**The Difference between ‘Spirit’ and ‘Soul’ in Hebrew**

William D

2022-07-07

**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]](#footnote-1) Some argue that they are interchangeable. In Chinese, both ‘spirit’(灵) and ‘soul’(魂) are coined together as a term ‘*Linhun’* (灵魂) to refer to unmaterial things. However, from a perspective of Hebrew language, it shows that both come from distinct primitive roots and they are completely different in essence.

In daily life, ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ seems to have different usages. A poet claimed that “I am the caption of my soul” but not the spirit. “Frightening to death” is also described as “the soul flies away” rather than spirit in Chinese. Thomas Edison said “Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration” where ‘inspiration’ is something from spirit rather than soul. “My spirit sang all day O my joy” but not my soul.

Many know that they have heart and strength. But not all are certain if they have soul and what is the soul. To understand the different between the spirit and soul is significantly important in Christian faith: not to follow the soul but to follow to the holy spirit "which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (Jhn1:13 KJV)

**About ‘Spirit’**

The Hebrew word רוּחַ (‘spirit’) first appears in Genesis,

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

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

" וְהָאָ֗רֶץ הָיְתָ֥ה תֹ֙הוּ֙ וָבֹ֔הוּ " (Gen1:2 a)

Now the earth was formless and empty

" וְחֹ֖שֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵ֣י תְהֹ֑ום " (Gen1:2 b)

darkness was over the surface of the deep

" וְ**ר֣וּחַ** אֱלֹהִ֔ים מְרַחֶ֖פֶת עַל־פְּנֵ֥י הַמָּֽיִם׃ " (Gen1:2 c)

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) | תֹּהוּ | *tohu* | vain, confusion, formless, waste, empty | adj | From an unused root meaning to lie waste |
| 3 | (a) | בֹּהוּ | *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) | תְּהוֹם | *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* | 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, |

1. 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.
2. 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)
3. 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.
4. 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,

"וַיִּיצֶר֩ יְהוָ֨ה אֱלֹהִ֜ים אֶת־הָֽאָדָ֗ם עָפָר֙ מִן־הָ֣אֲדָמָ֔ה וַיִּפַּ֥ח בְּאַפָּ֖יו נִשְׁמַ֣ת חַיִּ֑ים וַֽיְהִ֥י הָֽאָדָ֖ם לְ**נֶ֥פֶשׁ** חַיָּֽה׃ " (Gen2:7)

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

" וַיִּיצֶר֩ יְהוָ֨ה אֱלֹהִ֜ים אֶת־הָֽאָדָ֗ם עָפָר֙ מִן־הָ֣אֲדָמָ֔ה " (Gen2:7a)

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

" וַיִּפַּ֥ח בְּאַפָּ֖יו נִשְׁמַ֣ת חַיִּ֑ים " (Gen2:7b)

breathed into his nostrils the breath of life

" וַֽיְהִ֥י הָֽאָדָ֖ם לְ**נֶ֥פֶשׁ** חַיָּֽה׃ " (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 | יְהוָ֨ה | *yhwh* | the LORD. | n | אֱלֹהִ֑ים *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 אָנַףּ (*anaf*, anger) |
| 6 | b | נְשָׁמָה | *nashama* | breath, spirit, soul | 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’ יָצַר , עָשָׂה 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 פָ 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 נֶ 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 פָ that links to ‘dust,’ ‘nostril’ and ‘blow’ previously appeared words.

Combined with Gen1:26-7 and Gen2:7, form a biblical perspective, a living man is made of four critical elements:

1. The image (צֶלֶם, similar pronunciation with שָׁלֵם, peace, Gen14:18) of God.
2. The likeness (דְּמוּת, shape, fashion, manner) of God.
3. The dust from the earth.
4. The breath from God.
5. The soul.

**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 |  |
| Controllable | No.  "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (Jhn3:8 NIV) | Yes.  "Love the Lord your God with all your heart(mind) and with all your **soul** and with all your strength." (Deu6:5 NIV)  "וְאָ֣הַבְתָּ֔ אֵ֖ת יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֑יךָ בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָ֥ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ֖ וּבְכָל־מְאֹדֶֽךָ׃ " (Deu6:5) |  |

**Different Translations of ‘Soul’ in Gen2:7c**

1. In CUV, the translation of Gen2:7c (他就成了有灵的活人 he became a living man with the spirit.)is not appropriate. It is suggested to be translated as : 他就成了有**魂**的活人 (He became a living man with the soul). 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).

**Different Translations of ‘Spirit’ in Ecc3:21**

(1)

In CUV, the identical Hebrew ר֚וּחַ (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—it shows that ‘spirit’ has two kinds: a upward spirit upward and a downward spirit. The downward spirit is not the same as the ‘soul’ even though both are negative.

“מִ֣י יֹודֵ֗עַ ר֚וּחַ בְּנֵ֣י הָאָדָ֔ם הָעֹלָ֥ה הִ֖יא לְמָ֑עְלָה” (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)

“ וְר֙וּחַ֙ הַבְּהֵמָ֔ה הַיֹּרֶ֥דֶת הִ֖יא לְמַ֥טָּה לָאָֽרֶץ׃” (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 | | | | | | | | |
|  |  | לְמָ֑עְלָה | הִ֖יא | הָעֹלָ֥ה | הָאָדָ֔ם | בְּנֵ֣י | ר֚וּחַ | (a) |
|  |  | upward | him | goes | man | son | spirit | NIV |
|  |  | 上 |  | 升 | 人 |  | 灵 | CUV |
| Ecc3:21b | | | | | | | | |
|  | לָאָֽרֶץ | לְמַ֥טָּה | הִ֖יא | הַיֹּרֶ֥דֶת | הַבְּהֵמָ֔ה |  | וְר֙וּחַ֙ | (b) |
|  | To the earth | downward | him | goes | beast |  | spirit | NIV |
|  | 地 | 下 |  | 入 | 兽 |  | **魂** | CUV |

(2)

The book Ecclesiastes starts the usage of ‘spirit’ in verse Ecc1:6:

"הֹולֵךְ֙ אֶל־דָּרֹ֔ום וְסֹובֵ֖ב אֶל־צָפֹ֑ון סֹובֵ֤ב׀ סֹבֵב֙ הֹולֵ֣ךְ הָר֔וּחַ וְעַל־סְבִיבֹתָ֖יו שָׁ֥ב הָרֽוּחַ׃ " (Ecc1:6)

"The wind(spirit) goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits." (Ecc1:6 KJV)

"风往南刮、又向北转、不住的旋转、而且返回转行原道。" (Ecc1:6 CUVS)

"The wind(spirit) blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course." (Ecc1:6 NIV)

It is the exactly identical to what Jesus meant, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (Jhn3:8 NIV)

(3)

The book of Ecclesiastes ends the usage of “spirit” with the verse Ecc12:7:

“וְיָשֹׁ֧ב הֶעָפָ֛ר עַל־הָאָ֖רֶץ כְּשֶׁהָיָ֑ה וְהָר֣וּחַ תָּשׁ֔וּב אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִ֖ים אֲשֶׁ֥ר נְתָנָֽהּ׃ “ (Ecc12:7)

“the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” (Ecc12:7 NIV)

“尘土仍归于地、灵仍归于赐灵的　神。” (Ecc12:7 CUVS)

It is the exactly identical to what Jesus meant, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” (Mak12:17, Mat22:21, Luk20:25 NIV)

Although the Hebrew ר֚וּחַ (ruah, spirt) are only used 24 times in the book of Ecclesiastes, its frequency percentage rate is 0.85% [[2]](#footnote-2) in the book, the highest among the OT. Ecclesiastes is the most important book to study the concept of ‘spirit’.

The book of Ecclesiastes clearly tells that man does not own spirit and cannot control it. However, man can pray for spirit to enter into his heart to be reborn from spirit. Whereas man own his soul and can control it.

(4)

"The lamp of the Lord searches the spirit of a man ; it searches out his inmost being." (Pro20:27 NIV)

"The spirit of man is the candle of the LORD, searching all the inward parts of the belly." (Pro20:27 KJV)

"人的灵是耶和华的灯、鉴察人的心腹。" (Pro20:27 CUVS)

The translation of ‘spirit’ is not appropriate. Its original Hebrew is *Neshama* (נִשְׁמַ֣ת, breath) that is identical to the word in Gen2:7b used when man was created.

"נֵ֣ר יְ֭הוָה נִשְׁמַ֣ת אָדָ֑ם חֹ֝פֵ֗שׂ כָּל־חַדְרֵי־בָֽטֶן׃ " (Pro20:27 H\_G)

The breath of man is more like the candle of the LORD than spirit. Its light is the truth that contrast to its soul in the dark. The breath can extinguish like a candle burns out. If the breath is considered as the run-time of man, then the soul can be considered as the design-time of man. God turned on the power of the man through the breath.

The breath we have today is indeed the bread coming from God. Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal2:20 KJV)

**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). Man own his soul rather than the spirit.  
    (B) Spirit is uncontrollable (Jhn3:8). Soul is controllable like mind (heart) and strength (Deu6:5)   
    (C) ‘Soul’ is neutral that can be divided as emotion(heart, psychic) and mind, 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.

**References**

<https://www.blueletterbible.org>

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

<https://wdingbox.github.io/pubs/biblestudy/my_papers/docs/spirit_soul/main.htm>

1. <https://www.gotquestions.org/soul-spirit.html>, visited in 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://wdingbox.github.io/pubs/biblestudy/my_papers/docs/spirit_soul/main.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)