

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. 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 essentially different in concept.

About 'Spirit'

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

"והָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:" (Gen1:2),

which can be divided into three sections (a, b and c):

"וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָחָשֶׁךְ" (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	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	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

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	רָחַף	<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. In section (b) and (c), four elements are mutual comparative. The pair of 'darkness' with 'deep/abyss' is parallel to the pair of 'spirit of God' with 'water.' The 'darkness' is opposite to 'spirit of God;' the 'deep/sea/abyss' is opposite to 'water.'
2. The noun 'spirit' has an attributive adjectives '*Elohim*,' which means 'spirit' can be of God or others. There is a tendency that the spirit of God is written as 'Spirit' (or the holy spirit) and the spirit of others is translated as 'ghost.' The spirit of God that is opposite to 'darkness' can also be literally represented as the 'light of the world' who is Jesus Christ.
3. The spirit of God hovering over water (Gen1:2c) and 'darkness' over the 'deep' (Gen1:2b) refers to Jesus walking over water at night between 1-3am, the darkest period in a day (Mat14:25, Mark6:48). Gen1:2(b, c) shows that the 'spirit' initially refers to the triune spirit.
4. Two types of spirits can also refer to two types of 'heavens' (in plural form) that has day and night rather than layers. "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)

About 'Soul'

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

" וַיֵּצֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפֹּחַ בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה: " (Gen2:7)

which can be divided into three sections (a, b and c):

" וַיֵּצֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה " (Gen2:7a)

the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground

" וַיִּפֹּחַ בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת 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.

#	@	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 Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*, soul) can be considered as the combination of נִשְׁמָה (*nashama*, ‘of a woman in travail’) and the letter פּ that represents the ‘dust,’ ‘nostril’ and ‘blow.’

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
	Spirit or spirit (232x), wind (92x), breath (27x), side (6x), mind (5x), blast (4x), vain (2x), air (1x), anger (1x), cool (1x),	soul (475x), life (117x), person (29x), heart (15x), mind (15x), creature (9x), body (8x), himself (8x), yourselves (6x), dead (5x),	common in mind, invisibility.

	courage (1x), miscellaneous (6x).	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).	נֶפֶשׁ 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, רוּחַ (*ruah*, 'spirit') and נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*, 'soul') come from distinct primitive roots. The essential difference between them is that, 'soul' is created by God during the process of creation with dust through breath related to the travail of woman, whereas 'spirit' eternally exists in the beginning with the triune God (Gen1:2).
2. Spirit can be of two kinds: the spirit of God (the holy or triune spirit, Spirit) representing light or day, and the spirit of Satan that tends to be translated as evil spirit or 'ghost' in English, representing the darkness or night. To God, the darkness is as light (Psa139:12).
3. Although spirit belongs to God in heaven and soul belongs to its individual on earth, both are closely associated with life, related to mind, heart (emotion) or strength, and belong to the invisible spiritual world rather than the physical materials.
4. 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 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.