

A Study of the Nature of Man

Intro: If we are to appreciate fully and accurately what the Bible says about life after death, we must ponder the subject of the nature of man. To understand the nature of man, we must carefully study the terms used to describe man's nature. In the OT there are two distinct terms used to describe man's inward nature as opposed to the physical body itself.

The “nephesh” or “pseuche” (Translated “soul”)

First, let's consider the Hebrew word “nephesh”. It is found 755 times in the OT. It is used in a variety of ways in the OT; but all of them are logically related to its concrete meaning.

In Hebrew, the most fundamental and concrete use of this word is to describe the “breath” of a person.

There is a related verb in the OT “napash” which means to “refresh oneself”. It is the picture of someone “catching their breath, breathing deeply so as to feel energized rather than tired”. Thus, in the most fundamental sense “nephesh” could refer to the “breath” that animates the body of both man and beast. Thus, in this sense the OT speaks of the “nephesh” of man and the “nephesh” of land creatures who also breathe like we do.

“and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food” (Genesis 1:30)

This phrase might be literally translated “breath of life”. The JW's are notorious for seizing upon this use of “nephesh” to deny that man has an existence after death. They argue from this verse that man's “soul” is no different from the animal's “soul”; and that both have no existence beyond death. (You can live forever, p. 77) In this sense they are right. But is this is not the only use of the word “nephesh”!!

Our understanding of the varying uses of “nephesh” depends somewhat on our ability to think about the remarkable powers of observation that ancient people had toward life and its mystery. Because the breath is closely associated with the feelings of yearning, desire, longing, the word “nephesh” was commonly used to describe the appetites, cravings, or needs of both man and animal.

“When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied (lit. according to the satisfaction of your soul), but you shall not put any in your basket. (Deuteronomy 23:24)

It was also used to describe the inward “source” of these appetites or desire. Thus, the “nephesh” is the seat of desire and volition. It is the source of our longing for not only physical things but for a relationship with God.

“AS the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God.” (Psalm 42:1-2)

And because the fulfillment of one's inward desires is essentially the activity of life itself, the word “nephesh” is used in the OT as a term for “life” with the emphasis upon the living self with all its hopes and drives.

“Then Saul sent messengers to David’s house to watch him, in order to put him to death in the morning. But Michal, David’s wife, told him, saying, “If you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be put to death.” (1 Samuel 19:11)

It is an easy step from this usage to the idea that “a life” is a “person”. For this reason, “nephesh” can simply be a reference to man as a living being.

Commonly newscaster might say, “Three lives were lost in the tornado”.

“Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7)

It is clear that the word “nephesh” has many shades of meaning; but it is clear that there is an animating principle closely associated with the breath that is the seat of man’s recognized needs and longings and is the seat of the personality of man.

In the Septuagint “psuche” was used to translated “nephesh” into Greek. In the NT the writers use the word “psuche” (from which we get psyche or psychological) to refer to this part of man.

“Ruach or “pneuma” (Translated “spirit”)

The second Hebrew word is “ruach”. It too like “nephesh” has a broad range of meanings and a similar derivation in concept and application.

It is concretely the wind, air in motion.

‘And I shall bring upon Elam the four winds from the four ends of heaven, And shall scatter them to all these winds; And there will be no nation to which the outcasts of Elam will not go.” (“Jeremiah 49:36)

Likewise, it may be the “breath” of man or animals or both.

“So they went into the ark to Noah, by twos of all flesh in which was the breath of life.” (Genesis 7:15)

It is that part of man that he shares with God, who is spirit. Man was created uniquely as God breathed into His nostrils the breath of life. He was made “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:26). Thus, man possesses a “spirit” that is unique to him; his spirit possesses capabilities that he shares with God, the capacity to reason, and exercise emotion. He thinks in his “ruach” (Eze. 11:5).

Then the Spirit of the LORD fell upon me, and He said to me, “Say, ‘Thus says the LORD, “So you think, house of Israel, for I know your thoughts.” (Ezekiel 11:5)

And “ruach” may then be a state of mind or attitude of the person. He may possess a “spirit” (ruach) of sadness, contrition, pride, wisdom, whoredom, jealousy, restraint, or anger.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10)

Because of the association with the intellectual and moral qualities of man, “spirit” stands for the whole inner man as opposed to the flesh or the outward man:

“For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the

contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isaiah 57:15) Note how the spirit is paralleled with the heart.

The translators of the Greek OT chose to use the word “pneuma” to translate the Hebrew word “ruach”. This word is commonly used in the NT in a similar way.

Is there a distinction to be made between “soul” and “spirit”?

In general, the two seem to be used interchangeably, particularly in contrast to the body; yet there are subtle distinctions made. First consider some interchangeable uses:

Both are used to describe the inner person.

The “soul” of Jesus was “troubled” (Mt. 26:38)

He was “troubled in spirit” (Jn. 13:21).

Both are used in contrast to the physical body.

2 Cor. 7:1

Mt. 10:28

Both are used to describe the moment of death

“And it came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.” (Gen. 35:18)

“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” (James 2:26)

Hebrews 4:12 seems to communicate the idea that one manifestation of the power of the word of God is to “pierce” what is virtually inseparable, like “joints and marrow” or “soul and spirit”.

In other passages there seems to be a distinction implied.

Paul’s description of sanctification involves “spirit, soul, and body” (1 Thes. 5:23).

The Lord’s own appeal to serve God with the totality of our being involves loving him with all our “heart, soul, mind (understanding), and strength” (Lk. 10:27).

Most of us would agree that man is not simultaneously bi-part, tri-part, quadru-part all at once. These terms describe various features of our inward being.

But how might they be distinguished?

Paul contrasts the “natural” (pseuchikos) from the “spiritual” (pneumatikos) in a number of passages (1 Cor. 2). Contextually, the difference seems to center around the state of man without the influence of God as opposed to the yielding of man to the control of the divine through the Holy Spirit. The “natural man” lives by his own instinctive longings and desires; the spiritual man uses the God given capacities to think and reason about the Holy Spirit’s revelation to discern his relationship to the creation.

Gleason Archer suggests these distinction: “Ruach is the principle of man’s rational and immortal life, and possesses reason, will, and

conscience. It imparts the divine image to man, and constitutes the animating dynamic which results in man's nephesh as the subject of personal life. The distinctive personality of the individual inheres in his nephesh, the seat of his emotions and desire. Ruach is life power, having the ground of its vitality in itself; the nephesh has a more subjective and conditional life."

The use of the "soul" seems to center around the innate "longings" and "needs" of man in his created state. The use of "spirit" seems to center around the intelligence principle that directs the course of his life as it instructed by God. Thus in Is. 26:9 we read:

"At night my soul longs for Thee, Indeed, my spirit within me seeks Thee diligently; for when the earth experiences Thy judgments. The inhabitants of the world learn righteousness." (Isaiah 26:9)

Conclusion: All of us must face the question of what we are. Are we just a bag of chemicals that will have no existence beyond your last breath? If so, then go home "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die". But if we trust the word of God, then we see that we are more than a body—that we possess a soul or spirit that can live on after death. If so, then it is of greatest importance for us to know what the future holds and prepare for it. Everything depends upon that decision.