a defence for orthodox Christianity in like kind.”³¹ Ephraim waged ideological warfare against the Manichaeans and Gnostics through his poetry and prose, defending the “material value of the world and human life . . . [and] the value of the body as a mate of the soul.”³² These elements are also present in many Old English homilies and poems, especially *Soul and Body I* and *II*.

Stevenson suggests that Anglo-Saxon soul and body poems were “Old English versions of an Ephraimic prototype, redacted through an unknown set of intermediaries.”³³ Though Stevenson does not name the prototype, perhaps she was referring to Hymn 69 in *Carmina Nisibena*, a poem that features a body and soul who take each other to court upon death, and—more than any other Ephraimic hymn—focuses on the importance of cooperation between body and soul in the process of salvation: “Body and soul go to court to see which caused the other to sin; / but the wrong belongs to both, for free will belongs to both” (5–6).³⁴ Other hymns that focus on this theme include *Hymns on Virginity*, No. 7, which compares the soul to a signet ring that impresses its spirit on the body like wax;³⁵ *Nisibene Hymns*, No. 50, which likens the soul-body relationship to a tree and its roots;³⁶ and

²⁹ (Brock 2013, p. 9).

³⁰ See (Ephraim 1912).

³¹ (Brock 2013, pp. 9–10).

³² (Kim 2002, p. 93).

³³ (Stevenson 1998, pp. 269–70).

³⁴ All citations of Ephraim’s hymns and homilies are taken from (Brock 2013).

³⁵ (Brock 2013, p. 70).

³⁶ (Brock 2013, p. 80).

several other hymns that compare the body to clothing that the soul dons on Judgment Day—light and clean if the body is free from sin and dirty if body and soul are damned.

Ephraim viewed the body not as a flawed material object that imprisons and corrupts the soul, but as partner to the soul that makes its existence in the material world and its salvation possible:

Those who are themselves fashioned of dust fashion dust, and
The earthborn labour on the earth.
We love our bodies, which are akin to us, of the same origin:
For our roots are dust
And our branches bear the fruits of our works. (Nisibene Hymns, p. 80)

For Ephraim, the body and soul are inseparable, and both are inherently good. In his refutations against Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan, he states that the soul “acquired understanding on account of the Body, nor does the Body bring it to an end since by means of its Soul it (i.e., the Body) acquired Animal-Life, by means of one another they acquire for one another, and they are a mirror of one another.”³⁷ One cannot exist or find salvation without the other, which also seems to be the point of the good soul’s address to its body in *Soul and Body I*.

Ephraim refutes Gnostic and Manichean anti-materialism that equates the body with evil and darkness and the soul with goodness and light.³⁸ He argues that there is no connection between light and darkness in the natural world and the soul and body. He also contends that the body cannot be an extension of a flawed material world that traps and corrupts the soul during its lifetime on earth, because God would never have clothed himself in flesh and come into the material world if it was evil. He became incarnate in order to bring about mankind’s salvation. *Hymns on Faith*, No. 31, best exemplifies Ephraim’s thoughts on this subject as it presents a loving God, who became an embodied being in order close the gap between Himself and mankind. Brock states that “God, stirred by love for his creation . . . entered the created world, allowing himself to be described in human terms and in human language.”³⁹ God “did not just create man, He actually put man on” (*Nisibene Hymns*, 69.11).

Ephraim’s hymns and refutations make clear his belief that one can only truly understand God and his or her own relationship to God’s created universe as an embodied being. If body and soul are at odds with one another, then sin must be separating them: “The body was fashioned in wisdom, the soul was breathed in through grace, / love was infused in perfection—but the serpent separated it in wickedness” (*Nisibene Hymns*, 69.4). This separation is emphasized in the damned soul’s address to its body in *Soul and Body I* and *II* by focusing on the body’s decay. Frantzen points out that the poet “exploited physical corruption as an image of moral corruption, and so pointed his poem toward the Last Judgment without transplanting it to that time. His portrayal of the body as the agent of penance, and as an image of the soul rotted with sin, is central to his design: the body performs penance, and registers the punishment which results when penance is neglected.”⁴⁰ Conversely, the poet of *Soul and Body I* portrays the unity between the saved body and soul by de-emphasizing the body’s decay and only letting us see what little we are allowed to glimpse of the body’s suffering through the soul’s lament: “Forþan me a langaþ, leofost manna, / on minum hige hearde, þæs þe ic þe on pyssum hynðum wat / wyrnum to wiste [Therefore it gives me perpetual pain, / dearest of men, sharply in my heart, / to know that you dwell in such dereliction, / as a feast for the worms]” (*Soul and Body I*, p. 59).

4. The Absence of Purgatory in Soul and Body Poetry

Another important feature of *Soul and Body* and Ephraim’s hymns is the emphasis on the importance of performing penance and living a godly life within one’s lifetime. What *Soul and Body*

³⁷ (Ephraim 1912, cv).

³⁸ (Ephraim 1912, lxviii).

³⁹ (Brock 2013, p. 84).

⁴⁰ (Frantzen 1982, p. 85).

implies and what Ephraim explicitly states in his hymns is that the body and soul must work together while alive, as there is no possibility of performing penance in the post-mortem state. *Soul and Body I* and *II* make this clear in the passage where the damned soul visits the body at its grave every seventh night and bitterly states that it must return to “helle [the torments of hell]” for the other six days (*Soul and Body I*, p. 55; *Soul and Body II*, p. 176). We are also told that after its weekly visit, the soul “sceall þonne feran onweg, / secan hellegrund, nallæs heofondreamas, / dædum gedrefed [must go on its way, / seeking the bottom of hell not at all the joys of heaven— / afflicted by its deeds]” (*Soul and Body I*, p. 57; *Soul and Body II*, p. 177). It is clear that the damned soul was sent to hell upon its death and already suffers punishment. The word *gedrefed* is the past participle of *drefan*, the Old English word for “afflicted, tormented, and troubled”— indicating that the soul suffers now for what was done in the past, which cannot be undone. The body lies helplessly silent at this point, unable to change the soul’s condition or even offer it any consolation (*Soul and Body I*, p. 57; *Soul and Body II*, p. 177). The soul maliciously reminds the body that the only thing to look forward to is their reunion on Judgment Day where their torments will be doubly felt.

The good soul has also been “sorted” at death because it tells its body that it has come “of mines fæder rice, / arum bewunden [from the realm of my father, / encircled with his mercies]” (*Soul and Body I*, p. 55). The emphasis in both poems is on the Last Judgment. Upon death, souls are immediately sorted into heaven or hell where they will await universal judgment at the end of time. Once united with their bodies, their joys or miseries will double. Penance, therefore, should be completed before death, as the poems offer no evidence of a penitential middle state in the afterlife for imperfectly shriven souls. The absence of a post-mortem penitential middle ground in *Soul and Body* is an implicit rejection of purgatory, despite its growing popularity in religious and popular culture in the pre-Conquest period.

A common misconception about pre-Conquest England is that the concept of purgatory had not yet been “born.” Part of the misconception can be attributed to Jacques Le Goff’s 1984 seminal work on the subject, titled *The Birth of Purgatory*, which provides a history of the concept from its origins in the pre-Christian era, and makes a claim that the idea of purgatory flourished in the High Middle Ages in response to the socio-economic and spiritual needs of the rising middle class. Le Goff asserts that when the word purgatory began to function as a noun in the 13th century, the once vague notion of a third post-mortem space began to take shape as a well-defined idea that disrupted spiritual binaries, such as good and evil and heaven and hell. He tied the birth of purgatory to the rise of the middle class in medieval Europe, arguing that it extended the process of salvation beyond the grave, allowing the living to focus on making money and acquiring power.

Le Goff was correct in placing the official “birth” of purgatory during the High Middle Ages, if by “birth” he meant establishing the concept of purgatory as official church doctrine. This process began with Pope Innocent III’s decretal *a nobis* in 1199, which stated that a person dying under excommunication could be absolved after death, provided the excommunicant showed sufficient repentance and clear signs of contrition before death, and on the condition that his or her heirs were willing to satisfy all outstanding debts to the Church on behalf of the deceased.⁴¹ The decretal made clear that excommunicants who died unabsolved would go to purgatory instead of hell, and that they, as with all purgatory inmates, could be released from this prison through prayer, donations, and masses offered on their behalf by the living.⁴² The Fourth Lateran Council further elaborated the Church’s position on purgatory by stating that it is not just a “state of mind” or a process, but a concrete place in the afterlife from which inmates could be released with spiritual and (especially in the cases of debt) financial assistance from the living.⁴³ Due to this, critics of purgatory mistakenly credited the Catholic Church with the concept. The idea of a temporary place of redemptive punishment located between

⁴¹ (Jaser 2013, p. 129).

⁴² (Lea 1968, p. 332).

⁴³ (Lea 1968, p. 305–14).

heaven and hell, however, did not originate in the Latin Christian Church, nor was it established to serve an economic need. Rather, it predates the Judeo-Christian belief system by several thousand years and has been a firmly established feature in many older Eastern belief systems. The belief in purgatory has served different needs in different religious contexts and the belief in a post-mortem third place had firmly taken root in the medieval Christian imaginaire long before it became doctrine in 1215.

Though the concept of purgatory in pre-Conquest England was somewhat vague, it was gaining currency over time in religious and popular culture. The earliest accounts of purgatory that survive from the Anglo-Saxon period present an undefined middle state between death and Judgment Day, where imperfect souls experience physical and mental punishment until they are allowed into heaven. Early beliefs in pre-Conquest England about this middle state were primarily influenced by Augustine, who emphasized an eschatological view that began with baptism and ended on Judgment Day. In *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, Augustine states that:

Tempus autem quod inter hominis mortem et ultimam resurrectionem interpositum est, animas abditis receptaculis continet, sicut unanquaeque digna est vel requie vel aerumna, pro eo quod sortita est in carne cum viveret.

[Now, for the time that intervenes between man's death and the final resurrection, there is a secret shelter for his soul, as each is worthy of rest or affliction according to what it has merited while it lived in the body].⁴⁴

Augustine posited a space that held and punished the transgressive dead until the end of the world. A different model of penance and purgation emerged in the Middle Ages and eventually replaced the older tradition, and posited that because it is almost impossible to complete one's penance during a single lifetime, only the most perfect souls ascend to heaven at the time of death. This shift began around the ninth century with the development of the Office of the Dead. In this model, the majority of the dead go to purgatory to complete their penance—provided they have shown proper contrition at the time of death. Furthermore, once the work of penance is complete, a person may attain salvation, even before Judgment Day.⁴⁵

Some of the earliest accounts of purgatory in literature include Bede's eighth century *Vision of Drihthelm* and *Vision of Furseus* in *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*,⁴⁶ which were revised by Ælfric of Eynsham two centuries later.⁴⁷ These narratives reflect an early understanding of purgatory as a vaguely defined liminal space between heaven and hell. Although the concept of purgatory changed over time and became more detailed and prison-like during the High and Late Middle Ages, it existed in religious and popular literature in pre-Conquest England and became more popular over time. Purgatory's allowance for post-mortem penance and purification seems to directly contradict the ascetic principles of the Benedictine Reform and the precepts of the Eastern fathers, including St. Ephraim. Its absence from *Soul and Body I* and *II*, therefore, is no surprise.

Ephraim's conception of the afterlife includes heaven, paradise, hell, and Sheol—a liminal space just above hell and below earth where the dead are held until Judgment Day. Ephraim believed that "descent to Sheol in death was the consequence of Adam's sin and the inheritance of all his progeny" until Christ's Harrowing created a path out of Sheol to paradise for the righteous dead on Judgment Day.⁴⁸ In *Hymns of the Unleavened Bread*, No. 3, Ephraim describes how the Harrowing changed Sheol from a permanent prison of the dead to a temporary holding place: "With the Living Lamb, Sheol's

⁴⁴ (Augustine of Hippo, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, C.CX).

⁴⁵ (Watkins 2007, pp. 233–34).

⁴⁶ (Bede 1969).

⁴⁷ (Ælfric 1979).

⁴⁸ (Buchan 2014, p. 55).

hunger disgorged back the dead, against its nature . . . / With the Living Lamb, Death has returned the just, who left their graves”⁴⁹

Ephraim’s beliefs about death, Sheol, sin, and penance are perhaps best represented in the disputation dialogues between Death and Satan in the *Nisibene Hymns*. In Hymn No. 52, one learns from the exchange between Death and Satan that Sheol is a temporary space between death and resurrection, and that once the dead are in that space, there is no further possibility for repentance:

Satan: Sheol is hated for there is no chance of remorse there: it is a pit which swallows up and suppresses every impulse.

Death: Sheol is a whirlpool, and everyone who falls into sin is resurrected, but sin is hated because it cuts off a man’s hope.

Satan: Although it grieves me, I allow for repentance; you cut off a sinner’s hopes if he dies in his sins. (Ephraim [4th century] 2013, p. 106)

Ephraim reiterates that “the dead cannot repent in Sheol” in number 36 of the *Nisibene Hymns*. The work of the dead is done. They have only to sleep until the moment of Resurrection. Thomas Buchan states that the “image deployed by Ephrem to convey the change which has taken place as a result of the Savior’s descent to Sheol is that of sleep . . . as a result of the resurrection, the phenomenon of humanity’s death and descent to Sheol are regarded by Ephrem as sleep.”⁵⁰ Christ’s Harrowing converted permanent death and imprisonment in Sheol into a temporary sleep that has diminished Death’s power. Death chastises himself for allowing Christ to die and enter Sheol when he failed to recognize his divinity in number 36 of the *Nisibene Hymns*. Satan also mocks Death’s diminished power after the Harrowing in number 53 of *Nisibene Hymns*, saying that “the body’s dead state is but a sleep, lasting for a time; do not imagine, Death, that you are really death, for you are like a shade”⁵¹.

Buchan states that the word Sheol is “translated as ‘pit’ or ‘grave,’ and envisioned as the underworldly abode of the dead, Ephrem’s conception of Sheol was strongly informed by three interrelated sources: Scripture, his Mesopotamian cultural milieu, and many of the physical aspects of death and the human experiences of practices related to it.”⁵² That all of the souls of the dead sleep in an underworld pit/grave until the Resurrection, is yet another of Ephraim’s defenses against the heresies that were flourishing in his time. Specifically, these teachings refute the Zoroastrian-derived Manichean belief in a purgatorial post-mortem middle ground, sometimes referred to as hamēstagān.⁵³ Ephraim’s Sheol is not purgatory and makes no allowance for further correction or repentance to those who die in a state of sin.

There is no room in Ephraim’s hymns or in *Soul and Body I* and *II* for purgatory. The absence of a post-mortem middle ground of spiritual cleansing underscores the importance of penance, prayer, and fasting during one’s lifetime. Aside from slight differences between *Soul and Body* and Ephraim’s hymns in the fate of the souls after death, the bodies—damned and saved—repose silently in the grave while the souls either sleep in Sheol until the Resurrection (Ephraim’s hymns) or are sorted into places of reward or punishment (*Soul and Body*) until all are reunited on Judgment Day, where the woes of the damned and the joys of the saved are doubled. The saved soul’s address to its body at the end of *Soul and Body I* is very similar to the account Ephraim offers about the reunion of saved souls with their bodies during the Resurrection. Ephraim describes how “Angels of fire draw close to people of flesh: they receive them in love, for they have toiled and brought repose to their souls”⁵⁴. The saved soul in

⁴⁹ (Brock 2013, p. 53).

⁵⁰ (Buchan 2014, p. 189).

⁵¹ (Brock 2013, p. 133).

⁵² (Buchan 2014, p. 54).

⁵³ (Zaehner 1956).

⁵⁴ (Brock 2013, p. 117).

the Old English poem also credits the body with its salvation and promises that they will be united among the angels on Judgment Day:

Eala, min dryhten,
 þær ic þe moste mid me lædan,
 þæt wyt englas ealle gesawon,
 heofona wuldor, swylc swa ðu me ær her scribe (Soul and Body I [10th century] 1932, p. 58)

[Alas, my lord—if I were allowed to lead you
 by my side, to where we could catch sight of
 all the angels, glory of heaven, just as
 you had appointed me in this place]. (Soul and Body I [10th century] 1932, p. 58)

Both of these accounts are representative of penitential Christian ideas at the heart of *Soul and Body* and should preclude the possibility of reading it as a poem with dualist or anti-materialist elements. *Soul and Body I* and *II* should be read, instead, within the context of the 10th-century Benedictine Reform as a penitential poem influenced by Ephraimic asceticism. *Soul and Body*, compiled (and possibly composed) at a time when the early English Church was attempting to recover from the decades of damage caused by the Viking invasions, was especially concerned with penance, prayer, and monastic asceticism. The English monastic culture that produced *Soul and Body I* and *II* found much in the writings of the Eastern fathers that inspired them. The works of St. Ephraim, which emphasized penance, fasting, and prayer during one's lifetime as a means of salvation, were written in defense of a church that was under attack by foreign invaders, and a religion which was challenged by Gnostic and Manichean heresies that were flourishing all over the ancient Near East. These ideas all must have appealed to English Monastic Reformers who were defending and redefining the boundaries of the early English Church, both against moral decline and the growing popularity of purgatory.

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