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 רוּחַ ('spirit') first appears in Genesis,

(Gen1:2) " וְהָאָ֗רֶץ הָיְתָ֥ה תֹ֙הוּ֙ וָבֹ֔הוּ וְחֹ֖שֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵ֣י תְה֑וֹם וְ**רוּחַ** אֱלֹהִ֔ים מְרַחֶ֖פֶת עַל־פְּנֵ֥י הַמָּֽיִם׃ "

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

(Gen1:2 a) " וְהָאָ֗רֶץ הָיְתָ֥ה תֹ֙הוּ֙ וָבֹ֔הוּ "
Now the earth was formless and empty

(Gen1:2 b) " וְחֹ֖שֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵ֣י תְה֑וֹם "
darkness was over the surface of the deep

(Gen1:2 c) " וְ**רוּחַ** אֱלֹהִ֔ים מְרַחֶ֖פֶת עַל־פְּנֵ֥י הַמָּֽיִם׃ "
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	haya	be, become	v	also הָוָה
2	(a)	תֹהוּ	tohu	vain, confusion, formless, waste, empty	adj	From an unused root meaning to lie waste
3	(a)	בֹהוּ	bohu	emptiness, void, waste	adj	Unused root
4	(b)	חֹשֶׁךְ	hosheh	darkness, obscurity, secret place	n	From primitive root חָשַׁךְ darken
5	(b)	פָּנִים	penim	Face, upon	n	From פָּנָה turn, prepare
6	(b)	תְהוֹם	tehome	deep places, abyss, the deep, sea.	n	From הוּם rang, make a noise, distract

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

7	(c)	רוּחַ	*ruah*	Spirit or spirit, wind, breath, side, mind, blast, vain, air, anger, cool, courage, miscellaneous.	n	From a primitive root רִיח smell (8x), touch (1x), quick understanding (1x), accept (1x).
8	(c)	רָחַף	*rahav*	move	v	A primitive root
9	(c)	מַיִם	*hayim*	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,

(Gen2:7) " וַיִּיצֶר יְהוָֹה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְ**נֶפֶשׁ** חַיָּה:"

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

(Gen2:7a) " וַיִּיצֶר יְהוָֹה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה "
the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground

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

(Gen2:7c) " וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְ**נֶפֶשׁ** חַיָּה: "
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	יְהוָֹה	*yhwh*	the LORD.	n	אֱלֹהִים *Elohim* God
3	a	עָפָר	*afar*	dust	n	Fr primitive root עָפַר, gray dust
4	b	נָפַח	*nafar*	blow	v	A primitive root.
5	b	אַף	*af*	nostril, nose	n	Fr primitive root אָנַף (*anaf*, anger)
6	b	נְשָׁמָה	*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 עָפָר (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 עָפָר (*afar*,'dust'), נָפַח (*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 נְשָׁמָה (*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 נְשָׁמָה (*nashama*, breath) and נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*, 'soul') share common letter נ and שׁ 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 נְשָׁמָה (*nashama*, 'of a woman in travail') and the letter פְּ that links to 'dust,' 'nostril' and 'blow' previously appeared words.

Comparison between 'Spirit' and 'Soul'

Items	Spirit	Soul	Notes
Hebrew	רוּחַ	נֶפֶשׁ	
Transliteral	*ruah*	*nefesh*	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	רִיחַ 12x smell (8x), touch (1x), quick understanding (1x), accept (1x).	נָפַשׁ 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	*Elohim*	*Elohim Yhwh*	

usage	interchangeable	interchangeable	Ecc3:21
Chinese	灵，靈	魂	

Translation Issues 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. 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).

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.