

THE SPIRIT VS. SOUL CONTROVERSY

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The modern definitions of spirit and soul, two words frequently used in the Bible, appear to be nearly synonymous. The linguistic effect is a controversy of meaning and much variation in interpretation. The single definition for both words that I have created by reviewing numerous definitions is:

The vital principle or animating force within living human beings credited with the faculties of thought, action, and emotion conceived of as an immaterial entity and considered as departing from the body of a person at death.

This definition appears to be a hybrid of ideas borrowed from Hebrew, Sanskrit, Greek, Roman and Germanic religious explanations for the living being and based upon the observation that living beings breath.

The controversy doesn't resolve itself clearly by reviewing the words used in Greek and Latin Bibles. The Greek words pneuma (spirit) and psyche (soul) both relate to breath or breathing as do the Latin words spiritus (spirit) and anima (soul). Resorting to the Sanskrit equivalents prana (spirit) and atma (soul) doesn't resolve the controversy either as both words relate to breath or breathing. Even the Hebrew words ruach (spirit) and nephesh (soul) relate to breath or breathing. Understanding begins with the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. Nephesh literally means "that which breaths" while ruach means "breath".

Even though the word nephesh could refer to any living creature that breaths air (all animals), the Biblical word is most often a literal reference to the living, breathing human being. The air that is being breathed is spiritus. When a creature inhales air it inspires. When a creature exhales air it expires. Inspiration brings life. When a creature expires and then fails to inspire it is dead. The act of inhaling and exhaling is anima. A creature that breaths is animated and therefore alive. All air, whether it is being breathed or not, is ruach or pneuma.

The Hebrew, Greek and Latin words describe the natural, observable elements of life related to breathing. The humans that used these words did not have a full understanding of how respiration works but they did their best to describe it and its significance relative to life. One Greek word, psyche, doesn't describe breathing, it describes emotions. The word comes from a Greek mythological person who fell in love with the deity Eros and the word ever after relates to the inner self and the forces that motive our thoughts, emotions and behavior. The translation of the Bible to Goth brought us the word soul which descends from saiwala, the Norse explanation for life which comes from the sea.

The Greek word psyche doesn't descend from anything relative to breath, it is the proper name of a mythological young woman who loved and was loved by Eros and was united with him after Aphrodite's jealousy was overcome. She subsequently became the

personification of the soul, the part of the living creature from which thought, emotions and behavior originated.

In summary, the Hebrew words ruach and nephesh used in the Old Testament had little to do with the Greek and Latin words used in the New Testament and the Germanic word introduced in the Goth Bible is most like the modern soul even though the modern soul has little or nothing to do with breathing, something that appears to be the common element in words chosen for the older texts. Also, the modern metaphysical or supernatural spirit and soul appear to have little relationship to the earlier words which were descriptive of physical or natural phenomenon. Instead of becoming less mysterious with the passing of time, the Bible has become more mysterious.

Six Elements Related to Spirit vs. Soul

- Air or wind – ruach or pneuma (spirit).
- Air that is moving in and out of the lungs or breath – ruach or spiritus (spirit).
- The act of inhaling and exhaling air or breathing – anima (soul).
- The creature that breaths – nephesh (soul).
- That which causes the creature to breath – saiwala (soul).
- That which causes the creature to think, feel and act – psyche (soul).

A Dictionary of Word Related to Spirit vs. Soul

an·i·ma^{1, 2} (ān'ə-mə)

n.

1. The soul.

2. *Literal* Life, breath.

[Latin anima (cf. Greek animos *wind*, Goth uzanan *to exhale*, Sanskrit aniti *breaths*), from Proto-Indo-European root *anə- *to blow, to breath.*]

at·man³ (āt'mən)

n. also **at·ma**

1. The soul.

2. *Hindu* The individual self.

3. *Literal* A living (breathing) being.

[Sanskrit ātman *breath, self.*]

¹ "anima." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.* Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 29 Feb. 2008. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/anima>>.

² "animus." Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, Historian. 29 Feb. 2008. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/animus>>.

³ "atman." *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1).* Random House, Inc. 29 Feb. 2008. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/atman>>.

ne·phesh⁴ (neh'·fesh)

n.

1. The soul.
2. *Literal* That which breaths, a living (breathing) being.
[Hebrew, from Aramaic root *naphash *to take breath.*]

pneu·ma⁵ (nōō'mə)

n.

1. The soul or spirit.
2. *Literal* Wind, breath.
[Greek, from Proto-Indo-European root *pneu-.]

pra·na⁶ (prā'nə)

n.

1. The spirit.
2. *Hindu* Breath of life.
3. *Literal* Breath.
[Sanskrit *prāṇa breath.*]

psy·che⁷ (sī'kē)

n. also **psych**

1. The spirit or soul.
2. *Psychiatry* The mind functioning as the center of thought, emotion, and behavior and consciously or unconsciously adjusting or mediating the body's responses to the social and physical environment.
[Latin, from Greek *psūkhē soul*, from Proto-Indo-European root *bhes-.]

Psyche⁸

Greek Mythology A young woman who loved and was loved by Eros and was united with him after Aphrodite's jealousy was overcome. She subsequently became the personification of the soul.

ruw·ach⁹ (rū'·akh)

n.

1. The spirit.

⁴ "nephesh" *Blue Letter Bible*. "Dictionary and Word Search for nephesh (Strong's 05315)". Blue Letter Bible, 1996-2008. 29 Feb 2008. <<http://cf.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?strongs=H5315>>.

⁵ "pneuma." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 29 Feb. 2008. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pneuma>>.

⁶ "prana." *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. 29 Feb. 2008. <[Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/prana](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/prana)>.

⁷ "psyche." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 29 Feb. 2008. <[Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/psyche](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/psyche)>.

⁸ "psyche." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 29 Feb. 2008. <[Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/psyche](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/psyche)>.

⁹ "ruwach" *Blue Letter Bible*. "Dictionary and Word Search for ruwach (Strong's 07307)". Blue Letter Bible, 1996-2008. 29 Feb 2008. <<http://cf.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?strongs=H7307>>.

2. *Literal* Wind, breath.
[Hebrew, from Aramaic root *ruwach *smell*.]

soul^{10, 11} (sōl)

n.

1. The vital principle or animating force within living human beings credited with the faculties of thought, action, and emotion conceived of as an immaterial entity and considered as departing from the body of a person at death.

2. The spirit.

[Middle English, from Old English *sāwol* (cf. Goth *saiwala*), from Proto-Germanic **saiwalo* *coming from or belonging to the sea*, because that was believed to be the place from which our immaterial self came before birth and went after death, from Proto-Germanic **saiwaz* *sea*; translates to Greek *psychē*, Latin *anima*, Hebrew *nephesh*, and Sanskrit *atma*.]

spir·it (spīr'īt)

n.

1. The vital principle or animating force within living human beings credited with the faculties of thought, action, and emotion conceived of as an immaterial entity and considered as departing from the body of a person at death.

2. The soul.

3. A fairy or sprite.

4. *Literal* Breath.

[Middle English, from Old French *esprit*, from Latin *spīritus*, *breath*, related to *spīrāre*, *to breathe*, from Proto-Indo-European **(s)peis-*, *to blow*; translates to Greek *pneuma*, Hebrew *ruah*, Goth *ahma*, and Sanskrit *prāna*.]

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Monroe Area Atheists, Agnostics and Secular Humanists can be found at <http://atheists.meetup.com/625/>.

Word Count: 601

¹⁰ "soul." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 29 Feb. 2008. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/soul>>.

¹¹ "soul." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper, Historian. 29 Feb. 2008. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/soul>>.