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' (רוּחַ) first appears in Genesis,

(Gen1:2), " וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְ**רוּחַ** אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם:"
"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 sections (a, b and c):

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

7	c	רוּחַ	*ruah*	Spirit or spirit, wind, breath, side, mind, blast, vain, air, anger, cool, courage, miscellaneous.	n	From a primitive root רִיחַ smell (8x), touch (1x), quick understanding (1x), accept (1x).
8	c	רָחַף	*rahav*	move	v	A primitive root
9	c	מַיִם	*hayim*	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 Satan (against God). There is a tendency that the spirit of God is written as 'Spirit' (or the holy spirit) and the spirit of Satan 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,

(Gen2:7) " וַיִּיצֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְ**נֶפֶשׁ** 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 sections (a, b and c):

(Gen2:7a) " וַיִּיצֶר יְהוָה 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 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	*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. 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.'
2. Item (3), (4) and (5) share common alphabet פ which shed the light on the connection among the dust, nose and breath. They also sound similar in pronunciation (*af*).
3. 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.
4. Item (6) and (7) share common letter נ 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 פ which represents the 'dust,' 'nostril' and 'blow.'

Comparison between 'Spirit' and 'Soul'

Items	Spirit	Soul	Notes
Hebrew	רוּחַ	נֶפֶשׁ	
Transliteral	*ruah*	*nafesh*	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), air (1x),	soul (475x), life (117x), person (29x), heart (15x), **mind** (15x), creature (9x), body (8x),	Common in mind, invisible

	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	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, life (baby or elder)	Distinct directions Ecc3:21
existence	eternal existence. omnipresent	being created, reproduction.	
types	Two, good vs evil.	One.	
connection	*Elohim*	*Elohim Yhwh*	
usage	interchangeable	interchangeable	Ecc3:21

Conclusion

1. In Hebrew, 'spirit'(רוּחַ *ruah*) and 'soul' (נֶפֶשׁ *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 through breath related to the travail of woman. Whereas 'spirit' eternally exists in the beginning with triune God (Gen1:2).
2. Spirit can be of two kinds: the spirit of God referring to the holy or triune spirit (Spirit), representing light or day, and the evil spirit that tends to be translated as '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, thoughts, heart or emotions, 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, 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.