

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 various versions of the Bible. It can be confusing to attempt to discern the precise differences between the two.¹ 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 completely different in essence.

About 'Spirit'

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

" (Gen1:2) וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

that contains three sections (a, b and c):

" (Gen1:2 a) וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָחֹשֶׁךְ

Now the earth was formless and empty

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

darkness was over the surface of the deep

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

and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

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

#	Sect	Hebrew	Sound	English	Type	Notes
1	(a)	הָיָה	<i>haya</i>	be, become	v	also 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)	חֹשֶׁךְ	<i>hosheh</i>	darkness, obscurity, secret place	n	From primitive root חָשַׁךְ darken
5	(b)	פְּנִים	<i>penim</i>	Face, upon	n	From פָּנָה turn, prepare
6	(b)	תְּהוֹם	<i>tehome</i>	deep places, abyss, the deep, sea.	n	From הוֹם rang, make a noise, distract

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/soul-spirit.html>, visited in 2022.

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)	רָחַב	<i>rahav</i>	move	v	A primitive root
9	(c)	מַיִם	<i>hayim</i>	waters,	n	Dual of a primitive noun (but used in a singular sense)

Analysis

1. The section (b) and (c) are parallel, having an identical pattern, containing four critical elements: the pair of ‘darkness’ over ‘deep’ synchronizes the pair of ‘spirit’ over ‘waters.’

Sect	Elements	Preposition	Elements
(b)	Darkness - singular, - masculine.	over	Deep/sea/abyss - singular, - feminine.
(c)	Spirit - singular, - feminine.	over	Waters - plural - masculine,

2. The singular noun ‘spirit’ has an attributive adjectives ‘Elohim’ and participant verb ‘moving,’ which means ‘spirit’ can be of God or others. There is a tendency that the spirit of God is written as ‘Spirit’ (referring to the holy spirit); sometimes the spirit of others is translated as ‘ghost’ in English version.
3. Contrasting (b) to (c) in gender, ‘darkness’ against ‘Spirit’ and the ‘deep/sea/abyss’ against ‘waters,’ literally, the opposite of ‘darkness’ is ‘light.’ The ‘darkness’ infers that the Spirit is ‘light’ which predicts what Jesus Christ claimed He is the light of the world (John 8:23). The difference between the Spirit and the light is that the light comes from the Word of God (Gen1:3), which is exactly the same as what John claimed “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14)
4. The spirit of God hovering over waters (c) and ‘darkness’ over the ‘deep’ (b) prefigure an identical scenario when Jesus walked over water at night between 1-3am, the darkest period in a day (Mat14:25, Mark6:48). Initially, the singular noun ‘spirit’ refers to the triune spirit.
5. The reiterated singular noun ‘earth’ in Gen1:2 (a) is to further describe what the created ‘earth’ (Gen1:1) is. Accordingly, ‘Spirit’ is to further describe what the created ‘heaven’ means. The plural form of ‘heavens’ (Gen1:1) infers to the possible multiple spirits rather than layers of heaven. Two major types of heavens are day and night, which means light and darkness, morning and evening, the spirit of God and the spirit of Satan, good and evil, waters and the deep/sea/abyss. "God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day,’ and the darkness he called ‘night.’ And there was evening, and there was morning - the first day." (Gen1:4-5 NIV). The multiple types of created heavens infers God’s sovereignty: “To God, the darkness is as light” (Psa139:12).

About 'Soul'

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

" וַיִּצְרֵהוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה: " (Gen2:7)

that contains three sections (a, b and c):

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

" וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים " (Gen2:7b)
breathed into his nostrils the breath of life

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

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

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

Analysis

1. The Hebrew יָצַר (form) and עֹפָר (dust) share common alphabet ר which shed the light on the difference among words for 'creation' עָשָׂה, יָצַר or בָּרָא in that, יָצַר is related to 'dust' whereas עָשָׂה is related to 'image' and בָּרָא is related to 'blessing.'
2. The Hebrew עֹפָר (afar, 'dust'), נִפַּח (nafar, 'blow') and אַף (af, 'nostril') share common alphabet פ and similar pronunciation (af), which shed the light on the linked blockchain among the dust, nose and breath.
3. The Hebrew נִשְׁמָה (nashama, breath) come from the primitive root נָשַׁם that means 'pant' and 'of a woman in travail or labor.' It is related to childbirth or the new life.
4. The Hebrew נִשְׁמָה (nashama, breath) and נֶפֶשׁ (nefesh, 'soul') share common letter נ and ש which sheds the light on the connection between the breath, spirit and soul. The

Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*, ‘soul’) can be considered as the mixture of נִשְׁמָה (*nashama*, ‘of a woman in travail’) and the letter פ that links to ‘dust,’ ‘nostril’ and ‘blow’ previously appeared words.

Comparison between ‘Spirit’ and ‘Soul’

Items	Spirit	Soul	Notes
Hebrew	רוּחַ	נֶפֶשׁ	
Transliterated	<i>ruah</i>	<i>nefesh</i>	distinct pronunciation.
Order	Gen1:2	Gen2:7	‘spirit’ firstly appears before ‘soul.’
Count	378x	573x	in the OT
English	Spirit or spirit (232x), wind (92x), breath (27x), side (6x), mind (5x), blast (4x), vain (2x), air (1x), anger (1x), cool (1x), courage (1x), miscellaneous (6x).	soul (475x), life (117x), person (29x), heart (15x), mind (15x), creature (9x), body (8x), himself (8x), yourselves (6x), dead (5x), will (4x), desire (4x), man (3x), themselves (3x), any (3x), appetite (2x), miscellaneous (47x).	common in mind, invisibility.
Primitive Root	רוּחַ 12x smell (8x), touch (1x), quick understanding (1x), accept (1x).	נֶפֶשׁ 3x refreshed (3x).	distinct roots.
associated	water	dust	distinct materials.
form property	wind, heaven, transparent, clear	gray ground, earth, dust, life (baby or elder)	distinct directions. Ecc3:21
existence	eternal existence. omnipresent	being created, reproduction.	
types	two or more, good vs evil.	one, neutral.	
connection	<i>Elohim</i>	<i>Elohim Yhwh</i>	

usage	interchangeable	interchangeable	Ecc3:21
Chinese	灵, 靈	魂	

Translation of ‘Soul’ in Gen2:7c

1. In CUV, the translation of Gen2:7c (他就成了有 灵 的活人) is not appropriate. It is suggested to be translated as : 他就成了有 魂 的活人. It is because man (Adam) initially had a ‘soul’ 魂 but he did not have ‘spirit’ 灵 until Jesus came into his heart.
2. In ESV, the translation of Gen2:7c (and the man became a **living** creature) should be translated as: “and the man became a creature with **soul**” to be distinct from the living plants.
3. In NIV, the translation of Gen2:7c (and the man became a **living** being) is better to be translated as: “and the man became a being with **soul**” (Gen2:7c ESV).

Translation of ‘Spirit’ in Ecc3:21

In CUV, the identical Hebrew רוּחַ (ruah) is translated into two different words: ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’. ‘Spirit’ can freely go anywhere, like over water, upward or downward to the earth. ‘Soul’ has ‘desire, will’ and can only exit with a creature life. From this biblical perspective, NIV version is more appropriate than CUV.

"מִי יוֹדֵעַ רוּחַ בְּנִי הָאָדָם הֲעֹלָה הִיא לְמַעַלָּה" (Ecc3:21a)

"Who knows if the **spirit** of man rises upward " (Ecc3:21a NIV)

"谁知道人的 灵 是往上升、 " (Ecc3:21 CUVS)

"וְרוּחַ הַבְּהֵמָה הֲיֵרֶדֶת הִיא לְמַטָּה לָאָרֶץ:" (Ecc3:21b)

" and if the **spirit** of the animal goes down into the earth?" (Ecc3:21b NIV)

"兽的 魂 是下入地呢。 " (Ecc3:21 CUVS)

Contrast of the Parallel in Ecc3:21

Ecc3:21a								
		לְמַעַלָּה	הִיא	הֲעֹלָה	הָאָדָם	בְּנִי	רוּחַ	(a)
		upward	him	goes	man	son	spirit	NIV
		上		升	人		灵	CUV
Ecc3:21b								
	לָאָרֶץ	לְמַטָּה	הִיא	הֲיֵרֶדֶת	הַבְּהֵמָה		רוּחַ	(b)
	To the earth	downward	him	goes	beast		spirit	NIV
	地	下		入	兽		魂	CUV

Conclusion

1. In Hebrew, רוּחַ (*ruah*, 'spirit') and נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*, 'soul') come from distinct primitive roots. The essential difference between them is that, (A) 'soul' is created by God during the process of creation with dust through breath related to the travail of woman (Gen2:7), whereas 'spirit' eternally exists in the beginning with the triune God (Gen1:2). (B) 'Soul' is neutral, but 'spirit' has two major opposite types: the spirit of God and the spirit of Satan, linking to light and darkness, day and night, morning and evening, water and deep/abyss/sea, good and evil, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom on the earth. However, literal opposite spirits are neutral to God. "the darkness is as light to God" (Psa139:12 NIV).
2. Although 'spirit' belongs to God Himself in heaven and 'soul' belongs to its individual on earth, both are closely associated with life that is related to mind, heart (emotion) and strength, and belong to the invisible spiritual world rather than the physical materials.
3. The Hebrew Scripture shows that when Adam was initially formed from dust, 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 companion later on, God did not give him the triune spirit until Jesus came into the world. Today, man can freely accept the holy spirit to satisfy his soul with the living water. It is because of His grace and mercy.