ARTICLES

St. Macrina's Prayer: A Case Study of Transcultural Dialogue and Innovation

Zhang Xin

(Beijing Normal University)

Abstract:

Composed by one of "the church fathers" known for his contributions to theological anthropology, Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of St. Macrina* and *On the Soul and Resurrection* nevertheless appear somehow "problematic" from the perspective of modern studies of humanities. Macrina's description of nonintellectual human activities, which is interspersed with critical or even disparaging remarks, often seems to deny the importance of the body and renders emotions and the senses redundant. This article takes Macrina's deathbed prayer as an entry point into her negative view of the body and addresses the two main dimensions of her argument (philosophical and mythical), which complement one another to depict an account of the Christian soul associated with the body in the formation of human beings. I first discuss the genre of VSM, also known as the "philosophic biography," which underwrites the content of the deathbed prayer, and then analyze the ways in which the prayer is organized to respond to the philosophical concept of preparing for death. I then argue that the prayer provides a Christian answer to the concept of immortality while, through a confessing grace, relieving tensions between the soul and body, which was first advanced in Plato's *Phaedo*.

Keywords: St. Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa, the soul

After Macrina the Younger (c. 327–79) died, Gregory of Nyssa authored *The Life of St. Macrina* (henceforth VSM) and *On the Soul and Resurrection* (henceforth AR) in the following years (381-5). VSM narrates the life of Macrina and her family, focusing on her last days and her funeral. AR adopts the form of dialogue, the content of which is expected in VSM: Christian reasoning of death, the soul, and immortality.[1] While Gregory of Nyssa was writing VSM and AR, Plato's *Phaedo* was undoubtedly on his mind. He wished to make his older sister, Macrina, "compete" with Socrates in confronting death and demonstrating her excellence in both theory and practice. As Socrates is for Plato "the best and wisest and most religious man" (*Phaedo* 118a) who defended and bore witness to the philosophy by his death, Macrina is Gregory's heroine "who had raised herself to the highest summit of human virtue" (VSM 1.5); the depiction of her endorsed Gregory's vision that the Christian faith is the true philosophy while the ascetic life is the best life that people can live.[2]

1 Gregory mentioned the conversion in VSM: "And if my narrative were not to expand to an unconscionable length I would recount everything in order, how exalted was her discourse as she philosophized to us on the soul and explained the cause of our life in the flesh, and why man was made, and how he became mortal, and whence came death, and what is the release from death back to life again." (18.5) Translation from *The Life of St. Macrina*, trans. Anna Silvas, in *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008.109-148). Ilaria Ramelli situates Gregory's treatment of the soul in AR within the philosophical tradition of treatises given in *On the Soul*. She indicates that Origen never wrote a work titled *On the Soul* but did write an *On the Resurrection*. Origen knew and cited Middle Platonists' relevant books, including Plutach's *On the Soul* and Numenius' second book *On the Indestructibility of the Soul*. Justin the Martyr wrote a σχολικόν *On the Soul* as attested by Eusebius *HE* (4.18) which is now lost but may have been known to Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. Another Christian Platonist, Athenagoras, composed an *On the Resurrection*. Origen's older contemporary Tertullian composed both an *On the Soul* and an *On the Resurrection*. "Gregory opted for a synthesis, in one and the same work, of the philosophical genre *On the Soul* with the Christian (for him, Origenian) genre *On the Resurrection*, within the framework of a remake of a Platonic dialogue," introduction, 4. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Soul (and the Restoration): From Plato to Origen," *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Neil B. McLynn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.110-141.)

2 The term "philosophy" or "philosophize" appears 15 times in the text. In late antiquity, the term "philosophy" was widely used by Christian intellectuals to refer to Christianity. For example, Justine the martyr adopted the term "philosophy" to describe Christian ways of life and belief in *Dialogue with Trypho*. See Saint Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy or the Rule of God*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of American Press, 2008.373-421.) Also refer to C. Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2016.155.)In Gregory's text, "philosophy" is especially attached to the ascetic life, which is characterized by celibacy, consistent praying, reading Scripture, singing hymns, mutual respect and serving the community.

Composed by the church father who is famous for his contributions to theological anthropology,[3] VSM and AR nevertheless appear somehow "problematic" in anthropology. Macrina's marvelous detachment might prove her to be a perfect philosopher for Nyssa and his contemporaries; however, it is hard for the modern reader to identify with her impenetrable attitude towards suffering. Her derogatory or at least marginalized description of nonintellectual human activities seems to undervalue the importance of the body, rendering emotions and the senses redundant. Her standing point seems to cite a permanent tension between the soul and body for living people. This tension is positioned at the center of several works on VSM published over the last three decades.[4] Very recently, a book based on a conference at Oxford titled *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies* was released, in which a series of articles concentrate on Gregory's view of the soul.[5] For example, Mark Edwards objects to the recent interpretation of Gregory's integral understanding of humans and puts forward that Gregory is more a Platonist than Origen if the term Platonist is intended to "connote a dualistic anthropology and a lower valuation of the written text as a medium of instruction" (74) based on the comments of Gregory and Origen on the Song of Song. Ilaria Ramelli investigates Gregory's views on

3 Since Daniélou released *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, a human being's perpetual progress towards God ('Epektasis') has become a preeminent theme in modern scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa. For a description of the *Epektasis*, see "Introduction" in *From Glory to Glory*, trans. and ed. Herbert Musurillo (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979. 3-78.) See also Xueying Wang, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Corporate Nature of the Human Body" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, South Bend, 2014.1-2.)

4 For example, see the discussion of grief in VSM by Rowan William, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion." In *Christian Faith and Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead*. Edited by L. Wickham & C. Bammel, 227–246. Leiden: Brill, 1993; Warren Smith, "Macrina, Tamer of Horses and Healer of Souls: Grief and the Therapy of Hope in Gregory of Nyssa's *De Anima et Resurrectione*." *Journal of Theological Studies*, 52 (2000): 37–60; "A Just and Reasonable Grief: The Death and Function of a Holy Woman in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina." *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 12 (2004), 57-84; and Wessel, S. "Memory and Individuality in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogues de Anima et Resurrectione." *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 18(2010), 369–392.

5 *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Neil B. McLynn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Articles in the book related to Gregory's understanding of the soul include "Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the Song of Songs" by Mark Edwards, 74-92; "Gregory of Nyssa on the Soul (and the Restoration): From Plato to Origen" by Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, 110-141; "The Soul as Dynamis in Gregory of Nyssa's On the Soul and Resurrection" by Johannes Zachhuber, 142-159; and "Christian Formation and the Body–Soul Relationship in Gregory of Nyssa" by Morwenna Ludlow, 160-178.

the soul against the backdrop of Plato's theories, focusing in particular on the soul's resurrection or restoration. Her article explores the influence of Gregory's views on Evagrius' theories of "the threefold resurrection (of body, soul, and nous) and of the subsumption of body into soul and soul into nous (the so-called 'unified nous')" (110). Johannes Zachhuber indicates that though "Gregory was heir to Platonic ideas about the soul as an intelligible substance," his replacement of the soul's pre-existence with resurrection leads his theory of the soul to "move consciously and decisively away from Platonic premises" (143). Furthermore, the soul "permeates the body from within as an imminent, moving principle" (149). Morwenna Ludlow notes that Christian formation, in Gregory's view, is not a matter for the soul alone but of "the reorientation of the whole person" (166). The publication shows that Gregory's concept of the soul, as key to his anthropology and psychology, stands at the center of scholarship on Gregory. Furthermore, as Zachhuber concludes, Gregory's "observational starting point serves to justify an empirical approach,"[6] which helped Gregory develop his particular theory of the soul, which has a strong hermeneutic capacity to explain psychological phenomena and guide the concrete process of Christian spiritual formation, as Ramelli argues. Gregory's "(unsystematic) anthropology" and "eclectic psychology" (Smith, *Passion*, 14, 48) attract scholars in its openness towards both philosophical speculation and the possibility for transformation into spiritual practice.

This article attempts to participate in the discussion of Gregory's theory of the soul by focusing on Macrina's deathbed prayer to address to her seemingly negative view of the body. It argues that the prayer interweaves two arguments (philosophical and mythical) shaped by varied resources and that complement one another in depicting an ideal image of the Christian soul closely associated with the body in spiritual formation. I first discuss the genre of VSM as a "philosophic biography" that underwrites the content of the deathbed prayer and then analyze how the prayer is organized to respond to the philosophical concept of preparing for death. I then indicate that the prayer provides a Christian answer to immortality but inherits tensions between the soul and body in Plato's *Phaedo*. Finally, I show how the prayer, in confessing grace, organizes a formational narration that relieves tensions

6 Johannes Zachhuber, "The Soul as Dynamis," ibid, 147. Moreover, Gregory made a long argument for the immaterial and intellectual property of the soul (*On the Making of Man*, 13-15.3) mostly from the medical observation of the human mind. It is worth mentioning that unlike Socrates, Gregory's reasoning depends more on an observation of experiences and completely gives up on mathematic justification. For example, Gregory argued that the harmonious fabric of the universe hints at its wise and skillful designs (AR 1.23) but did not use Pythagorean analogies. The latter, nevertheless, were important to Plato's reasoning.

of philosophic arguments of the soul and body by virtue of a mythical approach.

The Genre and Textual Background of the Deathbed Prayer

The rise and prevalence of hagiography represent a new understanding of the world and of human beings. Hagiography emerged in late antiquity and prevailed for roughly 1000 years as the dominant narrative in the Middle Ages. Simon Swain comments that "[t]he period of the Roman Empire shows a great increase in the portraiture of the individual in writing and art, i.e., in biographical texts in the widest sense" (Swain, 2). He suggests that the transformation of the concept of status and solidified social stratification played a crucial role in prompting the emergence of hagiographies (Swain, 4). On the other hand, Peter Brown, in a series of publications,[7] argues that "[h]agiography served as a magnifying glass to focus into the burning pinpoint of one man's life the sun of 'divine power'" (*Making*, 14). Swain and Brown's perspective is based in the social functions of the holy man. Their research focuses more on the background and reception of hagiographies than on the intentions of the writer. Though Gregory of Nyssa hoped to make Macrina an exemplar, it is difficult to claim that his main purpose was to depict Macrina as one of "the limited number of exceptional human agents" for the "divine power" (*Making*, 12). While his narration includes the two miracles of Macrina, Gregory expected his narrative of Macrina to participate in the "debate for the holy"[8] but in the vein of philosophical concerns. Anna Silvas suggests that "Macrina fell naturally into the role of a Christian Socrates on the eve of her death discussing with her brother-disciple why she was not afraid of death, and arguing for the continuance of the soul."[9] Silvas calls AR "the Christian Phaedo" (Maraval, 155). Nevertheless, it might be more appropriate to say that VSM and AR comprise the "Christian Phaedo," for they together respond to two components of Phaedo: the narrative on how Socrates faced death in the company of friends and his reasoning on the existence of the soul.

7 Peter Brown, "the Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 61 (1971): 80-101; *The Making of the Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978; *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981; Peter Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations*, No. 2 (Spring, 1983), 1-25.

8 A Debate for the Holy is the title of the first chapter of Brown's work *The Making of the Late Antiquity*.

9 *Macrina the Younger,* 159. Maraval calls VSM 'philosophical biography,' *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, 21–23, 92. Pierre Maraval, ed. and trans., *Grégoire de Nysse: Vie de Sainte Macrine* (Paris: Cerf, 1971).

Plato's *Phaedo* was a classic from the moment of its appearance.[10] The figure of Socrates was extraordinarily heroic for his unparalleled detachment and optimism in facing death. On one hand, Gregory knew that Socrates's reasoning on the soul and immortality was influential; therefore, a Christian answer to the same topics should have a dialogue with *Phaedo* and appropriate it to Christianity. On the other hand, as a man of letters, Gregory realized the infectious narrative qualities of *Phaedo*. The narrative depicted Socrates as an animated and tragic human being, arousing the reader's sympathy. Hence, AR alone, which has only two interlocutors, cannot compete with *Phaedo* in the rich interactions of it characters; an equivalent narration of Macrina must be created to attract the reader with a charismatic heroine. Sensitive to different functions of different genres, Gregory split his "Phaedo" into two texts: a biography of Macrina and a dialogue between Macrina and himself. The hagiography was addressed to a friend "in an unstudied and simple narrative," (1.5)[11] which is accessible to common readers, while AR is a philosophical dialogue for intellectuals. With these two texts, Gregory made Macrina a rival of Socrates.

The biography of Macrina is more than a counterpart of Socrates' deathbed scene and includes more elements. Gregory combined the form of biography, or hagiography as later scholars call it, with a detailed description of Macrina's deathbed days according to his personal experience on the spot, which was apparently inspired by *Phaedo*. VSM is a literary masterpiece. Among the many stereotypical legendary hagiographies coming before and after it, VSM stands out in its touching and persuasive narration from the witnessing of an affectionate sibling.

Gregory adopted several narrative threads to delineate the ideal figure of Macrina. Gregory and Phaedo are both first-person narrators who witnessed their masters' deaths. Their roles as loyal and defective disciples set off the narrates' superiority and flawlessness. In contrast, the figure of Gregory is richer than Phaedo. Gregory was a priest with a good reputation as a prominent theologian; nevertheless, he demonstrates a series of unstable emotions; readers are exposed

10 L. G. Westerink., *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, Amsterdam; New York: North-Holland Pub. Co., 1976-1977. Introduction, 7.

11 For a review of Gregory's style, see Silvas: "In favour of 'artlessness', Gregory does show a certain freedom in his construction of the VSM, not holding himself bound to all the conventions of late antique biography or encomium. The narrative weaves backwards and forwards in a way that might have been tidied up in a more thoroughly revised work. So much for 'unstudied'. Yet rhetoric is never absent from Gregory's style. Cf. for example the summary description of the virgin's way of life (13), Macrina's prayer before death (24), and the sisters' lament (26), all highly wrought literary pieces." *Macrina the Younger,* 111.

to his weakness in feeling and interior conflicts, helping readers sympathize with the narrator's perspective and receive his opinion for his humble posture and accessibility. Furthermore, the monastic women function similarly to other friends of Socrates, who mourned losing Macrina and needed to be oriented to higher levels of philosophy. In taking advantage of the biographical genre, Gregory depicted much more their words, activities, and, particularly, affections towards Macrina than dialogue as Phaedo could incorporate. This enriches the view of Macrina as an influential and deeply loved leader in her community and strengthens the force of the eulogy. Finally, VSM traces Macrina's family story, including her illustrious family and her formative years. This part is totally absent in *Phaedo* and in any of Plato's dialogues. The narration of her growth makes her more understandable and accessible to the reader. With these approaches, Gregory constructs the figure of Macrina from many angles, rendering her an animate protagonist.

In VSM, Gregory records Macrina's deathbed prayer, which also constitutes her last words. The prayer is long but harmoniously embedded in the biography of Macrina. If VSM functions as a replacement of the narrative part of *Phaedo*, this prayer serves as a full disclosure of the Christian philosopher's inner world. Some scholars noticed this peculiar prayer. Pierre Maraval suggests that "[h]er final prayer and the liturgical context of her last moments make explicit the Christian sense of her entire trajectory [...] The pursuit of the philosophical ideal is none other than the mystical ascent to Christ."[12] Anna Silvas remarks that "[h]er life of Christian philosophy which was always an anticipation of the angelic life of the resurrection climaxes at last in her mystical communion in prayer on her deathbed, a prayer of final self-offering that bears features of a Eucharistic anaphora" (105). She also indicates that the prayer is liturgical and mystical (104-8). Nevertheless, though the prayer allows for some institutional associations, the content is strictly biblical and not mysterious. Below is Macrina's deathbed prayer:

> "It is you O Lord…who have freed us from the fear of death (Hebrews 2. 15), you who have made the end of our life here the beginning of true life for us, you who put our bodies to rest in sleep a little while and will waken them again at the last trumpet (I Corinthians 15. 52), you who return our earth fashioned by your hands (cf. Genesis 2. 7), to the earth (cf. Genesis 3. 19; Job 10. 9; Ecclesiastes 3. 20) for safekeeping, and will retrieve again what you once gave, transforming what is mortal and unseemly in us (cf. I

12 Maraval, *Vie*, 92. Translation from *Macrina the Younger,* 107.

Corinthians 15. 53) with immortality and grace, you who have rescued us from the curse (cf. Galatians 3. 13) and from sin, having become both for our sakes (cf. II Corinthians 5. 21), you who have shattered the head of the dragon (cf. Psalm 73. 13, 14, Septuagint) who had seized man in his jaws and dragged him into the yawning abyss of disobedience, you who have opened up for us the way to the Resurrection, having trampled down the gates of Hades (cf. Psalm 106. 16, Matthew 16. 18) and brought him who had the power over death (Hebrews 2. 14) to naught, you who have given a sign (Psalm 59. 16) to those who fear you, the symbol of the Holy Cross, to destroy the adversary and to secure our life. O God the eternal one, to whom I have cleaved from my mother's womb (cf. Psalm 21. 11), whom my soul has loved (Song of Songs 1. 7) with all its strength (cf. Mark 12. 30), to whom I have dedicated my flesh and my soul from youth even until now, send an angel of light to be by my side to guide me to the place of refreshment (cf. Psalms 65. 12, 38. 14), to the water of repose (Psalm 22. 2), in the bosom of the holy Fathers (cf. Luke 16. 22). You who averted the flame of the fiery sword (Genesis 3. 24) and brought to Paradise the man who was co-crucified with you and implored your mercies remember me, too, in your kingdom (Luke 23. 42), since I, too, was co-crucified with you (cf. Galatians 2. 19, Romans 6. 6), having nailed my flesh in the fear of you, for I have feared your judgment (Psalm 118. 120, Septuagint; cf. Galatians 5. 24). Do not let the terrible abyss sunder me from your elect (Luke 16. 26), or the Slanderer stand in the way to oppose me (cf. Zechariah 3. 1, Revelation 12. 10), or my sin be uncovered before your eyes, if I have sinned in word or deed or thought, led astray in some way through the weakness of our nature. O you who have power on earth to forgive sins (Matthew 9. 6, Mark 2. 10), spare me, that I may revive (Psalm 38. 14) and as I put off my body (cf. Colossians 2. 11) be found before you without stain or blemish (cf. Ephesians 5. 27) in the form of my soul. But, may my soul be received into your hands (cf. Psalm 30. 6) blameless and undefiled (cf. 2 Peter 3.14) as an incense offering in your sight (Psalm 140. 2; cf. Romans 12.1)."

The most prominent feature of Macrina's deathbed prayer lies in the intensity of its scripture. Apart from its sentences and phrases that quote Scripture directly, the rest of the prayer is filled with biblical concepts and images. The Gospels, Epistles of apostles, and Psalms are cited most. This echoes Gregory's retrospective treatment of Macrina's education since childhood. Their mother thoughtfully

selected her daughter's formational texts, avoiding conventional Greek classical works, including "tragedy," "comedy," and Homeric epics. Instead, "whatever of inspired Scripture was adaptable to the early years, this was the child's subject matter." Exposed to the Wisdom of Solomon and to other scriptures that "lead us to a moral life," Macrina was especially well versed in the Psalms, thinking and praying with the Psalter all day (Silvas, 165).

Furthermore, prayers were the center of Macrina's ascetic practice. Gregory praised the community: "there was constant prayer and an unceasing singing of hymns distributed throughout the entire day and night" (Silvas. 172). Women prayed at the reception of Gregory; Macrina devoted her night to prayers after speaking with Gregory; her last breath accompanied the prayer; people prayed while burying her; the soldier narrated the healing function of Macrina's prayer. The prayer permeates the whole text; it serves as a condensed image of Macrina's life. In Gregory's eyes, Macrina is the "holy" (27.4, 29.1, 30.4, 31.2, 32.2, 33.1, 37.1, 40.3, 41.1), "that blessed soul" (40.1), "the lofty and noble soul" (12.4), and "this divine soul" (29.2). While Macrina prayed at the end of her life, her body almost ceased to function. Her physical and spiritual state shows that she was detached from her body and lived like a pure soul. Therefore, it is appropriate to regard her deathbed prayer as a disclosure of the soul in an ideal Christian way.

Phaedo is a dialogue about facing death and is also widely known and referred to as 'on the soul' in antiquity (Gertz, 14). Since *Phaedo*, the existence of the soul has become a strong argument for immortality. Socrates defined death as the separation of the body from the soul (*Phaedo* 64c). He announced that philosophical life prepares people for their death best by embracing the correct understanding of the soul and living a philosophical life.[13] His famous claim that the philosopher practices "nothing other than dying and being dead" (64a) illustrates his main view. As a Christian philosopher, Macrina faced death with her prayer, which, for Gregory, is her philosophizing.

A Prayer of Resurrection and the Problem of the Soul

A second look at Macrina's prayer reveals that it is a summary of scriptural (mostly from NT) teachings about death and immortality. Scriptural verses, images, and concepts are carefully interwoven to represent a Christian view of immortality echoing Macrina's idea on the same topic given in AR.

13 "[A] man who has truly spent his life in philosophy feels confident when about to die, and is hopeful that, when he has died, he will win very great benefits in the other world" (64a). Plato, *Phaedo*, Translated by David Gallop, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

The prayer begins with "[o] Lord…who have freed us from the fear of death" (Heb. 2.15). This indicates that Macrina was confronted with imminent death without fear; her courage originated from her faith in Christ and from His redemptive work. The prayer is Christ-centered and narrates Christ's mission in the world: Incarnation, Crucifixion, breaking the gates of Hades, and Resurrection. Macrina believed that Christ's series of deeds in dealing with death opened up for Christians the way to the Resurrection, making "the end of our life here the beginning of true life for us" (26.2). She was not afraid of death for she believed that she would be raised.

Naming afterlife the "true life" discloses that the prayer was influenced by *Phaedo*, for it was originally a Platonic idea to regard this world as a shadow and the world of Forms as reality. Socrates claimed a longing for death in contending that "the philosopher differs from other men in releasing his soul, as far as possible, from its communion with the body" (*Phaedo* 65a); yet the philosopher discerns that "all the bodily senses are neither accurate nor clear" (*Phaedo* 65b) and "disdains the body and flees from it" (*Phaedo* 65d). The theory of Forms is not as clear in *Phaedo* as in *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, but Socrates' argument presumes the theory of Forms. For example, his argument of anamnesis (recollection) is based on the theory of Forms. He argued that humans reference concepts such as absolute Beauty, absolute Good, absolute justice, and "pure knowledge" that cannot be obtained from the senses because the soul achieves these before being embodied and retrieves them from memory after birth (*Phaedo* 65a-d). Compared to the permanent and divine world of Forms, the material world is the shadow of this real world (*Republic* 514b–515a). The divine world was also where Socrates repeatedly said that he wished to arrive after death. In contrast, though Paul showed a desire for a "better" afterlife, he never regarded the created world as a shadow or lesser entity because the Hebrew tradition to which Paul belonged did not hold a dualistic worldview. However, for intellectuals of late antiquity immersed in Greco philosophies, some passages in NT inevitably seemed to endorse a Platonic view of the world. Gregory inherited Origen in Christianizing Platonism. Hence, the vocabulary of Macrina's prayer shows a Platonic interpretation of scriptures with respect to the afterlife but accepts the interpretation in the realm of the catholic doctrine.[14]

The prayer then turns to teachings of resurrection in I & II Corinthians. Macrina's understanding of the resurrection is strictly biblical and orthodox with

14 For example, Paul said that "to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (*Philippians* 1.23); *Hebrews* also praises the faithful ancestors in that "they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (*Hebrews* 11:16).

God creating the human body from the earth and where in virtue of Christ's ministry the body is retrieved and turned immortal (ἀθανασίαν) in its last days. Paul announced that the raised body would be "imperishable" (ἀφθαρσία, 1 Corinthians 15.42, 53) and "a spiritual body" of immortality (ἀθανασίαν, 1 Corinthians 15.44, 53, 54). This is Macrina's belief. In contrast to her belief in resurrection that guarantees her immortality, Socrates' detachment from death was grounded on an argument: the immortality of the soul. Socrates argued that the soul is essential to and a permanent part of humans; it remains when the body dies; hence, people should not fear death. It is worthy to note that while Macrina accepted Plato's idea that the soul forms an essential part of human beings and remains after the body dies, she did not discuss the immortality of the soul or speculate on the soul's independent existence. Gregory's silence regarding the animal's soul stands in sharp contrast to Middle Platonist's interests in the topic. For Gregory, the soul is created and cannot be immortal, for God alone is immortal. While adopting many Platonic vocabularies and arguments, Gregory did not share all Platonic assumptions of the soul.

For Macrina, the final authority comes from Scripture. If there are some theories that conflict with Scripture, Christians must abandon them.[15] Along with Plato's idea of the immortal soul are two theories: the preexistence and reincarnation of the soul. The soul's unfleshly existence entails anamnesis and reincarnation, which explain where the soul has been and will be when it is not with the body. Hence, forms the complete narration of the soul: where the soul has come from, how the soul conflicts with the body in this life, how it will exist after people die. Macrina, however, rejected these two theories, for they did not conform with scriptural teachings.

First, God created the whole human being with one action; the body and soul are in the seed of His creation; thus, there is no preexistence of the soul. Gregory accepted Socrates' argument that the property that differentiates one from others is the essential part of the entity; this, with respect to humans, means that rationality forms the essential part of the soul and of human beings (AR 3.16). However, he related the soul's rational essence to its divine origin, God, and did not go further to follow Socrates in connecting human intellectual capability with the theory of Forms and anamnesis. He resorted to Scripture to explain the origins of human intellect: the human being is the image of God, whom God appointed to dominate the world image (Genesis 1.26-27); rationality as the distinct intellectual ability that

15 The authority of Scriptures sets the boundary for what Gregory could receive and reason (AR 44, 45, 50, 54).

originated from God is afforded to humans to fulfill the task (On the Making of the Man (henceforth HO 4.1).

Second, the theory of reincarnation is absurd for it is neither in accordance with the doctrine of the resurrection nor convictive. Socrates used reincarnation to support human immortality: death does not take away their better and fundamental part; instead, it can accomplish purification and free the soul from the body. Nevertheless, for Gregory, since resurrection clears the way to immortality, the theory of reincarnation is redundant and even undermines the doctrine of resurrection, for it provides another version of immortality incompatible with Scripture. To reject reincarnation, on one hand, Gregory highlights the defects of the theory. First, even the soul returns to the heavenly world, it is where it falls; this forms "a cycle of much the same recurring patterns" (AR 8.19-25). Second, the theory neglects the continuity and accumulation of sin. In introducing the biblical idea of sin to anthropology, Gregory reasoned that it is impossible for the soul to return to a rational state once it falls into irrationality, for its close association with passion can only lead to a further fall. The soul has no chance of being purified when it combines with a lower state: irrational animals, insentient plants, or inorganic matter (HO 28.3-7, AR 8.3-22). In this way, Gregory persuasively rejected reincarnation.[16]

In the prayer, Gregory skillfully employs scriptural resources to respond to the Platonic doctrine of the immortal soul. VSM and AR follow *Phaedo*'s focus, scenes, forms, and reasoning but adapt them to Christianity. Nevertheless, the deep involvement of the VSM and AR with *Phaedo* also creates the same tension in Gregory texts as observed in *Phaedo*. That is, a prioritization of the soul leads to "inhuman" violence, at least linguistically, inflicted on the body. Accordingly, this tension becomes a complication of Gregory's theory of the soul as it does for Platonists.

The Unsolved Problem of the Soul

This part discusses problems of Plato's theory of the soul that remain in Gregory's texts about Macrina. It first introduces the contribution and inherent

16 Other related arguments for resurrection include the fact that Jesus raised several dead people in the Gospels (HO 24.10-13); some materials can reunite after separation: seeds that die in the earth grow into new plants (HO 26.6, 7; AR 5.5-11); and the soul leaves signs in its original material elements for their commixture (HO 27.2, 5; AR 16-23). "[T]he soul is disposed to cling to and long for the body that has been wedded to it, there also attaches to it in secret a certain close relationship and power of recognition" (HO 27.2).

tensions between the soul and body in Phaedo and then indicates that the "problematic" figure of Macrina comes from this tension when Gregory inherits many of Plato's arguments.

Ancient texts show that existence beyond the tomb was a widespread concept in most civilizations around the Mediterranean (e.g., Homeric epics and Theogony, Egyptian Book of the Dead, Gilgamesh, and The Hebrew Bible) no matter how diverse and ambiguous the idea is.[17] This existence of an afterlife was named "the soul (ψυχή)" in Greek. E. R. Dodds comments, "[t]he Classical Age inherited a series of inconsistent pictures of the soul and the self" (Dodds, 177). *Phaedo* is one of the most important resources for the discussion of the soul. Its contribution covers several crucial aspects. First, Socrates' theory of the soul helps explain some fundamental conflicting existential experiences, which include mortal humans desiring immortality and difficult choices made between the senses and morality. Second, in constructing the idea of the immortal soul, it sets a rigid moral retributive system between this life and the afterlife, laying the foundation for the argument of morality. Third, the dialogue identifies the soul with intellectual activities; hence, it confirms the divine essence of both the soul and human beings. Fourth, *Phaedo*'s arguments and conclusion were witnessed by a great philosopher who faced death with remarkable courage. Socrates' witness was so powerful and influential that, since the appearance of *Phaedo*, any schools or intellectuals who wished to touch the topic needed to respond to *Phaedo*'s arguments on the soul.[18]

Phaedo's theory of the soul, nevertheless, is not faultless. T. M. Robinson contends that a good number of "inconsistent pictures of the soul and the self" seem to have found their way into *Phaedo*, in which the soul-body relationship is in essence "unnatural." On one hand, the soul is "our most genuine self, complete with all the complexity and change that go with cognition, desire, decision making, and a whole range of potential pains and pleasures" (Robinson, 40). On the other hand, it is "most like the divine and immortal and intellectual and uniform and indissoluble and ever unchanging" (*Phaedo* 80b). As a result, the theory of the soul

17 See Alan E. Bernstein. *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1993.

18 Plato's view of the soul is original but unsystematic. According to T. M. Robinson, Plato's dialogues suggest that "Socrates himself had some difficulty grappling with the problem, offering various tentative solutions—ranging from the purest dualism of *Gorgias*, 493aI-5, to the mitigated the dualism of *Alcibiades* I to the uniquely formulated monism of the *Charmides*." See "The Defining Features of Mind-Body Dualism in the Writing of Plato." In John P. Wright and Paul Potter ed. *Psyche and Soma: Physicians and Metaphysicians on the Mind-Body Problem from Antiquity to Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 37-56. 40.

that claims to prepare people best for their happiness goes against all sensible parts of human beings. Put differently, the theory tends to split human beings, depriving humans of the flesh. Speaking in the context of imminent death, Socrates' eulogy of the soul separating from the body shows his unbeatable bravery, which transformed into the persuasive power of his argument. Nevertheless, to expect this separation in daily life means renouncing the whole material world, including the human body, emotions, and the senses. Such a radical dualistic theory creates two problems. First, it is difficult to explain how the soul animates the body, constituting the reason for Aristotle rejecting Plato's theory in De Anima (I 3, 407b13–26). Second, it is difficult to judge the soul's boundaries and difficult to practice in daily life. Later, Platonists also found that this rigid point requires clarification. For example, to solve tensions the theory created with regard to statesmen who deal with material things, Platonist Olympiodorus explained that statesmen who deal with civic life not only know sensible things but must know the principles of all three.[19] The function of statesmen was crucial for Plato in other dialogues on political life. In this way, Olympiodorus attempted to harmonize Socrates' detached attitude towards the material world with statesmen's occupation with worldly issues. The tension between the soul and body constituted one of the most important intellectual premises when assertions about death, immortality, and the soul in NT appeared in the Greco-Roman world.[20]

Gregory's adoption of Platonic theory of the soul was strictly limited to the realm of scriptures. The word "soul" (psyche) as it appears in the New Testament is not a dependent or philosophical concept but leaves room for its development against the Greek background. N. T. Wright argues that "for Paul it is the body, not

19 *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, 76-79. Olympiodorus attempted to have different dialogues be in accordance with one another. Therefore, he needed to consider the noble status that Plato gave to statesmen in *Republics* and avoided disvaluing them for dealing with sensible things. Plotinus also showed strong interests in the difficult issue of the soul–body relation; see S. Clark, 'Plotinus: Body and Soul', in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 275–91.)

20 This tendency is developed in Stoics in regard to atheism. Phaedo's emphasis on rationality has many echoes in later generations. Refer to Xian Gang 先刚. "Plato's Doctrines of 'Recollection' and 'Immortal Soul'" 柏拉图的"回忆说"和"灵魂不朽论"(Bolatu de'huiyi shuo'he'linghun buxiu lun') *Yunnan University Journal*1(2017): 5-12.. Print. Xian claims that "stripped off the cloak of the myth, doctrines of 'recollection' and 'immortal soul' demonstrate but a thorough rational worldview and rational epistemology." 12. Furthermore, he recommends viewing "the immoral soul" as "immortal rationality," as the former cannot be achieved through Plato's reasoning and is the concern of religion rather than philosophy. 10.

just the soul, the mind or the spirit, which is the temple of the living God."[21] Wright asserts that if people are loyal to the New Testament in its original Jewish context and setting, there is a need to refuse a dualistic understanding of the soul and body that was "contaminated" (Wright) by Plato(nism). In NT, the soul often refers to life or creatures (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 2.8; Philippians 1.27; 2.30; Romans 2.9; 11.3; 13.1; 16.4; 2 Corinthians 1.23) (Wright). Nevertheless, scholars have long noted that certain scriptural passages in the Letters to the Corinthians show "apparent Platonic dependence."[22] Other similar passages include 1 Thessalonians 5.23, Romans 7.22; 2 Corinthians 4.16, and Ephesians 3.16. Furthermore, there are immaterial beings in NT: God and spirits.[23] Even if the dualistic view does not fit the original meanings given in NT, there is still a need to describe these immaterial beings and human relationships to them. For instance, what allows humans to communicate with the spiritual world where God belongs if humans do not enjoy an immaterial existence? Against the intellectual setting of late antiquity, intellectuals of late antiquity adopted existing ideas of the soul in understanding Paul's words.[24] For an original theologian such as Gregory, who discerned various hindrances and traps associated with using Platonic soul without discrimination, it was a challenging but necessary work to explain what the soul is for Christians. His dialogue with Macrina clearly indicates his awareness of this challenge.

While Gregory admitted to the difficulty of exploring the concept of the soul,[25] it was too important to be avoided. Understanding of the soul stood at the center of anthropology in late antiquity. Christian needed to clarify how salvation functions

21 N. T. Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body: All for One and One for All Reflections on Paul's Anthropology in his Complex Contexts" at the Society of Christian Philosophers: Regional Meeting, Fordham University on March 18, 2011. http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/mind-spirit-soul-and-body/, NTWrightPage, accessed January 2, 2020.

22 Theo K. Heckel, "Body and Soul in Saint Paul," 117-132. in *Psyche and Soma*, 118. Bultmann believes that these passages of "dualistic" tone can be attributed to the fact that "Paul's ability to reason abstractly is not developed." Bultmann, *Theologie*, 199. Heckel argues that "the dialogue about body and soul grew out of an interrogation of Paul by the Corinthians" who belonged to "religious Platonism," 120-1.

23 For example, see John 4.24: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

24 To see how common non-Christian Roman readers understood Pauline anthropology through Greek philosophy, refer to Outi Lehtipuu, "Some facets of Pauline anthropology – How Would a Greco-Roman Reader understand it?" *Anthropology in the New Testament and Its Ancient Context*, eds. Michael Labahn and Outi Lehtipuu. (Leuven; Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2010) 55-86.

25 In the spirit of apophatic theology, he claimed that the nature of the mind as invisible from its prototype, God, is unspeakable and lies beyond human understanding, as his image is (HO 11).

in humans and the soul as an essential part of human beings playing an unavoidable role in clarification. Furthermore, an understanding of the soul also helped Christians practice their religion daily since they are supposed to live a life that shows signs of salvation. Discussion of the soul in the ancient world functioned like today's psychology in helping people understand themselves and assess themselves with regard to their faith and virtues.

AR begins with Gregory's questioning of the existence of the soul. After putting forward the theory of intelligent design, Macrina avoided recollection and contended that the capacity for rationality alone serves as evidence of the soul. In her definition, the soul "is an engendered substance, a living and intellectual substance which infuses into an organic and sensate body the power of living and of receiving the impressions of sense" (AR 2.5).[26] While viewing the soul as an organizing and life-giving power, Gregory's focus is to argue on whether the soul is rational, as irrational features such as anger and desire can be observed. Macrina answered that emotions are passions that do not share the substance of human nature and should be removed (AR 3.16, 22-30). However, Gregory retorted that this opinion does not benefit virtues and that even Scripture admits that certain emotions are positive (AR 3.31). Macrina then conceded and said that emotions are neutral; they "[lie]on the borderland of the soul" and do not belong to the archetype (God) of the soul. In Genesis, creation is first insensate, and then sensate, and then rational (AR 3.37). The human being was created in the final stage with rationality alone bearing "the stamp of the divine character" (AR 3.41). It is also appropriate for the irrational to mingle with the intellectual part of the soul, as reasoning power cannot come to be in bodily life "except that it comes into being with the senses" (AR 3.41-43). Moreover, emotions are instruments of virtue or vice according to the ways that humans make their choices. For example, in controlling rationality, "[f]ear would only generate obedience, and anger courage, and timidity caution, and the impulse of desire would sponsor the divine and undefiled delight" (AR 3.44). These senses and emotions might be useful and even necessary for the soul to restore its image of God.

As can be observed above, Gregory, in some sense, inherited Plato's tensions with respect to the soul and body. The term "borderland" is an ambiguous metaphor hinting at the fact that emotion is a temporary and inessential part of the soul; after

26 See also AR 11, 24-31, 53.

resurrection, emotions disappear and rationality alone remains.[27] This also forms the origins of Macrina's "unnatural" attitude towards grief. Cleansing fleshly attachments or passions then becomes the most important work for the living (AR 6.4). An attitude rejecting this life makes Macrina's ascetical theory and practice adhere better to Platonic dualism and seems to lose a solid foundation in scriptural anthropology.

A Prayer that Confesses Love

Regarding Gregory's views on the connection between the soul and body, his anthropology undoubtedly is an ascetic theology. Nevertheless, it would be a misunderstanding to think that his ascetic theology was Platonism disguised as Christianity and that Macrina simply applied this dualistic view upon practicing in the name of piety. Johannes Zachhuber believes that certain Christian premises such as resurrection limit the use of Platonic interpretation in Gregory's theory. This section argues that the mythical argument made in VSM, as demonstrated by the deathbed prayer, shows Gregory's understanding of the soul through a visible model. Only by joining philosophical and mythical arguments can one develop a full account of Gregory's views of the soul.

It was common for Neo-Platonists to use both philosophical and mythical arguments. For instance, Olympiodorus named these two arguments in his commentary on *Phaedo*.[28] He offered allegorical interpretations of Greek myths to support Socrates' moral request even though these myths do not appear in *Phaedo*. At the end of *Phaedo*, Socrates describes a myth without clear origins, which might have been fabricated to make the afterlife desirable. It is worth noting that after thoroughly renouncing the fleshly world, Socrates depicted the other world as including splendid materials impressively pleasing to the senses. This also shows that Plato was not alien to the mythical argument.

While serving as an underlying dialogue with *Phaedo*, Macrina's deathbed prayer employs a mythical argument in contrast to the lengthy reasoning given in AR. Olympiodorus believed it important to have dialectical arguments agree with Greek myths; hence, he dragged the latter into his commentary. Gregory,

27 This is the opinion that AR holds. However, Gregory seems to present different ideas in *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, which asserts that the soul never ceases to desire God. Warren Smith discusses the incoherence of Gregory's views on whether eros remains eschatologically. *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004.

28 "Socrates, demonstrating by his very reserve the esoteric character of the myth, adds nothing but 'that we are in a sort of custody'; the commentators, however, add the myth from other sources." *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, 42.

however, did not need to do this, for he had access to rich resources of the "Great Narrative" in the tradition of Christianity. Scripture contains a full narrative from the beginning of the world to the last days along with an omnipotent and faithful God who is actively involved in human history. This "myth" serves as self-evident support for Macrina's account. Moreover, the prayer interweaves two other narratives with this "Great Narrative."

The first is the aforementioned Christ-centered narrative embedded in God's salvation plan for human beings. The second is Macrina's confession of God's grace in her life. The prayer includes a brief summary of Macrina's life. She "cleaved to God from [her] mother's womb," as Gregory recorded in his account that their mother had a dream when she was expecting Macrina that foretold Macrina's life. "From youth [she] has dedicated to God," which refers to her education and choice of celibacy. She was "cocrucified with Christ" and "nailed (her) flesh," which means that she took an ascetic life. As a result, she was before God "without stain or blemish in the form of [her] soul." The original image of "without stain or blemish" is from Scripture and refers to a lamb sacrificed to God (1 Peter 1.19). In NT, it became a metaphor for the church. "[I]n the form of the soul" is added by Gregory to a scriptural image of another biblical origin: "whom my soul has loved" from the Song of Songs 3:4. The Septuagint translates OT "נַפְשִׁי" into "soul (ψυχή)" in Greek, which Paul and other NT writers kept in their letters. Gregory employed the OT phrase to represent the relationship between God and humans in the relationship between God and the soul. The phrase "without stain or blemish" indicates that Macrina has purified her soul of passions. Moreover, the prayer and brief biography show that the process of purification was by no means a reflective one, though Gregory often referred to it as a form of philosophizing. In the long discussion between the siblings, there is a scene in which Macrina recalls her life, and her bodily experiences are given a positive account due to grace. In VSM, Gregory mentions that she lost many important persons in her life: her fiancé, her two beloved brothers, her mother. However, according to her recollection, her life is full of grace, for God paved her way to philosophy from a young age with unceasing provisions. This recollection was constructed from an awareness of God's work in her personal life. Hence, Macrina's narrative is also God-centered. In this respect, Macrina was influenced by the OT. The Psalms to which she was devoted were filled with two types of narratives. The first is Israel's ethnic memory of God's salvation from Egypt, confirming Israel's identity and its relation to a merciful and just God. The second is the named or anonymous poets' personal narrative in front of God. These materials apparently affected the style and content

of Macrina's prayer in echoing the monistic anthropology of the OT, characterizing her as a humble supplicant fully committed to God.

There are two characteristics of a Christian soul according to Macrina's prayer. First, a Christian soul is God/Christ-centered. All of Macrina's attention is dedicated to her savior: her thoughts, love, and fears were completely directed towards the Lord. It was Him who led her through life and she expected Him to guide her to eternity. Second, the soul experienced God in the body as a necessary process of purification. Macrina's account corresponds with Gregory's records of her life. Gregory significantly narrated his hero's "failure" with regard to passion: though she was not annihilated even by Naucratius's tragic death, Basil's untimely death caused her irrational emotion. This record indicates that Gregory believed in the need for and possibility of the soul's restoration. Even though Macrina was fully blessed on account of her pious family and personal devotion, she still needed tests to purify her attachment to this life.

Ilaria Ramelli asserts that "the role of philosophy for the purification and illumination of the soul was a tenet of Platonism, both 'pagan' and Christian" (123). However, Macrina's philosophizing/prayer shows that Platonic purification and Christian formation also bear critical differences. For Plato, purification involves rationality controlling passions and finally removing them. For Gregory, Christian formation incorporates another aspect: the subject constructing its life narrative centered on God, whose grace is concrete, manifested, and plentiful in one's life to support one's blessed self-account. In this account, the soul and body are closely associated. As Macrina conceded to Gregory, emotions are useful and even necessary for the soul to achieve virtues. In HO, Gregory adopted the metaphor of the seed to describe the interactive and united relationship between the body and soul: "the seminal cause of our constitution is neither a soul without body, nor a body without a soul, but that, from animated and living bodies, it is generated at the first as living and animate being" (HO 30.29). However, he discussed the simultaneous development of the whole human being, including the soul and body, from the seed. Just as Macrina's soul grew stronger like an athlete who exercises after she experienced Basil's death, the body is not just a prison of the soul. Rather, the soul's growth needs the body, the senses, and feelings. In this way, philosophers' uncertain destination with the possibility of multiple reincarnations is transformed into the one-time Christian journey with bright prospects.

Narratives are naturally filled with bodies and experiences. Macrina's deathbed prayer is interwoven with both a Christian understanding of immortality and a depiction of her blessed journey. In philosophical arguments, the soul is essentially

rational and not necessarily clinging to the body, which alone encompasses an image of the divine, and humans must purify the soul to achieve immortality. In mythical arguments, the subject is a humble and grateful prayer before God, who guides the Christian towards himself with bountiful grace poured upon his life. In Gregory's account, the Christian soul is individual but not lonely given its communion with others throughout life; the ideal Christian soul desires virtuous commitment and an approachable pathway with the body to a bright future. In joining the two philosophical and mythical arguments, Gregory's VSM successfully established Macrina as an excellent saint prominent in the East and West; he also indicates that the soul's main task is purification and achieving moral excellence in the bodily experience of God, which is the process of restoring the image of God in humans. Furthermore, he demonstrated the importance of interweaving personal narratives with God's soteriological narrative in complementing philosophical arguments. This understanding paved the road for his later writings, including The Life of Moses and Homilies on Song of Songs. In these works, he explores the process of purification or restoration and describes spiritual formation in detail, forming the theoretical foundations of Eastern Orthodox ascetic practices.

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Author Profile:

Zhang Xin earned her PhD in comparative literature at Peking University with a specialization in Western Christian literature. She is currently associate professor at Beijing Normal University and the deputy director of the Center for the Study of Christian Literature & Arts at BNU. Her teaching and publications focus on Christian literature from ancient to present. Her monographs include *Jesus as Mirror: The Figure of Jesus in Western Novels in the 20th Century* and *The British Catholic Novels in the 20th Century*. She is working on a project "hagiographies in Late Antiquity" (18BWW074) executed under the National Social Science Fund of China. Email: Zhangxin@bnu.edu.cn