

SECOND STUDY

BODY, SOUL, SPIRIT

This is a word study that summarizes biblical usage of three words: soul, spirit, and body.

Some studies of these words may seem complex and complicated. I want to make it easier and simpler. If you will wade through some word studies with me, I promise that the water is not very deep!

An important principle that must guide any Bible study is that the context must determine the meaning and the translation of any word.

OLD TESTAMENT WORDS

Understanding the use of words

No systematic pattern or unifying principle can be discerned with reference to descriptions of human beings in the Old Testament. For example, humans are both “image of God” and “likeness of God.” Are these parallel? Different? What is the message of Scripture? What is the purpose of this parallelism? A careful study and comparison of Bible texts is both essential and profitable.

Often, the Old Testament uses words in a distinct way. There are parallel and overlapping references in certain words and some interchangeability [e.g., heart and flesh (Ps. 84:2), or heart and soul (Prov. 2:10)].

Sometimes, one part of the body is made to stand for the whole, e.g., Isa. 52:7 is a blessing on the messenger, not just on his feet.

Hebrew word -- nephesh (Greek equivalent -- psyche)

Nephesh, is used in Old Testament 755 times; the Hebrew word is correctly translated “soul” -- in the contemporary meaning and understanding of that word -- in only a few of those occurrences.

Nephesh primarily describes a person as being alive, as existing, a creature, a being. “then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7, ESV). The word nephesh is applied to animals in Gen. 1:20, 21, 24. Translation possibilities include being, creature, life, and existence, depending on context.

The word nephesh is often translated “soul,” especially in older translations. This translation reflects an Old English usage where the word “soul” referred to a living person.

In approximately 3% of its occurrences, nephesh refers to God. As already noted, it is used with reference to animals.

Human beings live as “soul-beings,” not as beings having a soul. An alternative way to say the same thing: human beings live as “living beings.”

The word nephesh refers to “a life; a living being, individual, or person.” A good translation includes the concept of “life.”

In the OT, a soul is a living being, not in the sense of indestructible spiritual substance or existence, but simply in the sense of life, often referring to physical life. This is the primary meaning in the OT.

Nephesh is translated as “soul” 428 times in the KJV. As mentioned above, this reflects an Old English usage is that is not well understood today. The word “soul” has changed meaning in the English language, leading to misunderstanding of biblical texts where the word “soul” is used in translation.

At least 20 words are used to translate nephesh in the KJV: any, appetite, beast, body, breath, creature, desire, ghost, heart, life (119 times), lust, man, mind, one, own, person (30 times), pleasure, self, thing, will.

Hebrew word -- ruach (Greek equivalent -- pneuma)

Ruach is used 389 times in the OT. It is applied to God 136 times; it is applied to persons and animals 129 times.

Ruach is translated as “spirit” 232 times.

At least nine other words (besides “spirit”) are used to translate ruach: air, anger, blast, breath (28 times), courage, mind, side, tempest, wind (90 times).

The basic meaning of the word is “wind” or “breath.”

In application, the word sometimes comes to mean strength or power.

At times, the word seems to incorporate the idea of psychic (psyche) life, spiritual life.

Job 12:7-10 distinguishes nephesh and ruach.

"But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind." (ESV)

In this passage, the words used are "the nephesh (life) of every living thing and the ruach (breath) of fleshly mankind."

Hebrew word -- basar, meaning flesh (Greek equivalent -- sarx)

Basar is used in OT 273 times, one-third of those occurrences refer to animals. This word is never used with reference to God.

In the OT, 256 times basar is translated as flesh (as body 2 times)

In OT usage, basar does not present the problems encountered in the parallel Greek NT word sarx.

NEW TESTAMENT WORDS

Psyche. Translated as soul, life, the physical as opposed to the spiritual, carnal.

Used in the LXX 900+ times, most often to translate nephesh; meaning is breath, exhalation, breathing, used 25 times for heart. Psyche can refer to the seat of emotions, ego, love, longing, gladness. In some contexts, psyche is the seat of outward, earthly life (Josephus).

In the NT, the word is used 101 times; 37 in Synoptics, 15 Acts, 10 John (a total of 62 times in the Gospels and Acts). In the NT, psyche primarily refers to life: "whoever will save his life will find it," "no one hates his own life," both referring to the being or life of human beings. Jesus lays down his life (not his soul) for the sheep. Some risked their lives (not souls) for Paul.

1 Thess. 5:23 refers to (1) spirit [pneuma], (2) soul [psyche], most likely meaning physical life [cf. 1 Cor. 2:14, where spiritual and physical are contrasted, also see 1 Cor. 15:45], and (3) body [soma]. The reference to the body is almost certainly to the physical body, "until his coming." It is not easy to understand how the three words function as three distinct items. Most likely, the list includes overlap. May your "totality" be preserved. The pneuma and psyche may represent life in the spirit realm and also in the biological or physical realm. A human being exists both with spirit life and with physical life, in or through a physical body.

Considering that psyche refers to life or existence, it is easier to understand why the word at times seems to have eternal significance. Our being or life here on earth is destined for eternal life, 1 Pet. 4:19, 2:25; Mt. 10:28 (compare parallel text to Mt. 10:28 in Lk. 12:5). Our being-existence in this life has continuity with our being-existence in the life to come.

Pneuma. Translated most often as spirit.

Is parallel to OT ruach. Pneuma is the usual translation of ruach in LXX, the primary meaning is wind or breath. In the NT in some contexts, pneuma can signify power in the spiritual realm.

The word is used to refer to the human spirit, the Holy Spirit, Jesus and the Spirit.

Sarx. Usually translated as flesh.

Sarx is used 147 times in NT, 129 times it is translated flesh

Other translation possibilities include bodily, bodily condition, body, earth, earthly, countrymen, fleshly, life, man, mankind, nation, personally.

Definitions of sarx include the following:

(1) flesh (the soft substance of the living body which covers the bones, where blood flows) of both man and beasts,

(2) the body -- the body of a human being, referring to the natural or physical origin, generation or relationship; that which is born of natural or physical generation; also at times, the sensuous nature of man -- "the animal nature" without any suggestion of depravity; but also, the animal nature with those cravings which incite to sin; also, the physical nature of man as subject to suffering;

(3) a living creature (with a body of flesh) whether man or beast (parallel to nephesh and psyche),
(4) the flesh, denoting human nature, the earthly or physical nature of man apart from divine influence, and therefore a part of the human that is prone to sin.

Observations: The word sarx is usually rendered as flesh (although some translations incorrectly render it as sinful nature). “Mortal flesh” gives a clearer understanding of what is meant by flesh. Sarx (mortal flesh) should be distinguished from soma (body). Sarx may describe the current mortal (fallen) human state -- the human body and its physical needs and desires that (if not controlled) lead toward selfish acts and motives.

Soma. Usual translation is body.

Soma is used 142 in the NT, 128 times it is translated body.

Other words used to translate soma include: bodies (pl.) 11, personal 1, slaves 1, substance 1

Definitions show the variety of use of the word:

- (1) the body, both of men or animals, a dead body or corpse, a living body,
- (2) the bodies of planets and of stars (heavenly bodies),
- (3) people united into one society or family, a social, ethical, or mystical body; used in the NT of the church;
- (4) that which casts a shadow as distinguished from the shadow itself.

Observations: Soma simply means “a body.” When we think of human bodies (soma) we naturally think of the flesh (thus, at times, even in scripture the terms soma and sarx seem to be used interchangeably). Soma is not limited to the fleshly body. Human beings will have post-resurrection bodies (soma) without mortal flesh. While on earth, humans have bodies (soma) made of flesh (sarx). Soma can be used to describe non-flesh bodies, such as the church as a body (soma) or our resurrection bodies.

Comparing sarx and soma

There is a difference between the living (nephesh) body (soma) that includes the sarx (mortal physical flesh) before death and the spiritual body (soma) that does not include the sarx (mortal flesh) after the resurrection. (There is also a continuity, that which is sown—that which is raised, see my study of 1 Corinthians 15 in this series.)

The two words sarx and soma should be translated in different ways. While the body (soma) is not necessarily bad, as Christians we live in and wage war against a body of mortal flesh (sarx). The fact that the flesh (sarx) is mortal and will die may explain its selfish concern with gratifying the desires or needs of mortal (dying) flesh. These desires or needs are focused on this world and its pleasures.

Christians, through the Spirit, live a life that does not consider worldly desires and pursuits as does the sarx (mortal flesh). The Spirit guides Christians to walk in light and in the way of Jesus, king of his kingdom. By the Spirit Christians live in the light of the resurrection, knowing they will rise again and receive spiritual immortal bodies (soma) to live in the kingdom in the coming age (after this current mortal age passes away).

SUMMARY

Many contemporary translations have caused confusion with regard to the biblical words that are usually translated soul, spirit, and flesh. For this reason, it is advisable that the Bible student who wishes to do a meaningful study of these words try to understand what are the original words in Hebrew and Greek. It is not necessary to have a knowledge of Hebrew or Greek. Wonderful interlinear and other study tools exist to assist in identifying the original words.

Suggestions for translation

The Hebrew word nephesh, paralleled by the Greek word psyche, is often translated “soul” (in the 16th century meaning of the word soul, meaning “being” or “individual”). In today’s language, a more accurate translation is person or life (meaning “being”), that which exists, life. Animals, and even God, are described with this word in the OT. Generally, the meaning is existence or life, often referring to biological existence in this world (Gen. 2:7).

The Greek word, psyche, is parallel to nephesh. Psyche refers to the seat of biological life, including will, desire, and emotion. A few NT verses connect psyche with eternal matters, but the sense is probably that life in

this world is connected to the life to come. Both nephesh and psyche primarily relate to living or existing, explaining why animals and even God are described with the word nephesh in the OT.

The Hebrew word ruach, paralleled by the Greek word pneuma, is translated spirit. The basic meaning is breath or wind, and the concept of power inheres in the word. This word applies to spiritual life, the eternal aspect of human existence.

The Greek word, pneuma, has the same meaning as ruach -- spirit, referring to the eternal, ever-existing aspect of human beings.

The Hebrew word basar, flesh, refers to the physical body.

The Greek word sarx is used in the NT to refer to the flesh, but sometimes in the negative sense of fleshly desires. The Greek word for "body" is soma. The study above outlined the biblical distinctions between sarx (flesh) and soma (body).

The respective correspondences between nephesh and psyche, ruach and pneuma, and basar and sarx are important and should be kept in mind in translation and interpretation.

Nephesh and psyche should usually be understood and translated as relating to biological life, existence, being, life. The word "soul" easily leaves a wrong impression, since the word previously had a different meaning, referring to individuals. The preferred translation is life, being or existence.

Ruach and pneuma, spirit, present the fewest problems in translation.

Basar and sarx, flesh, are parallel. Sarx has the NT meaning of mortal flesh (not sinful nature, but merely fleshly or physical nature, flesh). Psyche is used in 1 Cor. 2-3 to describe carnality, that is, life focused on existence in this physical world. The common root and common word formation between psyche and physical are obvious.

Conclusion

In the Old Testament, human beings are dual-natured and are described as spirit (spiritual) beings (ruach) and living beings (nephesh). In this biological world, the existence or life (nephesh) of human beings is in the flesh (basar).

In the New Testament, human beings have two natures and live in two realms: in the spiritual realm as spirit beings (pneuma) and in the physical, biological realm as living beings, having life (psyche). The physical (psyche) existence is possible because of a body (a temporary physical body which is composed of mortal flesh). When physical existence ends, the fleshly mortal body will no longer be useful. The spirit realm will be characterized by a transformed body (non-fleshly, celestial, heavenly).

The description of humans as spirit, being, and body (1 Thess. 5:23) is unique. Human beings exist as pneuma (spiritual beings), psyche (living beings) here in this physical world, and soma (body) with a fleshly mortal body that will one day be transformed to a celestial body. The three-fold description speaks both to our dual nature and existence, and to the fact that we live in this physical world in a body that God will transform to exist in the celestial, heavenly, spiritual realm.