WILL THE SOUL SURVIVE THE FIRST DEATH? An Exegetical Study of Matthew 10:28

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ABSTRACT

The statement of Jesus in Gospel of Matthew 10:28—"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna"—has been central to theological discussions concerning the nature of the soul and the destiny of human beings after death. While the passage has often been interpreted as support for the doctrine of the immortal soul, many modern scholars argue that it primarily concerns eschatological judgment rather than philosophical anthropology. This article analyzes Matthew 10:28 through literary context, Greek syntactical structure, lexical analysis of key terms (psychē and apollymi), comparison with the parallel passage in Gospel of Luke12:4–5, and the concept of Gehenna in Second Temple Judaism. Engaging with scholars such as Oscar Cullmann, Richard Bauckham, and N. T. Wright, the study argues that Matthew 10:28 does not necessarily affirm the inherent immortality of the soul but emphasizes God's ultimate authority over the final destiny of the whole person.

Keywords: *Soul, Body, Gehenna, Immortality, Resurrection.*

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether the human soul survives bodily death has been one of the most enduring debates in Christian theology. Classical Christian theology, influenced partly by Greek philosophical traditions, often affirmed the inherent immortality of the soul.[1] However, modern biblical scholarship increasingly questions whether this concept accurately reflects the anthropology of the New Testament.

One of the most frequently cited texts in discussions of the soul's immortality is Matthew 10:28:

[1] Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 15.

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"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna."

At first glance, the verse appears to imply that the soul survives physical death because human persecutors cannot kill it. Yet the statement also affirms that God can destroy both body and soul, raising important questions about the nature and destiny of the soul. Recent scholarship suggests that this passage must be interpreted within its Jewish eschatological framework rather than through later philosophical concepts.[2] Instead of offering a metaphysical definition of the soul, Jesus may be emphasizing the ultimate authority of God in the final judgment.

This article examines Matthew 10:28 through four major approaches: literary context, syntactical and lexical analysis, comparison with Luke's parallel account, and theological interpretation in light of Second Temple Judaism and modern scholarship.

LITERARY CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 10

Matthew 10 constitutes the second major discourse in the Gospel of Matthew and is commonly referred to as the mission discourse. In this chapter Jesus commissions the twelve disciples and prepares them for the mission that lies ahead. The discourse not only outlines the practical aspects of their mission but also anticipates the opposition, persecution, and suffering they will encounter as representatives of Jesus. Many scholars observe that Matthew structures his Gospel around five major teaching discourses, and Matthew 10 forms the second of these sections, following the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7.[3]

A key theme throughout the passage is the command not to fear. Jesus repeats this instruction three times (Matt 10:26, 28, 31), each time providing theological reassurance.[4]

Matthew 10:28 forms the center of this section, presenting a contrast between two kinds of fear:

1. fear of human persecutors
2. fear of divine judgment, France argues that the statement reflects a pastoral concern for disciples who may face death for their faith.[5] Human persecutors can destroy the body but possess no authority over a person's ultimate destiny.

Similarly, Craig L. Blomberg argues that the primary contrast in the verse is not between body and soul as separate metaphysical entities but rather between the limited scope of human

[2] N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 83.

[3] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 152–154.

[4] Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1992), 171.

[5] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 406.

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power and the ultimate authority of God. In this interpretation, the focus of the saying lies in its ethical and theological exhortation: disciples must maintain proper reverence for God rather than being intimidated by human threats.[6] This reading aligns with the broader theme of divine sovereignty that runs throughout the mission discourse.

The narrative context of Matthew's Gospel further reinforces this interpretation. The warnings about persecution in chapter 10 anticipate the suffering that will ultimately characterize the ministry of Jesus himself. Later in the Gospel narrative, Jesus will face arrest, trial, and execution at the hands of human authorities. In this sense the disciples' experience mirrors that of their master. As Ulrich Luz observes, Matthew consistently portrays discipleship as participation in the suffering of Christ. The disciples are called not only to proclaim the message of the kingdom but also to endure the same hostility that Jesus himself encounters.[7]

Consequently, Matthew 10:28 functions within the discourse primarily as an encouragement to remain faithful in the face of persecution. The verse does not appear in a context concerned with philosophical anthropology or metaphysical speculation about the nature of the soul. Rather, it serves as a rhetorical warning that emphasizes the ultimate seriousness of divine judgment and the sovereignty of God over human destiny. Interpreted within its literary context, the saying reinforces the central message of the mission discourse: disciples should not fear human persecutors but should instead maintain reverence for God, whose authority extends beyond the temporal limits of human power.

SYNTACTICAL AND LEXICAL ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW 10:28

The interpretation of Gospel of Matthew 10:28 depends heavily on the syntax and lexical choices of the Greek text. The verse contains a carefully structured contrast between two imperatives and two clauses describing the limits of human power and the ultimate authority of God.

Greek Text and Structural Diagram

The Greek text of Matthew 10:28 reads:
καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀποκτεννόντων τὸ σῶμα τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὴ δυναμένων ἀποκτεῖναι·φοβεῖσθε δὲ μᾶλλον τὸν δυνάμενον καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα ἀπολέσαι ἐν γεέννῃ.

A simplified syntactical diagram illustrates the structure:

Main Imperative 1
μὴ φοβεῖσθε
|

[6] Blomberg, *Matthew*, 174-175.

[7] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 118-121.

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|--- ἀπὸ τῶν ἀποκτεννόντων τὸ σῶμα
|
|--- τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὴ δυναμένων ἀποκτεῖναι

Contrast (δέ)

Main Imperative 2
φοβεῖσθε δὲ μᾶλλον
|
|--- τὸν δυνάμενον
|
|--- καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα
|--- ἀπολέσαι
|--- ἐν γεέννῃ

The verse contains two contrasting commands: a prohibition against fearing human persecutors and a positive command to fear God. The participial phrases clarify the respective powers of each subject: humans may kill the body but cannot kill the soul, whereas God possesses the authority to destroy both body and soul in Gehenna.

According to standard Greek syntax, the participles ἀποκτεννόντων ("those killing") and μὴ δυναμένων ("not being able") function attributively, describing the human persecutors.[8] The participle τὸν δυνάμενον ("the one who is able") describes the divine subject who exercises ultimate authority over human destiny.

The Contrast: μή φοβεῖσθε … φοβεῖσθε δέ

The rhetorical force of the verse lies in the contrast between the two imperatives:

μή φοβεῖσθε
"Do not fear"
φοβεῖσθε δέ μᾶλλον
"But rather fear"

The first imperative is a present middle/passive imperative with the negative μή, which commonly expresses the cessation of an ongoing action or a general prohibition.[9] In this context the command discourages disciples from living in continual fear of persecution. The use of the preposition ἀπό with the genitive ("from those who kill the body") indicates the source or object of fear.

[8] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 614–617.

[9] Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 487–488.

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The second imperative introduces a strong contrast through the conjunction δέ, which often marks a transition or contrast in Greek discourse.[10] The addition of the adverb μᾶλλον ("rather" or "more") intensifies the contrast, redirecting the disciples' fear from human persecutors to divine authority. This rhetorical shift emphasizes the theological priority of reverence for God over fear of human violence.

Within the narrative context of Matthew 10, this contrast functions as a pastoral exhortation. The disciples are encouraged not to allow persecution to determine their actions, since the ultimate authority over life and judgment belongs to God alone.[11]

Lexical Study of ψυχή (*Psychē*)

The term **ψυχή** (*psychē*) plays a central role in debates concerning the interpretation of this verse. In classical Greek literature the word often refers to the life principle or the immaterial soul that survives bodily death. However, the semantic range of ψυχή in biblical Greek is broader and more flexible.

According to BDAG, ψυχή can refer to "life," "self," "person," or "soul," depending on the context.[12] In many New Testament passages the term simply denotes **life itself** rather than an immaterial entity distinct from the body. For example, the same term appears in Matthew 16:25 ("whoever wants to save his life [ψυχή] will lose it"), where the meaning clearly refers to one's life rather than to an immortal soul.

The semantic range of ψυχή reflects its background in the Hebrew concept of נֶפֶשׁ (nephesh), which typically denotes the living person or life-force rather than a separable spiritual substance.[13] As a result, many scholars caution against reading later philosophical concepts of the soul into New Testament texts. In the context of Matthew 10:28, ψυχή may therefore refer to the whole life or person, emphasizing that human persecutors cannot determine a person's ultimate destiny.

This interpretation is supported by studies in semantic domains such as those presented in the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament by Louw and Nida, which classify ψυχή

[10] Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 293.

[11] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 401–402.

[12] Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1098–1100.

[13] Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 608–659.

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within the domain of life and living beings rather than as a strictly metaphysical entity.[14] Consequently, the contrast between body and soul in Matthew 10:28 may function rhetorically to emphasize the limits of human power rather than to define a dualistic anthropology.

Lexical Study of ἀπόλλυμι (*Apollymi*)

The verb ἀπόλλυμι (*apollymi*), translated "destroy" in Matthew 10:28, is equally important for interpreting the passage. The verb appears frequently in the New Testament and can carry a range of meanings including "destroy," "ruin," "perish," or "lose."[15]

BDAG notes that the verb often refers to complete destruction or ruin, especially in contexts of divine judgment.[16] In the Synoptic Gospels the term appears in several passages describing eschatological destruction (e.g., Matt 7:13; 10:39; 16:25). The semantic nuance depends heavily on context, but the verb generally implies the loss or destruction of life rather than mere temporary harm.

In Matthew 10:28 the infinitive ἀπολέσαι ("to destroy") describes the power attributed to God. The use of this verb in conjunction with both ψυχή and σῶμα ("body") suggests the comprehensive scope of divine judgment. The expression does not necessarily imply annihilation in a philosophical sense, but it does indicate that God's authority extends over the entire human person.[17]

Theological discussions of this verse often focus on whether the destruction described here implies annihilation, ruin, or exclusion from life. Lexical evidence alone cannot fully resolve this question, but the verb clearly underscores the seriousness of divine judgment and the limits of human power.

Summary

The syntactical structure of Matthew 10:28 reveals a carefully constructed contrast between human and divine authority. The prohibition μή φοβεῖσθε discourages fear of human persecutors, while the contrasting command φοβεῖσθε δέ μᾶλλον redirects fear toward God, whose authority extends beyond physical death. Lexically, the terms ψυχή and ἀπόλλυμι carry a broad semantic range that must be interpreted within the context of Jewish anthropology and

[14] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 23.88.

[15] Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 115–116.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 394–396.

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eschatological judgment. Rather than presenting a systematic doctrine of the soul, the verse emphasizes the ultimate sovereignty of God over the destiny of the entire human person.

ESCHATOLOGICAL JUDGMENT AND THE DESTINY OF THE SOUL

Comparison with Luke 12:4–5

A closely related passage appears in Gospel of Luke 12:4–5.

Luke's version reads:
"Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do."

Notably, Luke does not mention the soul explicitly. Instead, he states that persecutors can do nothing more after killing the body.[18]

This difference suggests that the emphasis in both passages lies not on the nature of the soul but on the limits of human power compared with divine judgment. Joel Green argues that Luke's version underscores the authority of God to determine the final destiny of the person.[19]

Gehenna in Second Temple Judaism

The reference to Gehenna in Matthew 10:28 is crucial for understanding the passage. The term derives from the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem, which in Jewish tradition became associated with divine judgment.[20]

Second Temple Jewish literature often used the term symbolically to describe the place of final punishment. Texts such as 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra portray Gehenna as the destiny of the wicked in the final judgment.[21]

According to N. T. Wright, Jewish eschatology focused primarily on resurrection and final judgment rather than on the immortality of the soul.[22] Therefore, the warning about destruction in Gehenna should be interpreted within the framework of eschatological judgment.

Immortal Soul vs Conditional Immortality

[18] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 487.

[19] Ibid., 488.

[20] Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 220.

[21] George Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 124.

[22] Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 92.

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The interpretation of Matthew 10:28 plays an important role in the debate between the doctrine of the immortal soul and the concept of conditional immortality. The doctrine of the immortal soul was strongly influenced by Greek philosophical traditions, particularly Platonism.[23] In contrast, many biblical scholars argue that the New Testament emphasizes resurrection rather than inherent immortality.[24]

Oscar Cullmann famously contrasted the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul with the Christian hope of resurrection.[25] Similarly, Richard Bauckham argues that early Christian eschatology centered on the resurrection of the body and the final judgment rather than on the natural immortality of the soul.[26] N. T. Wright likewise emphasizes that the central Christian hope is resurrection, not disembodied immortality.[27]

Within this framework, Matthew 10:28 may be understood as emphasizing God's authority over the destiny of the entire person rather than teaching the inherent immortality of the soul.

CONCLUSION

Matthew 10:28 has often been cited as biblical support for the doctrine of the immortal soul. However, a careful exegetical analysis suggests that the verse does not primarily address the metaphysical nature of the soul.

Instead, the passage emphasizes several theological themes: First, human persecutors possess limited authority. While they may kill the body, they cannot determine a person's ultimate destiny. Second, God alone holds authority over the final judgment of both body and soul. Third, the warning about destruction in Gehenna highlights the seriousness of divine judgment.

For these reasons, Matthew 10:28 should be interpreted primarily as an eschatological warning within the context of persecution rather than as a philosophical statement about the immortality of the soul.

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[23] Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul*, 18.

[24] Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 135.

[25] Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul*, 19.

[26] Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 138.

[27] Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 108.

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