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

William Ding

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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,

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

"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 parts:

" 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

" וְר֣וּחַ 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.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **#** | **@** | **Hebrew** | **Sound** | **English** | **Type** | **Notes** |
| 1 | a | הָיָה | *haya* | be, become | v | 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* | water, waters | n | Dual of a primitive noun (but used in a singular sense) |

Analysis

1. (b) and (c) are parallel. The opposite mirror of ‘spirit’ is ‘darkness.’ The opposite of ‘water’ is ‘sea’ or ‘deep place.’
2. The noun ‘spirit’ has two adjectives: ‘*Elohim’* and ‘moving’, which means ‘spirit’ can be of different kinds. There is a tendency that other kind of spirit is translated as ‘ghost’ to differentiate from the holy spirit.
3. The spirit from God is the divine spirit. The spirit moving on water (Gen1:2c) and ‘darkness’ (Gen1:2b) refers to Jesus talking on water at night between 1-3pm (Mat14:25, Mark6:48). The ‘spirit’ in Gen1:2(b,c) shows that initially the spirit refers the triune spirit.

**About ‘Soul’**

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

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

"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 parts:

" 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 לְנֶ֥פֶשׁ חַיָּֽה׃ " (Gen2:7c)

and the man became a living being.

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

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **#** | **@** | **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 | 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 פָ 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 נֶ 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 פָ which represents the ‘dust,’ ‘nostril’ and ‘blow.’

**Comparison between ‘Spirit’ and ‘Soul’**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **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),  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, invisible |
| 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 and breath related to the travail of woman. Whereas ‘spirit’ eternally exists in the beginning with triune God (Gen1:2). Spirit can be of different kinds. The holy spirit refers to the triune spirit. There is a tendency in English that the holy spirit is written as ‘Spirit’ and other kinds of spirits are translated as ‘spirit’ or ‘ghost.’
2. Although spirit usually belongs to God and soul belongs to its individual, 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.
3. 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.