

## THE HEBREW CONCEPT OF "SOUL" IN PRE-EXILIC WRITINGS

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The word "soul" is used in many ways in everyday speech. Some expressions employing the word are based on the Bible, others on works of Greek philosophers. In certain instances phrases using the word "soul" are connected with popular ideas, as the following examples illustrate: To say that a man's earnings are insufficient "to keep body and soul together" presents the soul as the vital principle in man; to remark that a certain musician of perfect technique does not "put soul into" his performance considers the soul as the seat of feelings and sentiments; while the popular phrase that the trials of life are "good for the soul" refers to the soul as the moral aspect of man. Further, to say that one arrived at a deserted place and found "not a soul there to speak to" makes the soul a synonym for "person," while prayers offered for the happiness of "departed souls" imply that the soul is a separate entity invested with an independent personality.

It can be easily understood that people who all their lives have used the word "soul" in phrases like those just quoted are unconsciously influenced in their understanding of Biblical passages in which the word occurs. It will be of value therefore to examine actual Biblical usage in order to determine the range of meaning given to this word by Scripture, and thus to obtain a clearer concept of its use.

This survey is limited to Hebrew writings which unquestionably have been written from the eighth century B.C. to the beginning of the sixth, namely Hosea, Amos, Micah,<sup>1</sup> Habak-

<sup>1</sup> Nahum, also a pre-exilic book, does not contain the word *nepeš*, for which reason it is not mentioned here.

kuk, Isaiah,<sup>2</sup> and Kings,<sup>3</sup> reserving the treatment of *nepeš* in other Old Testament books for another study.

In the books under review the word *nepeš* (נֶפֶשׁ) occurs 124 times. The translators of the KJV rendered it as "soul" 54 times, as "life" 40 times, and used ten other expressions to represent it in the remaining instances.<sup>4</sup> Such variety immediately suggests that the concept of *nepeš* in pre-exilic times was very broad; as E. C. Blackman says: "In this matter modern usage does not correspond, and it may easily obscure the meaning of a passage of Scripture."<sup>5</sup> Only a study of each use of *nepeš* in its context, such as this survey is an attempt to provide, can serve to give us a more accurate understanding of the meaning of the Hebrew term.

One needs to go but a little way to discover that the uses of *nepeš* in translation fall naturally into two groups. About one-third of all passages in which this word occurs read as if a soul is what man *is*, while two-thirds of these passages give the impression that the soul is something man *has*. However, these are not two different meanings, but merely two ways of translating a rather broad concept. It will therefore be convenient to consider *nepeš* from these two points of view; in each case we shall try to find other words to define *nepeš*, in order to depart from the limitations of the word "soul" in its modern usage.

<sup>2</sup> Since this study would neither gain nor lose anything by including the chapters 40-66 of Isaiah, which by most scholars are not considered to have been written in the pre-exilic era, only Is 1-39 are drawn upon.

<sup>3</sup> The books of 1 and 2 Ki, which the Jews regarded as belonging to the former Prophets, have been included, for though the history of the first few chapters reaches back two centuries earlier, at least the greater part of Kings must have been composed in the centuries immediately preceding the exile.

<sup>4</sup> These are pronouns like "me," "himself," (13 ×), and nouns such as "person" (4 ×), "man" (1 ×), "desire" (4 ×), "pleasure" (1 ×), "mind" (2 ×), "heart" (2 ×), "ghost" (1 ×), "fish" (1 ×), "tablet" (1 ×). Cf. נֶפֶשׁ in *Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance* (London, 1893).

<sup>5</sup> E. C. Blackman, "Mind, Heart," in *Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (London, 1950).

*The Soul That Man Is*

The head tax imposed by King Joash to raise money for the repair of the Temple is referred to in the KJV as "the money that *every man* is set at" and in the RSV as "the money from the assessment of *persons*." Both "man" and "person" here represent *nepēš* (2 Ki 12 : 4). When Jer refers to the various groups of Jewish captives taken by Nebuchadnezzar, he records in each instance the total number of "souls." The translators both of the KJV and of the RSV render these words as "persons" (Jer 43 : 6; 52 : 29, 30). The "weary soul" and the "sorrowful soul" of Jer 31 : 25 illustrate the same broad meaning and could have been rendered the same way. When Jer 20 : 13 says, "He hath delivered the *soul* of the poor from the hand of evildoers," the meaning is that the "person" of the poor was rescued, and the expression "the poor" could have stood alone without *nepēš* with no loss of meaning. The translators of the KJV recognized this and actually omitted the word *nepēš* twice in translating Jer 10 : 14, 15. They could also have done so in translating Jer 2 : 34 and 31 : 14. This makes a total of twelve instances in these writings where a word indicating simply "a person" or "a human being" is sufficient to give the meaning of *nepēš*.

However, in our daily speech, we do not usually refer to individuals specifically as "persons" each time we mention them. Usually a personal pronoun is sufficient. Thus when Benhadad, beaten and cornered, sent a messenger to Ahab to sue for his life, the translators of the KJV quite rightly rendered his message: "I pray thee, let *me* live" (1 Ki 20 : 32). When the prophet would reprove the careless Sabbath-keeping of his countrymen, he is reported as saying: "Take heed to *yourselves*, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day" (Jer 17 : 21). In both instances, and in eleven others<sup>6</sup> in the

<sup>6</sup> The others are 2 Ki 19 : 4; Is 5 : 14; Jer 2 : 24; 3 : 11; 37 : 9; 40 : 14, 15; 51 : 14; Am 2 : 14, 15; 6 : 8.

writings of this period, the personal pronoun of the KJV represents *nepeš*. And there are many other instances where this rendering would have been just as appropriate. For instance, as in Jer 18 : 22 the prophet complains, "they have digged a pit to take me," so it would not have been inappropriate to render *nepeš* as "me" two verses earlier where the KJV has "they have digged a pit for *my soul*" (Jer 18 : 20). And is not the RSV rendering, "As the Lord lives, and as *you yourself* live" more effective for our understanding than the KJV "As the Lord liveth, and as *thy soul* liveth . . ." (2 Ki 4 : 30)? There are twenty-eight other instances where a similar rendering would have expressed the thought more idiomatically in English.<sup>7</sup> Mic 7 : 1, which the RSV leaves unchanged in this respect, is chosen as a last example of this meaning because in it the writer refers to himself in the obviously physical aspect of appetite: "there is no cluster to eat: *my soul* [= I] desired the firstripe fruit." Thus, 52 times out of 124 that the word *nepeš* occurs, it signifies simply "the man himself."

To these passages may be added ten other very impressive examples in which the word "soul" is applied to God Himself. The earliest instance in the literature under review is: "your appointed feasts *my soul* hateth; they are a trouble to me; I am weary of them" (Is 1 : 14). The parallelism of this passage: "*my soul* . . . me . . . I" illustrates the complete identification of *nepeš* with the great Living One Himself. Of these ten instances the KJV actually does translate two by the pronoun "*himself*" (Am 6 : 8; Jer 51 : 14), and to these the RSV adds four more (Jer 5 : 9, 29; 6 : 8; 9 : 9). In the remaining texts it is just as clear that *nepeš* does not refer to some special single faculty of the Divine Being, but to the whole personality as a unit: "Hast thou utterly rejected

<sup>7</sup> 1 Ki 11 : 37; 2 Ki 2 : 2, 46; 4 : 27, 30; Is 1 : 14; 3 : 9; 29 : 8; 38 : 15, 17; Jer 4 : 31; 5 : 9, 29; 6 : 8; 9 : 9; 12 : 7; 13 : 17; 14 : 19; 18 : 20; 26 : 19; 31 : 12; 38 : 17, 20; 44 : 7; 50 : 19; 51 : 6; Mic 7 : 1; Hab 2 : 10.

Judah? hath *thy soul* loathed Zion? Why hast thou smitten us?" "I have given the dearly beloved of *my soul* into the hands of her enemies" (Jer 14 : 19; 12 : 7). Doubtless these passages may be considered as examples of anthropomorphism, but if so they emphatically illustrate that in the Hebrew mind the identification of *nepeš* with the human individual was so complete that the Hebrews could even attribute "soul" to God as an individual. We shall return to this question of anthropomorphism later.

### *The Powers of a Soul*

What are the activities and qualities predicated of souls, according to our texts? To determine these would be to elucidate further the nature of a *nepeš*. If we ask whether *nepeš* includes the *emotional* life of a man, the answer is a clear affirmative. Fourteen passages may be cited. A few examples will suffice: "her *soul* is vexed" represents the desperate sorrow of bereavement (2 Ki 4 : 27). The "*desire to return*" refers to the longing of the exile for his home country (Jer 22 : 27; 44 : 14). "Deceive not *yourselves*" is a warning against wishful thinking that an invasion would soon be over (Jer 37 : 9). Three passages refer to the divine emotions predicated of the divine *nepeš*: love, loathing, and hatred (Jer 12 : 7; 14 : 19; Is 1 : 14).

That a soul is capable of *moral* action is evident also from a survey of the prophetic writers. Micah speaks of the "sin" of his soul, and specifies bribery and corruption as actions of a *nepeš* (Mic 6 : 7; 7 : 3). Habakkuk speaks of pride, Hosea of mercenary greed, Jeremiah of hypocrisy (Hab 2 : 4; Hos 4 : 8; Jer 42 : 20). In contrast Isaiah makes the soul the seat of religious longings after God (Is 26 : 8, 9). If to these passages we add three instances of the moral indignation of the divine *nepeš* shown in vengeance, our documents have provided us with ten instances of the moral activities of a *nepeš* (Jer. 5 : 9, 29; 9 : 9).

There could hardly be morality without *mentality*. We should therefore expect to find a *nepeš* capable also of intellectual power. But it is noticeable that one of the greatest and most-used of today's lexicons hesitates to allow that the *nepeš* also represents the individual in the aspects of intellect, will, and character, suggesting rather that this is a late assimilation to other words such as *lēbāb* (heart).<sup>8</sup> However, other writers recognize that the *nepeš* is presented in Scripture as "supporting rational life" and that it "is said to will, to know."<sup>9</sup> Blackman says that the "*nephesh* means the mind as distinct from matter, but always indicates more than mind in the limited sense of the reasoning faculty."<sup>10</sup> W. J. Cameron asserts that "numerous occurrences . . . cover various states of consciousness: . . . the seat of physical appetite; . . . the source of emotion; . . . associated with the will and moral action."<sup>11</sup> The following examples will amply support these opinions:

When God expresses His intention to bless Judah with His "whole heart" and with His "whole *soul*," we recognize a sovereign act of a free mind (Jer 32 : 41). Likewise when His people make decisions to serve the Lord with all their heart and soul, we may clearly discern the operation of intellectual faculties (1 Ki 2 : 4; 8 : 48; 2 Ki 23 : 3, 25). When the translators of the KJV rendered *nepeš* in certain passages by the words "mind," "desire," "pleasure," they showed that they understood a *nepeš* to be capable of actively exercising volition and revealing intellect and will. In one passage the Lord is said to warn His people that His "*soul*" could forsake them, in another that His "*mind*" could not be favorable to them (Jer 6 : 8; 15 : 1). In one passage Jeroboam's ambition to rule is said to be "the desire of his *soul*," in another, the agreement

<sup>8</sup> F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1906).

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Davies, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (London, 1885).

<sup>10</sup> Blackman, *loc. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> W. J. Cameron, "Soul," *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (London, 1962), p. 1208.

of Jehu's fellow officers in support of his bid for the throne is said to be their "*mind*" (1 Ki 11 : 37; 2 Ki 9 : 15). In each of the four italicized words the original employs the word *nepeš*. Out of thirteen passages, eight refer to a human *nepeš*, five to the divine *nepeš*.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the human *nepeš* is a *physical* thing. "It shall even be as when a hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his *soul* is empty: or as when a thirsty man dreameth, and, behold, he drinketh: but he awaketh, and, behold, he is faint, and his *soul* hath appetite" (Is 29 : 8). "Bread for their *soul*" in the KJV is appropriately rendered in the RSV, "bread for their *hunger*" (Hos 9 : 4). "To make empty the *soul* of the hungry" in the KJV reads "to leave the *craving* of the hungry unsatisfied" in the RSV (Is 32 : 6). Evidently in classical Hebrew, as already noticed from Mic 7 : 1, *nepeš* includes the stomach as well as the heart and the mind, and perhaps no other indication from the literature under review provides more impressive evidence that *nepeš* in Hebrew thought represents the whole man. *Nepeš* is just as truly a man in his bodily cravings and physical appetites as it is a man in his highest aspirations and strongest determination for good or evil. This quality of a soul, not only appears a full seven times in these texts, but recurs throughout Scripture, and appears even in the NT, where ψυχή is the NT equivalent to *nepeš*, as the following example indicates: "Take no thought for your *life* (*psuchē*), what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink" (Mt 6 : 25; Lk 12:22).

Let us now return to the question of anthropomorphism. If in addition to a moral, intellectual, and emotional activity our texts had also attributed to the divine *nepeš* physical appetites and desires, then anthropomorphism might be the only fitting explanation. We would have to say that in these passages the word *nepeš* is applied to God, simply because the Hebrews attributed to God the qualities that they recognized in man. Then, although we could go no higher

<sup>12</sup> The others are Am 6 : 8; Hab 2 : 5; Jer 34 : 16; 51 : 14.

in our definition of *nepeš*, we could justly draw upon these passages to define the Hebrew concept of a human *nepeš*. But is not the case rather different when it is found that nowhere in the literature under review are physical, bodily appetites attributed to the divine *nepeš*? In fact, although *nepeš* is used of God twenty-three times in the Hebrew Old Testament, nowhere in all the canonical literature are physical, bodily appetites ever attributed to the divine *nepeš*. This is all the more remarkable because the pagan neighbors of Israel consistently attributed the grossest bodily appetites to their gods. Is there not then in Hebrew usage something other than anthropomorphism? Do we not recall that, according to basic Hebrew tradition, man became a living *nepeš* when he was made in the image of God (Gn 1 : 26; 2 : 7)? The living God gave him existence. The great *nepeš* created man and constituted him another living being, a *nepeš* on a reduced scale, on another level of existence, having modes of expression and action different from His own, but a *nepeš* nevertheless to some extent like Himself. And in whatever manner, spiritual or physical, this new living being found expression, these expressions would be expressions of himself, a *nepeš*.

### *The Soul That Man Has*

In about fifty per cent of the instances where *nepeš* appears as something a man has (this means in 40 passages in the writings under review) the KJV gives the rendering "life." Who can doubt the correctness of this translation in the following examples? Nathan advised Bathsheba to report Adonijah's attempted coup d'état in order to "save thine own *life*, and the *life* of thy son Solomon." Elijah fled from Jezebel's murderous designs and complained, "I only am left, and they seek my *life*." Benhadad's servants advised him to throw himself on the mercy of Ahab, "peradventure he will save thy *life*." The third captain sent with his men to arrest Elijah "fell on his knees . . . and said . . . O man of God, I



pray thee, let my *life*, and the *life* of these fifty thy servants, be precious in thy sight" (1 Ki 1 : 12; 19 : 10, 14; 20 : 31; 2 Ki 1 : 13).

The student of Scripture will probably agree also with the remainder of the forty such instances; but when he reads Hezekiah's words of gratitude for the fifteen years added to his life, "For the grave cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee . . . as I do this day," he will wonder how it came about that the KJV does not make him say, as the RSV, "thou hast held back my *life* from the pit of destruction," but instead reports him as saying "thou hast in love to my *soul* delivered it from the pit" (Is 38 : 17, 18). He may also wonder why Jeremiah, according to the KJV, should promise King Zedekiah that if he would surrender to the Babylonians "thy *soul* shall live" instead of "your *life* shall be spared" (Jer 38 : 17, RSV). There are a dozen such instances. This would bring the total to fifty-two. In several of these other twelve instances, as already noted, the RSV has changed "soul" to "life," thereby supporting our conclusions,—and yet not in all. For instance, in the very verse preceding the last mentioned instance, where the KJV has "who made us this *soul*" the RSV has "who made our *souls*," whereas both Moffatt and Powis Smith have "who made this *life* of ours" (Jer 38 : 16).

### *The Soul Can Die*

In the literature under review *nepeš* occurs 124 times. Of these occurrences, 109 refer to the human *nepeš*. Of these 109 instances, no less than 48 plainly indicate that the human *nepeš* dies. In other words, 44 per cent of the occurrences of the word *nepeš* in reference to man show that the soul of man is mortal. This evidence is overwhelming. We have already cited Benhadad's suit for his "life," Jeremiah's complaint against conspirators, the advice that saved Bathsheba's "life," and the miracle that prolonged the "life" of Hezekiah (1 Ki 20 : 32; Jer 18 : 20, 22; 1 Ki 1 : 12; Is 38 : 17, 18).

Of the 48 instances, the one that is most likely to perplex the modern Bible reader is the story of the raising of the Phoenician widow's son by Elijah. The RSV still uses the identical words of the KJV, "the *soul* of the child came into him again, and he revived." How much more clear the rendering of Moffatt, "the child's *life* came back and he revived," or that of Powis Smith, "the *life* of the child came back to him again, so that he lived" (1 Ki 17 : 22). Expressed in connection with this very text and the similar passage in Gn 35 : 18 the opinion of a thorough scholar of earlier days is significant: "נַפְשׁוֹ hath been supposed to signify the spiritual part of man, or what we commonly call his soul: I must confess, that I can find no passage where it hath undoubtedly this meaning."<sup>13</sup>

The *nepeš* can die whether it is the soul a man *has* or the soul he *is*. In the story of Elijah the word is rendered both ways with reference to the same event in a single verse: "And he requested for *himself* that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my *life*" (1 Ki 19 : 4). The RSV does not materially change this two-fold rendering, nor is there need to do so. Only when *nepeš* is rendered by the English word "soul" do these passages become obscure. The popular and theological accretions in meaning that have become attached to the English word are a hindrance to a proper understanding of the Hebrew word under consideration.

A recent Oxford publication expresses the common popular—and erroneous—view when it says: "The Scriptures are explicit . . . on . . . the distinction between soul and body, the creation of the soul of the first man . . . and its immortality."<sup>14</sup> This work is much nearer the truth when it goes on to say that the early Fathers reflect the confusion of pagan philosophies on this subject, and that the definition of the

<sup>13</sup> John Parkhurst, "נַפְשׁוֹ," in *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (London, 1778).

<sup>14</sup> "Soul," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross, (London, 1957).

soul by Thomas Aquinas as "an individual spiritual substance" that "may be severed from the body and lead a separate existence . . . after death" was taken over from the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

Consistent with the findings of the present survey, more and more scholars are recognizing the truth of the claim made by N. H. Snaith that "immortality of the soul . . . is not a Biblical idea at all."<sup>15</sup> "To the Hebrews, man is a body animated by a life-soul (*nephesh*), and when the man is dead, there is no life-soul anywhere."<sup>16</sup>

### *What Does Nephesh Mean?*

The soul that a man *is* is simply the living being a man is. The soul that a man *has* is simply his life, in any manifestation of that life. In the Hebrew concept the *nephesh* a man *is* and the *nephesh* a man *has* are one and the same; namely, the life that constitutes a man a living being and the living being so constituted. It is but a trick of language, accentuated by the difficulties of idiomatic translation, that appears to separate this comprehensive meaning into two.

In the original accounts of the creation of every living *soul*, the word *nephesh* is qualified by the word *hayyah* (חַיָּה "living" or "life", Gn 1 : 20, 21, 30; 2 : 7, 19). In the basic Hebrew concept every *nephesh* on earth had its origin in the gift of "life" (חַיִּים *hayyim*, Gn 2 : 7; 7 : 15, 21, 22). Every manifestation of activity in that newly constituted being called a *nephesh*, whether physical, mental, moral, or emotional, was a manifestation of that life, and hence *nephesh* itself became a synonym for "life," as well as the name of the "total psychophysical organism" thereby constituted.<sup>17</sup> The Living God created all other living beings. God, the great *nephesh*, created every

<sup>15</sup> N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London, 1944), p. 89, note 2.

<sup>16</sup> Snaith, *The Jews from Cyrus to Herod* (Wallington, 1949), p. 122.

<sup>17</sup> Ed. Jacob, "Man," in *Vocabulary of the Bible*, ed. J. J. Von Allmen (London, 1958), pp. 247-250.

other *nepeš*. As He, the Great Living One, is a *nepeš* in His higher sphere of existence and activity, so man, His creature, is a *nepeš* in his sphere. Man has life; he is a living being. When his life ceases, he ceases: the *nepeš*, both as life and as living being, is no more. This is the pre-exilic Hebrew concept of the human "soul." It comprehends man in all his powers of mind and body, manifesting life, not in one aspect of being, but in the total self, whether appetite or emotion, reason or purpose, consciousness or conscience. It is life as it appears in man, or it is the man himself as long as he has life.