
Man and the Meaning of נֶפֶשׁ

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What is man? This most basic of all human questions is asked in three places in the Old Testament.¹ One answer is given in Genesis 2:7. As a result of God's creative activity "man became a living נֶפֶשׁ." However, this raises another question: What is a נֶפֶשׁ, often translated "soul"?

The answer to this second question is anything but an easy one. The word נֶפֶשׁ, like many key biblical words, may convey different meanings in different contexts. This article begins then by exploring in a summary fashion the semantic range of the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ. Then major meanings, or groups of meanings, are surveyed.² The article concludes with a discussion of how the various meanings of נֶפֶשׁ affect three crucial theological issues: man's place in creation, man's essential nature, and the question of immortality.

The Semantic Range of נֶפֶשׁ

The slightly more than 750 uses of נֶפֶשׁ in the Old Testament can be grouped by common or shared basic meanings into 10 categories. Five of these categories are represented in a large number of texts, and five are represented in only a handful of texts. The more numerous categories are presented first.

¹ Job 7:17; Psalms 8:4; 144:3.

² Readers interested in a more complete study may consult the author's "The Plurality of 'Soul' in the Old Testament with Special Attention Given to the Use of נֶפֶשׁ" (PhD diss., New York University, 1987).

MAJOR USES OF נפש

Appetitive use. נפש is often used in the Old Testament to express the seat of desire for physical food or drink (e.g., meat, Deut. 12:15; grapes, Deut. 23:24 [Heb., v. 25]; and water, Isa. 29:8). נפש also refers at least once to an animal's appetite for food (Prov. 12:10). Proverbs 12:10 says a righteous man is one who knows (is concerned about and supplies) the נפש of his beast. In other words the righteous man is a person who provides for his animal's need for food and drink.

A related use of נפש borrows the language of the appetite and uses it to speak of other than physical appetites. For example the psalmist often speaks of his נפש "thirsting for God" like the deer thirsting for water (Ps. 42:2). The נפש is also used to indicate a more general desire. An example of this is Deuteronomy 21:14. A slave girl released by an Israelite man must be allowed to go forth "according to her נפש." The meaning is clearly that she could go forth to whatever place she desired.

נפש can also refer to sexual appetite, as in Ugaritic.³ This use, however, is found in only one text in the Old Testament. Jeremiah 2:24 likens the nation of Israel to a wild donkey that "sniffs the wind in the desire of her נפש."

Jeremiah 44:14 speaks of people "lifting up their נפש to go somewhere," that is, desiring to go there. And Psalm 25:1 speaks of the psalmist's "lifting up his נפש" to God. The context seems to indicate that the psalmist was expressing his desire to God in prayer. A related idea, though with different consequences, is expressed in Psalm 24:4. A man who "lifts up his נפש to vanity" is probably a man who prays to an idol.

Another subgroup of the appetitive use of נפש expresses the idea of fasting, which is described as "afflicting the נפש" (e.g., Ps. 35:13).

The basic idea of the appetitive group of meanings is derived from the desire for food and drink. The related concepts of a more general desire can be understood as variations on a basic theme.

Personal use. נפש is also often used in the Old Testament to refer to a person or individual. Such a use can refer to a single person, to a group of people in a collective sense, or to a group in a plural sense.

נפש refers to a single individual in contexts relating to sacrifice. Leviticus 2:1 speaks of an occasion when "a נפש brings a grain offering." The key to understanding this phrase is seen by comparing it with Leviticus 1:2, which speaks of "a man's bringing an offering." Thus "man" in Leviticus 1:2 is functionally parallel to "נפש" in 2:1.

A closely related use of נפש is found in the formulaic sayings of sanction for or punishment of an individual. A paraphrase of Genesis

³ Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Bible Institute, 1965), p. 446

17:14 exemplifies the wording of this formula: "as for the one who does (or fails to do) a certain action, that *נפש* will be cut off from his people." This clearly speaks of punishment meted out to a person.

An example of the collective use of *נפש* is in Genesis 12:5. Part of Abram's entourage is called "the *נפש* that they acquired in Haran." This probably refers to household slaves acquired by Abram or Lot or born into their households.

נפש in its plural form is found only 52 times in the Old Testament. Ezekiel 13:18-20 contains several of the plural forms of *נפש*, and in several cases the idea clearly expressed is "persons" or "individuals."

Reference to life. In the previous use *נפש* refers to a person or an individual, that is, a living being. In the present category *נפש* refers to the *life* of the person in a more abstract sense. In a general sense *נפש* means life and in a specific sense *נפש* is almost the same as blood.

The general sense in which *נפש* means life is seen in verses that speak of "seeking the *נפש* of someone" (Exod. 4:19). Also in Genesis 37:21 *נפש* is used in an adverbial sense. Reuben urged his brothers *לֹא נִכְנֹו נֶפֶשׁ*. The idiom speaks of "not smiting with respect to (the loss of) life," that is, not mortally wounding a person.

The general equivalence of *נפש* and life is also seen in verses that speak of the law of retaliation. The Israelites were commanded to make restitution of *נפש* for *נפש*, that is, life for life (Exod. 21:23). This sense of *נפש* expressing life is seen in verses that speak of atonement (but not the specific atonement effected by blood). Each Israelite male was to pay a half-shekel tax "to atone for his *נפש* . . . so that there would be no plague among them" (Exod. 30:12; cf. v. 16).

The use of *נפש* to express life is also seen in passages about protection and risk. The angels warned Lot to "slip away for the sake of your *נפש*" (Gen. 19:17). Elijah "went (away) for the sake of his *נפש*" (1 Kings 19:3). Risk could involve "exposing the *נפש*" (Judg. 5:18) or "putting the *נפש* in one's hand" (Judg. 12:3). This latter phrase corresponds with the English expression "to take one's life in one's hands."

In Deuteronomy 24:6 *נפש* means life in the sense of livelihood. Millstones were not to be taken as security for a loan because they were the *נפש* of their owner. The millstones were used to make flour from grain, the flour was used in cooking, and the food sustained the lives of those who ate it. Thus the millstones are "life" in the sense of serving to sustain life, or, as expressed in current English, "livelihood."⁴ In a figure of speech known as metonymy, the cause (millstones) is used to speak of the result (*נפש*).

⁴ It is interesting to note a parallel use of *βίος*, one of the New Testament words for "life." John wrote of one who has *βίος*, that is, has what sustains life, and yet will not use it to meet the needs of a brother (1 John 3:17).

נפש also is related to life in contexts where the נפש is almost synonymous with blood. For example in the context of the provision of food for the post-Flood human race, Noah and his sons were told "not to eat meat with its life still in it" (Gen. 9:4). Its "life," literally, its נפש, is clarified by the appositional words "its blood."⁵ Again in a metonymy the cause (blood) is substituted for the result (נפש).

Another use of נפש in close relationship with blood is found in Leviticus 17:11, 14. Leviticus 17:11 states that "the life (נפש) of the flesh is in the blood." The Israelite worshiper could rest assured that the life (נפש, a more abstract concept) of the animal had been removed if he removed its blood (a more physical entity).

The use of נפש to indicate life emphasizes a holistic view of life. It is the life of a living person, an individual, as evidenced in everyday life. And the life of the person is the object of the atonement.

Pronominal use. The pronominal use of נפש is observed in both poetry and prose. נפש and a personal suffix ("his נפש" or "your נפש") were used to parallel a simple pronoun. This requires, for example, that the exegete understand the words "his נפש" as a circumlocution for "him" or "himself."

The regular pronominal use of נפש is seen in Genesis 12:13. A literal rendering yields the following: "Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you and my נפש may live on account of you." "My נפש" is the subject of the following verb; it should be translated, "so that I may live on account of you."

The reflexive pronominal use of נפש is seen in a very instructive text (Lev. 11:43-44). The context deals with ritual uncleanness, and this uncleanness is expressed in terms of reflexive action. Interestingly the reflexive action is expressed in three ways: with a Hithpael stem and with a Niphal stem in verse 43, and with a Piel stem in verse 44. Since the Piel cannot be used to express a reflexive action,⁶ the text adds "your נפש (plural)" as a following object. In this way a Piel stem can express a reflexive idea perfectly well.

Thus נפש can express the force of either a personal pronoun or a reflexive pronoun when the context requires it. Perhaps this use in parallel to simple pronouns is only a stylistic variant, or perhaps in some cases it expresses an emphasis. The Old Testament has countless examples of this use of נפש.

Emotional use. The final major use of נפש refers to varying kinds of emotions in man. This class of usage is one area where נפש and רוח can have common meanings. Three kinds of emotions are expressed by

⁵ E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), par. 131k.

⁶ *Ibid.*, par. 57.

either *נפש* or *רוח* without apparent change of meaning. The first of these relates to an emotional state of impatience or discouragement. This emotion is expressed with *נפש* in Numbers 21:4 and Judges 16:16 and with *רוח* in Job 21:4.

Also bitterness can be expressed with either *נפש* or *רוח*. An example of bitterness expressed by *נפש* occurred when the Shunammite woman's son died (2 Kings 4:27). The same emotion is expressed by the use of *רוח* when Esau's Hittite wives were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 26:35).

Sadness or even depression can be conveyed by either *נפש* or *רוח*. An example of *נפש* is seen in Jonah 2:7 (Heb., v. 8). Jonah said his *נפש* was fainting on or against him. The same verb is used with *רוח* in Psalm 142:3 (Heb., v. 4). When the psalmist's *רוח* fainted on him, he was still confident in the Lord.

Several emotions are expressed exclusively by *רוח* in the Old Testament. They are pride (e.g., Prov. 16:18), humility (e.g., Isa. 57:15), anger (e.g., Eccles. 7:9), and self-control in relation to anger (e.g., Prov. 16:32).

So the semantic fields of *נפש* and *רוח* overlap in expressing emotions. But there are also areas of distinction in which these two words have exclusive roles.

MINOR USES OF *נפש*

Linked with heart. *נפש* is often linked with "heart" (*לב*) in the Old Testament in phrases that qualify certain actions. Probably one of the best known examples is Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Israel is charged in these verses to love the LORD her God with all her "heart" and all her *נפש*. Other verbs qualified in this way include "to seek," "to serve," "to do" (the statutes, hence "to obey)," "to hear," and "to return.

נפש, sometimes found alongside "heart" and sometimes not, is also used to refer to the seat of mental activity in man. That is, in certain Old Testament verses *נפש* indicates the part of man that is related to thinking. One clear example is Deuteronomy 4:9, in which Israel is instructed to guard her *נפש* lest she forget the things her eyes had seen. The linking of *נפש* with the action of forgetting clearly indicates that the *נפש* is related to memory. A further linking of *נפש* and memory is seen in Deuteronomy 11:18, in which Israel is enjoined to put words on her heart and *נפש*. These two examples are illustrative of the nine texts where *נפש* is related to mental activity.⁷

Used for corpse. This use is certainly one of the strangest in the entire Old Testament. Surprisingly the use of *נפש* to indicate a corpse

⁷ This use, in the author's judgment, is limited to Deuteronomy (4:9, 15; 11:18), Psalms (13:2 [Heb., v. 3]; 103:2), Proverbs (2:10; 23:7; 24:12), and Jeremiah (17:21).

is not even listed in a major recent work dealing with key Old Testament anthropological terms.⁸ But it is important to note that נפש refers to a corpse in 12 texts in the Old Testament.⁹ According to Leviticus 19:28, the Israelites were not to make any incision in their flesh for a נפש. The Authorized Version and the Revised Standard Version translate נפש here as "the dead." The use of נפש to refer to a dead body should caution Old Testament students against too closely linking נפש with the Greek idea of a disembodied "soul."

Used for throat. The Akkadian and Ugaritic words that are cognate to נפש can refer to the throat.¹⁰ In fact נפש may possibly refer to the throat in five Old Testament texts.¹¹ One of the clearer of these five is Psalm 69:1 (Heb., v. 2). The psalmist spoke of waters coming up to his נפש. Perhaps the "waters" are a metaphor for troubles, but the context speaks graphically of a man sinking and entering into deep waters. The picture is probably that of a man sinking deeper and deeper in water until the waters reach his throat. Thus נפש may refer to a specific part of the human body, the throat, if the context requires it.

Used for physical breath. נפש seems to refer to the physical breath in five verses.¹² The reference is usually to man's breath, but in one passage an animal's breath is referred to. Rachel died as she was giving birth to a son when the family was traveling from Bethel to Ephrath. Her last act was to name her son Ben-Oni, a name that Jacob changed to Benjamin. "Now it came to pass when her נפש went out . . . that she named him Ben-Oni, but his father named him Benjamin" (Gen. 35:18). If the words "now it came to pass," familiar from the Authorized Version, are taken as a temporal indicator, the verse may be rendered, "when her נפש went out . . . she named him Ben-Oni." The word "soul" in the Authorized Version and the Revised Standard Version is not an appropriate translation of נפש, since it introduces the idea that some immaterial part of man leaves the body at death. To be sure, the Old Testament speaks of an immaterial part of man, and of a part of man that "leaves" at death (cf. Ec-

⁸ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. 10-25.

⁹ The use of נפש to refer to a corpse is found in three Old Testament books: Leviticus (19:28; 21:1, 11; 22:4), Numbers (5:2; 6:6, 11; 9:6-7, 10; 19:13—first of two uses), and Haggai (2:13).

¹⁰ Cf. *The Assyrian Dictionary*, ed. Erica Reiner, s.v. "napīštu," 11:296-304, and Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 446.

¹¹ The texts are Jeremiah 4:10; Jonah 2:5 (Heb., v. 6); Psalms 69:1 (Heb., v. 2); 105:18; and Proverbs 3:22.

¹² Genesis 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21-22; Job 41:21 (Heb., v. 13); Jeremiah 15:9.

cles. 12:7). However, the Old Testament does not use נפש to speak of this immaterial part, nor does it speak about the immaterial part of man with the wealth of detail that is found in the New Testament. How then should נפש be translated in this verse? The most natural translation would seem to be "breath." The "going out" of her breath refers to her last breath before physical death.

The Authorized Version and the Revised Standard Version translate the perfect form מתה, "for she died." However, it seems preferable to understand the perfect as describing an action in process rather than a prosaic reference to a terminated action. The outcome of the process was so certain as to be described with the perfect form of the verb, which in its most basic sense describes a completed action.

With these considerations in mind, the text may be translated idiomatically, "When Rachel was breathing her last, for she was in the throes of dying, she named her son Ben-Oni." The biblical writer wished to emphasize that Rachel's naming of her son was her last act, and that it coincided with the very moment of her physical death. That physical death is described in the text as the going out of the נפש, that is, the breath.

Reference to animals. The final category of the uses of נפש is distinct from the other uses. נפש is used in certain passages to refer to different groupings of the animal creation. The very first occurrence of נפש in the Hebrew Bible speaks of small aquatic creatures as "living beings" (Gen. 1:20). In fact this verse uses the same words used to describe man (2:7). Both man and the small aquatic creatures are in one sense living creatures. Genesis 1:21 and 24 also use נפש to refer to animals. Verse 21 speaks of other aquatic animals, while verse 24 speaks of a variety of land animals. So the term "living נפש," or "living creature," can be applied equally to man and animals.

Summary. In the 10 major categories of meaning expressed by נפש perhaps the most basic meaning is "being" or "creature." At that level the term can be used to describe both man and animals. The basic idea may be creatures that breathe.¹³ From living creatures that breathe a logical extension is a reference to abstract life. In turn the concept of abstract life in living creatures could then come to represent or refer to certain aspects of that life, such as appetite, emotions, or even mental activity. "Your נפש," hence "your life," easily became an alternative way of saying "you." The references to throat and breath may be a reversion to the idea evidenced in cognate languages. Corpse was expressed by נפש in that the dead body was a reminder of the life lived by the individual. No attempt

¹³ Cf. Genesis 1:30 and the meaning of the denominative verb associated with נפש.

is made here to trace historical development in these meanings. This is merely an attempt to trace the logical connection between the several groups of meanings of the single word נפש.

Theological Implications

MAN'S PLACE IN CREATION

As already noted Job and the writers of two psalms gave expression many years ago to the question, What is man?¹⁴ This question could be stated as follows: Based on the variety of meanings נפש has throughout the Old Testament, what is man? Earlier it was noted that נפש may be used to refer to both man and animals. Both man (Gen. 2:7) and animals (Gen. 1:20) are referred to as "living creatures." In addition both נפש and רוח are used in the Flood narrative to refer to the breath of man and animals. It was further noted that נפש as appetite can refer to the appetite of man or animal. These facts emphasize that both man and animals are seen as living creatures created by God. The obvious conclusion is that man's distinctiveness is not derived from the mere use of the word נפש in the Old Testament. To be sure, man is distinctive. But that distinctiveness is based on man's being the only creature that bears the *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; Ps. 8:5 [Heb., v. 6]) and not on the usage of נפש.

MAN'S ESSENTIAL NATURE

A second implication relates to the nature of man's existence as a creature. Some scholars hold that man consists of two parts, material and immaterial, while others hold that man is made up of body, soul, and spirit. Genesis 2:7 certainly presents man as a composite creature. Part of man derives from the dust of the ground, and part of man comes directly from the creative breath of God. Yet the emphasis of the verse is on man as a נפש, a creature, a unity. This is decidedly opposed to the common Greek idea of a "soul" imprisoned in a body, and to the idea expressed by some branches of Protestant and Roman Catholic thought that the pathway to righteousness is found by downplaying the body and encouraging "the higher part of man." Man is part material and part spiritual. But the whole is more than the sum of the parts. The Old Testament gives far greater emphasis to man as a functioning unit and, except for the creation account and Ecclesiastes 12:7, almost passes over the question of man's component parts.

The fact that man is a נפש (cf. Gen. 2:7), the fact that נפש often refers to the person as an entity, and the fact that נפש and רוח, are

¹⁴ Cf. Job 7:17; Psalms 8:4 (Heb., v. 5); 144:3.

sometimes used interchangeably all argue strongly against the view that man consists of three distinguishable parts—body, soul, and spirit. The New Testament may teach that man is body, soul, and spirit, but the tripartite view of man finds no support in the usage of *נֶפֶשׁ* and *רוּחַ*.

MAN'S AFTERLIFE

This is not the place to undertake a detailed discussion of the meaning of Sheol or of the idea of immortality in the Old Testament.¹⁵ However, five verses in the Hebrew Psalter make a specific connection between *נֶפֶשׁ* and Sheol.

In Psalm 16:10a the psalmist affirmed that the Lord would not abandon his *נֶפֶשׁ* to Sheol. The second part of the verse may refer to corruption, evidently the decay of the body in the grave (though some prefer to translate "decay" as "pit"). If the second part of the verse refers to decay, then the verse is expressing a *similarity* between the presence of *נֶפֶשׁ* in Sheol and the physical decay of the body in the grave. The verse does not speak of a disembodied *נֶפֶשׁ* being in Sheol, but of an individual who has died and whose body is undergoing decomposition in the grave. The verse is thus using *נֶפֶשׁ* in a way that is similar to the use of *נֶפֶשׁ* to indicate a corpse, as discussed earlier.

In Psalm 30:3 (Heb., v. 4) the psalmist states that the Lord brought his *נֶפֶשׁ* up from Sheol. The parallel element stresses not going down to the pit, that is, the grave, and the context indicates that the psalmist spoke of a time when God delivered him from the hands of his enemies, thus protecting him from a violent death. A similar concept seems to be in view in Psalm 86:13, where delivering the psalmist's *נֶפֶשׁ* from the depths of Sheol is used in a context of enemies, combat, and the avoidance of physical death.

Psalm 89:48 (Heb., v. 49) indicates that physical death is unavoidable. The second part of the verse asks rhetorically, "What man can save his *נֶפֶשׁ* from the power (literally, the hand) of Sheol." Once again, Sheol is used in relation to physical death from which no man can save his *נֶפֶשׁ* (the meaning may be either himself or his life). The *נֶפֶשׁ* is not some sort of entity that lives on after death. The *נֶפֶשׁ* is the life of the person, viewed as a living, operating entity that ceases to live and operate at the time of physical death.¹⁶

¹⁵ The interested reader should see David L. Miller, "The Development of the Concept of Immortality in the Old Testament" (PhD diss., New York University, 1976), for a discussion of immortality and a bibliography of studies on Sheol.

¹⁶ Some part of man lives on after physical death, but *נֶפֶשׁ* is not used to refer to that part.

These texts have expressed two ideas. First, the presence of the נַפֿשׁ in Sheol refers to the fact that the dead body of a person has been placed in the grave. The presence of the "soul" in Sheol needs to be sharply contrasted with the Greek idea that a "disembodied soul" lives on after physical death. נַפֿשׁ does not refer to the part of man which transcends death. Second, the saving or delivering of the נַפֿשׁ from Sheol is to be understood as a temporal (and temporary) protecting of a person from physical death. In other words it means merely delaying the inevitable. All men die, but some men are protected by God in certain life-threatening situations, and their life is thus prolonged.

In Psalm 49:15 (Heb., v. 16), however, something more far-reaching seems to be in view. Here the psalmist referred to his expected deliverance from the dominion of Sheol. This redemption from Sheol is explained by a brief and enigmatic phrase, "For He will take me." The verse seems to contemplate a life beyond the grave.¹⁷ This life beyond the grave is only hinted at, and the nature of that life is not developed at all in the passage under consideration. And yet for the Old Testament man of faith such hints were sufficient until a more developed answer was obtained.

¹⁷ See, for example, the comments of William R Taylor, *Exegesis of Psalms*, *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed George Arthur Buttrick, 12 vols (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 4:258-59. He writes as follows: "Vs. 15 is one of the rare references in the Old Testament to a belief in an afterlife (cf. Psalm 73:23-25, Isaiah 26:19, Daniel 12:2-3)."

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