

The Difference between 'Spirit' and 'Soul' in Hebrew

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Introduction

The words 'spirit' and 'soul' have no significant difference in usage in the Bible. Some argue that they are interchangeable. However, from a perspective of Hebrew language, it shows that both come from distinct primitive roots and they are essentially different in concept.

About 'Spirit'

The Hebrew word 'spirit' (רוח) first appears in Genesis,

"וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:" (Gen1:2),
"Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." (Gen1:2 NIV)

which can be divided into three parts:

"וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ" (Gen1:2 a)

Now the earth was formless and empty

"וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם" (Gen1:2 b)

darkness was over the surface of the deep

"וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:" (Gen1:2 c)

and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

The First Appearance of Hebrew Words (yellow) in the Scripture.

#	@	Hebrew	Sound	English	Type	Notes
1	a	הָיָה	<i>haya</i>	be, become	v	הָיָה
2	a	תֹהוּ	<i>tohu</i>	vain, confusion, formless, waste, empty	adj	From an unused root meaning to lie waste
3	a	בֹהוּ	<i>bohu</i>	emptiness, void, waste	adj	Unused root
4	b	חָשֶׁךְ	<i>hosheh</i>	darkness, obscurity, secret place	n	From primitive root חָשַׁךְ darken
5	b	פָּנִים	<i>penim</i>	Face, upon	n	From פָּנָה turn, prepare
6	b	תְהוֹם	<i>tehome</i>	deep places, abyss, the deep, sea.	n	From תָהַם rang,make a noise,distract

7	c	רוּחַ	<i>ruah</i>	Spirit or spirit, wind, breath, side, mind, blast, vain, air, anger, cool, courage, miscellaneous.	n	From a primitive root רוּחַ smell (8x), touch (1x), quick understanding (1x), accept (1x).
8	c	רָחַץ	<i>rahav</i>	move	v	A primitive root
9	c	מַיִם	<i>hayim</i>	water, waters	n	Dual of a primitive noun (but used in a singular sense)

Analysis

1. (b) and (c) are parallel. The opposite mirror of 'spirit' is 'darkness.' The opposite of 'water' is 'sea' or 'deep place.'
2. The noun 'spirit' has two adjectives: 'Elohim' and 'moving', which means 'spirit' can be of different kinds. There is a tendency that other kind of spirit is translated as 'ghost' to differentiate from the holy spirit.
3. The spirit from God is the divine spirit. The spirit moving on water (Gen1:2c) and 'darkness' (Gen1:2b) refers to Jesus talking on water at night between 1-3pm (Mat14:25, Mark6:48). The 'spirit' in Gen1:2(b,c) shows that initially the spirit refers the triune spirit.

About 'Soul'

The Hebrew word 'soul (נֶפֶשׁ) first appears in Genesis,

" (Gen2:7) וַיִּצְרֵהוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפָּח בָּאָזְנוֹ נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה: " "the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." (Gen2:7 NIV)

which can be divided into three parts:

" (Gen2:7a) וַיִּצְרֵהוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה " the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground

" (Gen2:7b) וַיִּפָּח בָּאָזְנוֹ נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים " breathed into his nostrils the breath of life

" (Gen2:7c) וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה: " and the man became a living being.

The First Appearance of Hebrew Words (yellow) in the Scripture.

#	@	Hebrew	Sound	English	Type	Notes
1	a	יָצַר	<i>yaza</i>	formed, made, created,	v	בָּרָא created (Gen1:1, 21, 27). עָשָׂה made (Gen1:7, 11,12,16,25,26,2:2).
2	a	יְהוָה	<i>yhwh</i>	the LORD.	n	אֱלֹהִים <i>Elohim</i> God
3	a	עָפָר	<i>afar</i>	dust	n	Fr primitive root עָפָר, gray dust
4	b	נָפַח	<i>nafar</i>	blow	v	A primitive root.
5	b	אַף	<i>af</i>	nostril, nose	n	Fr primitive root אָנַף (<i>anaf</i> , anger)
6	b	נִשְׁמָה	<i>nashama</i>	breath, spirit	n	Fr primitive root נָשַׁם, pant, of a woman in travail or labour.
7	c	נֶפֶשׁ	<i>nefesh</i>	soul	n	Fr primitive root נָפַשׁ breath.

Analysis

- Item (1) and (2) share common alphabet ר which shed the light on the difference between the יָצַר and עָשָׂה or בָּרָא in that יָצַר is related to ‘dust’ whereas עָשָׂה is related to ‘image’ and בָּרָא is related to ‘blessing.’
- Item (3), (4) and (5) share common alphabet פּ which shed the light on the connection among the dust, nose and breath. They also sound similar in pronunciation (*af*).
- Item (6) come from the primitive root נָשַׁם, which means ‘pant’ and ‘of a woman in travail or labor.’ It is related to the delivery of woman, or a new life.
- Item (6) and (7) share common letter נּ and שׁ which sheds the light on the connection between the breath and soul. The word ‘soul’ can be considered as the combination of ‘delivery of woman’ and פּ which represents the ‘dust,’ ‘nostril’ and ‘blow.’

Comparison between ‘Spirit’ and ‘Soul’

Items	Spirit	Soul	Notes
Hebrew	רוּחַ	נֶפֶשׁ	
Transliterated	<i>ruah</i>	<i>nafesh</i>	Distinct pronunciation
Order	Gen1:2	Gen2:7	‘spirit’ firstly appears before ‘soul.’
Count	378x	573x	
	Spirit or spirit (232x), wind (92x), breath (27x), side (6x), mind (5x), blast (4x), vain (2x),	soul (475x), life (117x), person (29x), heart (15x), mind (15x), creature (9x), body (8x),	Common in mind, invisible

	air (1x), anger (1x), cool (1x), courage (1x), miscellaneous (6x).	himself (8x), yourselves (6x), dead (5x), will (4x), desire (4x), man (3x), themselves (3x), any (3x), appetite (2x), miscellaneous (47x).	
Primitive Root	רוּחַ 12x smell (8x), touch (1x), quick understanding (1x), accept (1x).	נָפֶשׁ 3x refreshed (3x).	Distinct roots
associated	water	dust	Distinct materials
form property	wind, Heaven, transparent, clear	gray ground, Earth, life (baby or elder)	Distinct directions Ecc3:21
existence	eternal existence. omnipresent	being created, reproduction.	
types	Two, good vs evil.	One.	
connection	<i>Elohim</i>	<i>Elohim Yhwh</i>	
usage	interchangeable	interchangeable	Ecc3:21

Conclusion

1. In Hebrew, ‘spirit’ (רוּחַ *ruah*) and ‘soul’ (נָפֶשׁ *nafesh*) come from distinct primitive roots. The essential difference between them is that ‘soul’ is created by God during the process of creation with dust and breath related to the travail of woman. Whereas ‘spirit’ eternally exists in the beginning with triune God (Gen1:2). Spirit can be of different kinds. The holy spirit refers to the triune spirit. There is a tendency in English that the holy spirit is written as ‘Spirit’ and other kinds of spirits are translated as ‘spirit’ or ‘ghost.’
2. Although spirit usually belongs to God and soul belongs to its individual, both are closely associated with life, related to mind, thoughts, heart or emotions, and belong to the invisible spiritual world rather than the physical materials.
3. The Hebrew Scripture shows that when Adam was initially created, he had soul but without the holy spirit (Gen2:7). It could be a reason that God said that it is not good for Adam to live alone (Gen2:18). Although God gave Adam a woman, God did not give him the holy spirit until Jesus came into the world. Today, man can freely accept the triune spirit to satisfy his soul with the living water. It is because of His grace and mercy.