

Lost in Translation: An Analysis of the Original Meanings of Heart, Mind, Soul and Spirit in the Hebrew Bible

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While reading the Hebrew Bible, it is possible for modern readers to misunderstand the original Hebrew meanings of the English translations. Common words such as ‘heart’, ‘mind’, ‘soul’ (נפש) and ‘spirit’ (רוח) are often misinterpreted to have English connotations that were not used in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the biblical Hebrew words (לֵב, לִבָּב, and לִבָּה), frequently translated as ‘heart’ had connotations that could be argued to correspond more accurately to the English definition of the word ‘mind.’ Conversely, the biblical Hebrew word (לֵב or לִב), generally interpreted as ‘mind,’ is perhaps better understood in relation to the modern understanding of the heart as one's emotional centre.¹ Also, as opposed to the non-physical modern notion of an immortal ‘soul’, biblical authors and their intended audiences understood it in relation to the physical. Furthermore, ‘spirit’ meant the energy and character of oneself² and had divine connotations as associated with the breath or divine essence of YHWH. Therefore, in order to appropriately understand the Hebrew Bible, the fallibility of translation must be recognized.

¹ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* “E-J” (Abingdon: Nashville, 1962), 549.

² *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* “R-Z” (Abingdon: Nashville, 1962), 428-29.

For biblical authors and their readerships, the heart was the centre of the body, controlling both mental and emotional activities: this understanding is different from the modern view of the heart's functions.³ Contemporarily, the heart can be perceived abstractly as a source of love and compassion and/or interpreted anatomically, as one of many important bodily organs. Conversely, in the Hebrew Bible, the heart is *the* centre of human activity.⁴ According to Aubrey Johnson in his book *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel*, biblical discourses represent the heart as governing human behaviour.⁵ It is not only the foundation of physical life; it is the "central and unifying organ of personal life."⁶ Since producers and intended audiences of the Hebrew Bible appear not to have made a distinction between the physical and mental aspects of a person, as is often done in modern times, they attributed psychological functions to bodily organs. The heart was the most important organ being not only the source of one's personality but also "the innermost spring of individual life, the ultimate source of all its physical, intellectual, emotional, and volitional energies, and consequently the part of [humans] through which he normally achieved contact with the divine."⁷

³ H. Wheeler Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," in A.S. Peake (ed.), *The People and the Book* (London :Oxford University Press, 1924), 363.

⁴ Aubrey Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (Great Britain: University of Wales Press, 1964), 76.

⁵ Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 79.

⁶ *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* "E-J", 549.

⁷ *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* "E-J", 549.

The term for ‘heart’ was used by biblical authors with a force which approximates to what contemporary society often identifies with ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’. Johnson agrees, adding that the heart is frequently used in the Hebrew Bible to denote one’s thought and thus one’s wish, purpose or resolve. Johnson contrasts biblical conceptions of the mind with those of the modern: “for one’s thought or wish is essentially ‘that which is in the heart’, or, as we should say, ‘what one has in mind.’”⁸

The biblical conception of mind may be viewed as roughly equivalent to the contemporary conception of the heart. In Biblical Hebrew, one word that is often defined as ‘mind’ (לֵב) does not refer to one’s emotional centre as it frequently does in modernity, but rather to the “inmost center of his entire personality.”⁹ According to *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, the English word ‘mind’ seems to be used in passages where the emphasis is on the heart (לֵב).¹⁰ While the English word ‘mind’ is also used in the context of active thinking, ancient concepts of cognition are different from those of contemporary times. In fact, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* details that “feeling, thinking, planning, and willing were all conceived to be functions of the entire personality, so that the conception of ‘the mind’ as the special seat or organ of reflective thinking as distinguished, e.g., from the heart as the seat of the emotions

⁸ Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 77-78.

⁹ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* “K-Q” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 383.

¹⁰ *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* “K-Q”, 383.

would have been, for the Hebrews, almost unintelligible.”¹¹ Instead, one’s consciousness and ethical qualities were diffused throughout the body and centered in the heart as opposed to the contemporary belief of being the result of the mind’s functions.¹²

For the modern reader, the concept of the mind draws upon a number of English and Greek concepts which contain the idea of the human capability for rational thinking and, most likely, a mind-body separation. As modern Western culture has been greatly influenced by Platonism, a contemporary reader could easily misread ‘heart’ and ‘mind’ as being suggestive of separate mind-body functions.¹³ However, biblical authors and their readerships did not recognize such a distinction.

In the Hebrew Bible ‘soul’ (נֶפֶשׁ) does not mean the immortal soul as it can contemporarily but instead the life-principle, the living being itself, or the human self in relation to the self’s appetites or activities.¹⁴ It also refers to the entire ‘person’ or ‘self’ and if נֶפֶשׁ was used with the correct pronominal suffixes, it could be used as a personal pronoun. נֶפֶשׁ is represented as having a physical

¹¹ *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* “K-Q”, 383.

¹² Robinson, “Hebrew Psychology,” 354.

¹³ While biblical authors could differentiate between soul and body, “there was no question of two separate, independent entities, except for a possible trace of the ‘Greek’ idea in Job 4:19.” (*The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* “R-Z”, 428).

¹⁴ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* “R-Z”, 428. According to Jo Ann Scurlock, for the ancient Mesopotamians, the *zāqīqu* was the closest equivalent to the modern concept of “soul.” At death as the “ghost” of the dead self, the *etemmu*, and the *zāqīqu* descended into the netherworld, the *etemmu* ceased being potentially harmful, thus leaving the *zāqīqu* which “was not in a position to interfere positively in human affairs” (Jo Ann Scurlock, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought” in J. M. Sasson [ed.], *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* [4 vols; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995], III, 1892).

source, often in the blood, as displayed in Gen. 9:4; Deut. 12:23; Lev. 17:11, 14, in which the life of every creature is described to be in its blood.¹⁵ It is the personality of the individual and not the soul which animated the body.¹⁶ This definition, in which soul means ‘life’, is displayed in 2 Kgs 1:13:¹⁷ “‘Man of God,’ he begged, ‘please have respect for my נפש and the נפש of these fifty men, your servants!’” (NIV).¹⁸ Despite נפש meaning ‘life’, נפש did not exclusively suggest a living person: נפש could also mean a corpse in the Hebrew Bible, which is evident in Num. 6:6: “Throughout the period of his separation to the LORD he must not go near a dead נפש.”¹⁹

The biblical concepts of ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ have several similarities. The words ‘soul’, נפש, and ‘spirit’, רוח, refer to the most spiritual parts of humans.²⁰ According to H. Wheeler Robinson, in his article “Hebrew Psychology”, soul and spirit both denote conscious human life and are associated with breath.²¹ This breath, Paolo Xella wrote in his article “Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought,” distinguishes a living creature from a dead one.²² Only spirit, however, suggests divine energy acting on humans from without. Spirit, רוח,

¹⁵ Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 9.

¹⁶ Robinson, “Hebrew Psychology,” 362.

¹⁷ Robinson, “Hebrew Psychology,” 355.

¹⁸ *New International Version*. (Gospel Communications International: 1995-2000).

<www.biblegateway.com> With the exception of Robinson’s Hebrew words in 2 Kgs 1:13, the following quotes that contain Hebrew words have been inserted by the author of this essay.

¹⁹ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* “R-Z”, 428.

²⁰ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* “K-Q”, 383.

²¹ Robinson, “Hebrew Psychology,” 361.

²² Paolo Xella, “Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought,” *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, III, 2067.

denotes wind, which retains the biblical concept of wind acting as the breath of God.²³ In addition to ‘spirit’, רוח also means ‘breeze’ or ‘breath’,²⁴ which associates the spirit with creation motifs in Gen. 2:7 and Ps. 33:6, where YHWH uses wind as his creative tool.²⁵ YHWH’s employment of wind is particularly evident in Gen. 2:7, “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Initially perplexing to a modern reader, the breath of humans and YHWH contain some of their physical essence, which contains traces of their ‘soul’.²⁶ Therefore, ‘spirit’ is conceived as originating with YHWH.²⁷

In addition to divine associations, רוח has several other meanings in the Hebrew Bible, as רוח is related to unusual human behaviour or characteristics. For example, ‘spirit’ is used to describe the madness of King Saul in 1 Sam. 16:15:²⁸ “Saul’s attendants said to him, ‘See, an evil רוח from God is tormenting you.’” ‘Spirit’ also refers to the characteristic of liveliness, especially the prophet

²³ In Ancient Egyptian, *ka*, breath, was thought to survive death and guarantee further existence while *ba*, the spiritual aspect of the self, departed the body at death or burial, often later remaining near the body. In addition, similar to the Hebrew Bible, “heart” for the ancient Egyptians was, in general, equivalent to the modern concept of “mind.” (Leonard H. Lesko “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egyptian Thought,” *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, III, 1764).

²⁴ In the Hebrew Bible, extensions of the personality were found in the spoken and written word, in one’s name, property and descendants (Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 88). Hence the ancient belief in the dangers of misusing one’s name for malicious purposes; an example of this is the protection against the misuse of the name YHWH itself in the Ten Commandments. Indeed, the spoken word must have been viewed as powerful since humanity sprung from the divine breath, which helps to convey words.

²⁵ Keith Crim (ed.), *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, “Supplementary Volume” (Abingdon: Nashville, 1976), 839.

²⁶ Robinson, “Hebrew Psychology,” 353.

²⁷ Robinson, “Hebrew Psychology,” 361.

²⁸ Robinson, “Hebrew Psychology,” 358-59.

Elijah, who was “full of life.”²⁹ In fact, Johnson writes that “it seems to have been possible to resort to it as a means of expressing the whole range of man’s emotional, intellectual, and volitional life.”³⁰ רוח can also be seen as a motivating agent; for instance, in 2 Chron. 36:22, YHWH ‘roused’ the רוח of Cyrus to rebuild the Temple.³¹ Johnson explains that in the same manner as there are variations of wind, such as a gale or a windstorm, biblical authors used the term to denote varied human behaviour, especially the rising and falling of human energy, which was perceived to be similar to the wind. Johnson presents an example from Judges, in which Samson is faint with thirst after a conflict with the Philistines, “having succeeded by the aid of Yahweh in finding a spring and having drunk its waters, ‘his רוח returned’” (15:19).³² As a result, physical fatigue is expressed as the absence of רוח. Also, in the Hebrew Bible, unlike YHWH, the lifeless and unresponsive idols are shown not to have רוח: “Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’ Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no רוח in it” (Hab. 2:19).³³ Most often רוח is associated with the physical aspects of life, such as breath, which again relates רוח to wind.³⁴

²⁹ Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 25.

³⁰ Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 31.

³¹ Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 35.

³² Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 25.

³³ Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 29-30.

³⁴ Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 27.

It is difficult to differentiate between the heart, soul, spirit and mind in the Hebrew Bible. Robinson suggests that in some usages, the heart, soul and spirit are almost indistinguishable from the other, except for spirit's association with divine energy.³⁵ In the same way that there is no distinction between natural and supernatural,³⁶ the body is understood to possess a stronger unity than it often does in modernity; ancient associations of the soul with a bodily substance such as the blood could have existed because there was no distinction between it and the spirit or mind. Therefore, given the great number of biblical Hebrew meanings having been lost in translation to English, a detailed study of the linguistic contexts of the producers and intended audiences of the Hebrew Bible is critical in order to avoid misunderstanding their works.

³⁵ Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," 361.

³⁶ Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," 358.

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