

Soul in the Bible

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The traditional Christian concept of an immaterial and immortal soul separate from the body is not found in pre-exilic Judaism, but evolved as a result of interaction with Persian and Hellenistic philosophy.^[1] Accordingly, the Old Testament Hebrew word *nephesh*, although translated as "soul" in some older Bibles, actually has a meaning closer to "living being". *Nephesh* was rendered in the Greek Septuagint (a translation of the Old Testament dating from the centuries immediately prior to the modern era) as *psyche* (ψυχή), the Greek word for soul. The New Testament also uses the word *psyche*, but with the Hebrew meaning and not the Greek.^[2]

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Etymology

The only Hebrew word traditionally translated "soul" (*nephesh*) in English language Bibles refers to a living, breathing conscious body, rather than to an *immortal soul*.^[3] John Goldingay writes, "The life of a human being came more directly from God, and it is also evident that when someone dies, the breath (*rûah*, e.g., Ps 104:29) or the life (*nepeš*, e.g., Gen 35:18) disappears and returns to the God who is *rûah*."^[4]

In the New Testament, the Greek word traditionally translated "soul" (*psyche*) has substantially the same meaning as the Hebrew, without reference to an *immortal soul*.^[5]

Man as Nephesh

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath [neshemah] of life,
and the man became a living *being/soul* [nephesh]
—Genesis 2:7

Animals as Nephesh

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. ...
And whatever the man called each living *creature* [nephesh], that was its name. .
—Genesis 2:19

Biblical definition

Genesis 2:7 gives the formula for creating a *nephesh*. According to this verse God did not make a body and put a soul into it like a letter into an envelope of dust; rather he formed man's body from the dust, then, by breathing divine breath into it, he made the body of dust live, i.e. the dust did not *embody* a soul, but it *became* a soul—a whole creature.^[6] A dead body is not a nephesh. A living, conscious body is a nephesh.

Immortality

The concept of an immaterial soul separate from and surviving the body is common today but was not found in ancient Hebrew beliefs.^[1] The word never means an immortal soul^[7] or an incorporeal part of the human being^[8] that can survive death of the body as the spirit of dead.^[9]

Historical Christianity

In Patristic thought, towards the end of the 2nd century, *psyche* was begun to be understood in a more Greek than a Hebrew way, contrasted with the body. By the 3rd century, with the influence of Origen, there was the establishing of the Roman Catholic tradition of the inherent immortality of the soul and its divine nature.^[10] Inherent immortality of the soul was accepted among western and eastern theologians throughout the middle ages, and after the Reformation, as evidenced by the Westminster Confession.

Modern scholarship

The modern scholarly consensus is that the canonical teaching of the Old Testament made no reference to an "immortal soul" independent of the body.^{[11][12][13][14]} This view is represented consistently in a wide range of scholarly reference works.^{[15][16][17][18][19][20]}

In the last six decades, conditional immortality, or "immortality by grace" (κατὰ χάριν ἀθανασία, *kata charin athanasia*), of the soul has also been widely accepted among Eastern Orthodox theologians, by returning to the views of the late 2nd century, where immortality was still considered as a gift granted with the value of Jesus' death and resurrection.^[21]

Many modern theologians reject the view that the doctrine of the immortal soul is taught in the Bible,^{[22][23][24][25][26][27][28][29][30]} and Hebblethwaite observes the doctrine is "not popular amongst Christian theologians or among Christian philosophers today".^[31] See also Soul death.

Modern Christian groups

There are some Christian churches which promote this Biblical view of the soul, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Christadelphians, and various Advent Church of God organizations.

Notes

- [^] ^{*a*} ^{*b*} Tabor, James, What the Bible says about Death, Afterlife, and the Future (<http://www.religiousstudies.uncc.edu/jdtabor/future.html>) , , access date: September 25, 2009. "The ancient Hebrews had no idea of an immortal soul living a full and vital life beyond death, nor of any resurrection or return from death. Human beings, like the beasts of the field, are made of "dust of the earth," and at death they return to that dust (Gen. 2:7; 3:19). The Hebrew word *nephesh*, traditionally translated "living soul" but more properly understood as "living creature," is the same word used for all breathing creatures and refers to nothing immortal.
- [^] *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*
- [^] "Even as we are conscious of the broad and very common biblical usage of the term "soul," we must be clear that Scripture does not present even a rudimentarily developed theology of the soul. The creation narrative is clear that all life originates with God. Yet the Hebrew Scripture offers no specific understanding of the origin of individual souls, of when and how they become attached to specific bodies, or of their potential existence, apart from the body, after death. The reason for this is that, as we noted at the beginning, the Hebrew Bible does not present a theory of the soul developed much beyond the simple concept of a force associated with respiration, hence, a life-force.", Avery-Peck, "Soul", in Neusner, et al. (eds.), "The Encyclopedia of Judaism", p. 1343 (2000)
- [^] Goldingay, "Old Testament Theology", volume 2, p. 640 (2006)
- [^] "In the nt, 'soul' retains its basic Hebrew field of meaning. Soul refers to one's life: Herod sought Jesus' soul (Matt. 2:20); one might save a soul or take it (Mark 3:4). Death occurs when God 'requires your soul' (Luke 12:20). 'Soul' may refer to the whole person, the self: 'three thousand souls' were converted in Acts 2:41 (see Acts 3:23). Although the Greek idea of an immortal soul different in kind from the mortal body is not evident, 'soul' denotes the existence of a person after death (see Luke 9:25; 12:4; 21:19); yet Greek influence may be found in 1 Peter's remark about 'the salvation of souls' (1:9). A moderate dualism exists in the contrast of spirit with body and even soul, where 'soul' means life that is not yet caught up in grace. See also *Flesh and Spirit; Human Being.*", Neyrey, "Soul", in Achtemeier, Harper, & Row (eds.), "Harper's Bible Dictionary", pp. 982–983 (1st ed. 1985)
- [^] Berry, Wendell (1997). "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" (<http://books.google.com/books?id=2OKiszvwwikC&pg=PA253&lpg=PA253&dq=body+plus+breath+of+life+equals+soul+be&source=bl&ots=lbtzEBjoo1&sig=cIzCaN0nLcVkUkCFfjDE>)
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<http://books.google.com/books?id=2OKiszvwwikC&pg=PA253&lpg=PA253&dq=body+plus+breath+of+life+equals+soul+be&source=bl&ots=lbtzEBjoo1&sig=cIzCaN0nLcVkUkCFfjDE>
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[uWPala&hl=en&ei=2Xh5TfuWFIHXrAHjqd3NBQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&sqi=2&ved=0CEwQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=body%20plus%20breath%20of%20life%20equals%20soul%20be&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=2OKiszvwwikC&pg=PA253&lpg=PA253&dq=body+plus+breath+of+life+equals+soul+be&source=bl&ots=lbtzEBjoo1&sig=cIzCaN0nLcVkUkCFfjDE). "The crucial test is probably Genesis 2:7, which gives the process by which Adam was created: 'The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul.' My mind, like most people's, has been deeply influenced by dualism, and I can see how dualistic minds deal with this verse. They conclude that the formula for man-making is man equals body plus soul. But that conclusion cannot be derived, except by violence, from Genesis 2:7, which is not dualistic. The formula given in Genesis 2:7 is not man equals body plus soul; the formula there is soul equals dust plus breath. According to this verse, God did not make a body and put a soul into it, like a letter into an envelope. He formed man of dust; then, by breathing His breath into it, He made the dust live. The dust, formed as man and made to live, did not *embody* a soul, it *became* a soul-that is, a whole creature. Humanity is thus presented to us, in Adam, not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together but as a single mystery."
- [^] *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.
- [^] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Father Xavier Leon Dufour, 1985.
- [^] *New International Dictionary*.
- [^] The early Hebrews apparently had a concept of the soul but did not separate it from the body, although later Jewish writers developed the idea of the soul further. Old Testament references to the soul are related to the concept of breath and establish no distinction between the ethereal soul and the corporeal body. Christian concepts of a body-soul dichotomy originated with the ancient Greeks and were introduced into Christian theology at an early date by St. Gregory of Nyssa and by St. Augustine.—*Britannica*, 2004
- [^] "Twentieth century biblical scholarship largely agrees that the ancient Jews had little explicit notion of a personal afterlife until very late in the Old Testament period. Immortality of the soul was a typically Greek philosophical notion quite foreign to the thought of ancient Semitic peoples. Only the latest stratum of the Old Testament asserts even the resurrection of the body, a view more congenial to Semites.", Donelley, "Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli's doctrine of man and grace", p. 99 (1976)

12. ^ "Modern scholarship has underscored the fact that Hebrew and Greek concepts of soul were not synonymous. While the Hebrew thought world distinguished soul from body (as material basis of life), there was no question of two separate, independent entities. A person did not have a body but was an animated body, a unit of life manifesting itself in fleshly form—a psychophysical organism (Buttrick, 1962). Although Greek concepts of the soul varied widely according to the particular era and philosophical school, Greek thought often presented a view of the soul as a separate entity from body. Until recent decades Christian theology of the soul has been more reflective of Greek (compartmentalized) than Hebrew (unitive) ideas.", Moon, "Soul", in Benner & Hill (eds.), "Baker encyclopedia of psychology & counseling, p. 1148 (2nd ed. 1999)
13. ^ "A broad consensus emerged among biblical and theological scholars that soul-body dualism is a Platonic, Hellenistic idea that is not found anywhere in the Bible. The Bible, from cover to cover, promotes what they call the "Hebrew concept of the whole person." G. C. Berkouwer writes that the biblical view is always holistic, that in the Bible the soul is never ascribed any special religious significance. Werner Jaeger writes that soul-body dualism is a bizarre idea that has been read into the Bible by misguided church fathers such as Augustine. Rudolf Bultmann writes that Paul uses the word soma (body) to refer to the whole person, the self, so that there is not a soul and body, but rather the body is the whole thing. This interpretation of Pauline anthropology has been a theme in much subsequent Pauline scholarship.", McMinn & Phillips, "Care for the soul: exploring the intersection of psychology & theology", pp. 107-108 (2001).
14. ^ "The general consensus is that the Old Testament rejected any natural or innate immortality.", McNamara, "Beauty and the Priest: Finding God in the New Age", p. 64 (1997).
15. ^ "Indeed, the salvation of the "immortal soul" has sometimes been a commonplace in preaching, but it is fundamentally unbiblical. Biblical anthropology is not dualistic but monistic: human being consists in the integrated wholeness of body and soul, and the Bible never contemplates the disembodied existence of the soul in bliss.", Myers (ed.), "The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary", p. 518 (1987).
16. ^ "There is no suggestion in the OT of the transmigration of the soul as an immaterial, immortal entity. Man is a unity of body and soul—terms that describe not so much two separate entities in a person as much as one person from different standpoints. Hence, in the description of man's creation in Genesis 2:7, the phrase "a living soul" (kjv) is better translated as "a living being."", Elwell & Comfort (eds.), "Tyndale Bible dictionary", p. 1216 (2001)
17. ^ "Barr is surely right to stress that the Genesis story as it now stands indicates that humans were not created immortal, but had (and lost) the chance to gain unending life.", Wright, 'The Resurrection of the Son of God', p. 92 (2003); Wright himself actually interprets some passages of Scripture as indicating alternative beliefs, "The Bible offers a spectrum of belief about life after death", Wright, "The Resurrection of the Son of God", p. 129 (2003)
18. ^ "In contrast to the two enigmatic references to Enoch and Elijah, there are ample references to the fact that death is the ultimate destiny for all human beings, that God has no contact with or power over the dead, and that the dead do not have any relationship with God (see, inter alia, Ps. 6:6, 30:9–10, 39:13–14, 49:6–13, 115:16–18, 146:2–4). If there is a conceivable setting for the introduction of a doctrine of the afterlife, it would be in Job, since Job, although righteous, is harmed by God in the present life. But Job 10:20–22 and 14:1–10 affirm the opposite.", Gillman, "Death and Afterlife, Judaic Doctrines Of", in Neusner, "The Encyclopedia of Judaism", volume 1, p. 176 (2000)
19. ^ "'Who knows whether the breath of human beings rises up and the breath of an animal sinks down to the earth?' (Eccles 3:21). In Qohelet's day there were perhaps people who were speculating that human beings would enjoy a positive afterlife, as animals would not. Qohelet points out that there is no evidence for this.", Goldingay, "Old Testament Theology", volume 2, p. 644 (2006)
20. ^ "The life of a human being came more directly from God, and it is also evident that when someone dies, the breath (rûah, e.g., Ps 104:29) or the life (nepeš, e.g., Gen 35:18) disappears and returns to the God who is rûah. And whereas the living may hope that the absence of God may give way again to God's presence, the dead are forever cut off from God's presence.²⁴¹ Death means an end to fellowship with God and to fellowship with other people. It means an end to the activity of God and the activity of other people. Even more obviously, it means an end to my own activity. It means an end to awareness.", *ibid.*, p. 640
21. ^ *Immortality of the Soul*, (http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/immortality_soul.htm) George Florovsky.
22. ^ "But the Jew did not believe that human beings consist of an immortal soul entombed for a while in a mortal body.", Caird & Hurst, "New Testament Theology", p. 267 (1994).
23. ^ "While the idea of an immortal soul is an established belief for most Christians, it cannot be supported by Biblical texts.", Ford & Muers, "The modern theologians: an introduction to Christian theology since 1918", p. 693 (2005).
24. ^ "Consequently Buddhist and biblical views of the self agree that there exists no immortal soul that remains self-identically permanent through time.", Ford & Muers, "The modern theologians: an introduction to Christian theology since 1918", p. 693 (2005).
25. ^ "Berkouwer has a long chapter on the meaning of the soul called "The Whole Man." Here he denounces the theory of a "substantial dichotomy" between an immortal soul and a mortal body.", Moody, "The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation", p. 182 (1990).
26. ^ "Berkouwer's critique of belief in the natural immortality of the soul is as significant as it is Scriptural. At times he argues that "creedal caution" is better than dogmatic theology, but his main thrust is against the theory of belief in an immortal soul independent of God. Only God is by nature immortal, and man's immortality is a gift received in dependence upon the immortal God.", Moody, "The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation", p. 182 (1990).
27. ^ "Fudge admits that belief in the immortality of the soul is the main current in church history. He, however, favors another view: "Crisscrossing all of this flows the stream of Christian mortalism. . . . This understanding appears as the sparkling water of pristine Christianity." He defines mortalism as "the belief that according to divine revelation the soul does not exist as an independent substance after the death of the body."", Fudge & Peterson, "Two views of hell: a biblical & theological dialogue", p. 173 (2000).
28. ^ "Theodore R. Clark also taught it. In his view, the whole person is mortal and subject to final and total destruction.", Richards, "Winds of doctrines: the origin and development of Southern Baptist theology", p. 207 (1991).
29. ^ "It is generally accepted that in biblical thought there is no separation of body and soul and, consequently, the resurrection of the body is central. The idea of an immortal soul is not a Hebrew concept but comes from Platonic philosophy. It is, therefore, considered a severe distortion of the NT to read this foreign idea into its teaching.", Vogels, "Review of "The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality", by James Barr", *Critical Review of Books in Religion*, volume 7, p. 80 (1994).
30. ^ "Several Evangelical theologians suggest that the concept of man possessing an "immortal soul" is not the teaching of the Word of God. Clark Pinnock argues that its source is Plato (or Greek philosophy in general), and not the Bible.", Dixon, "What Is Man?", *Emmaus Journal* (9.2.168), 2000.
31. ^ "That the idea of the soul's immortality as disembodied state beyond death is not popular amongst Christian theologians or among Christian philosophers today has already been acknowledged.", Hebblethwaite, "Philosophical theology and Christian doctrine", p. 113 (2005).

External links

- Stewart Salmond - The Christian Doctrine of Immortality (<http://www.archive.org/details/christiandoctri04salmgoog>)
- After Death — What? ...according to Jesus (<http://www.cftf.com/death/index.html>)

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