

'SOUL' IN THE BIBLE¹

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'SOUL' has come to be almost exclusively a religious word in modern languages, like 'heaven' and 'hell' and 'prayer'. The soul is something which people believe in or do not believe in, like God. It is thought of as an important but highly mysterious part of a human being, which it is the aim of the Christian religion to save. We talk about the salvation of souls, but not of bodies or minds or even of people, because 'bodies', 'minds', and 'people' are profane every-day concepts shared by believers and unbelievers alike. No one would dream of saying they believed or did not believe in the body, the mind, or people, because they are all more or less evident phenomena of which we all have experience. Soul is not an evident phenomenon, but a mysterious hypothesis which religious people believe in and others often do not.

This restriction of the word 'soul' to the religious or sacred domain seems to me a wholly regrettable deterioration of language, which indicates an equally regrettable deterioration of thought. An examination of 'soul' in the Bible, while it can do little to repair modern English usage, may at least help to clear up some confusions of thought. In the sacred book 'soul' is not a sacred word. It signifies a complex of evident phenomena, just as such words do in current language as 'mind', 'life', 'thought'. In the biblical context it would be as absurd to talk about believing or not believing in the soul as it would to talk about believing or not believing in stones and bread. It signifies an equally inescapable fact of experience.

'Soul' in the classical English versions, A.V. or Challoner, nearly always translates the Latin *anima*, Greek *psyche*, Hebrew *nephesh*, though as we shall observe, *anima-psyche-nephesh* is sometimes translated by some other English word. In modern translations this will be the case much more frequently. Here of course we are concerned with the complex of meanings of the *nephesh* or *psyche* of the original languages of scripture.

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We must begin, I am afraid, by proceeding like a dictionary; in fact we will simply take the various definitions of *nephesh* given in a standard Hebrew lexicon. Its most general meaning is 'life', or 'principle of life'. Thus the reason given for the prohibition of eating blood runs, 'for the blood it is the soul, and you shall not eat the soul with the flesh' (Deut. xii, 25). When Elias is raising a dead boy to life, he prays (I translate literally), 'May the soul of this boy return onto his midriff' (3 Kings xvii, 21). And later on in the same book, when Elias himself was so depressed he would have liked to die, 'he besought for his soul that he might die' (ib. xix, 4). In these cases we would naturally put 'life' for 'soul' if we were writing ordinary English.

A more particularized meaning of *nephesh* is 'self', or 'person'. The English 'Ole King Cole was a merry old soul' would go easily into Hebrew, though in that language this use of 'soul' is more poetic than colloquial, and the word is often used in poetry simply as an emphatic parallel or equivalent for the personal pronoun. Thus we have, 'Those who humbled thee, and said to thy soul Bow down' (Isaias li, 3). In biblical idiom you talk about afflicting your soul with fasting, or binding your soul by an oath.

Here is a short passage in which both these senses are present, and in which it would not be altogether easy to say which sense 'soul' has in each instance: 'If any man eats blood, I will harden my face against his soul and destroy it; because the soul of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you to expiate for your souls' (Levit. xvii, 10).

Lastly, *nephesh* is used in a more restricted sense still as meaning the emotions, especially the appetites. Thus the proverb, 'Like cold water to a thirsty soul is good news from a distant land' (Prov. xxv, 25). Isaias describes the insatiable appetite of the grave by saying, 'Sheol has enlarged her soul, and opened her mouth without limit' (v, 4). The Israelites in the desert, weary of eating manna day after day, said, 'Our soul loathes this very light food' (Deut. xii, 20). Isaac said to Esau, 'Make me a potage such as you know I love, and bring it to me to eat, that my soul may bless you before I die' (Gen. xxvii, 4). The psalmist asks, 'Why art thou sad, O my soul, and why dost thou disturb me?' (Ps. xlii, 5); or in a different mood, 'My soul shall exult in the Lord and delight in his salvation' (xxxiv, 9). It is clear from some of these passages that the word is not always easily to be classified under this or that

signification. Here is a passage where it is used most evocatively; 'The soul of Jonathan stuck to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved David as his own soul' (1 Kings xviii, 1).

The new testament uses *psyche* in a similar fashion. If we put 'soul' for *psyche* with relentless consistency, some of our Lord's sayings would sound highly offensive to pious ears. We would have, for example, 'He that finds his soul will lose it, and *he that loses his soul for my sake will find it*' (Matt. x, 39). The word is in fact wisely and correctly translated 'life'. In the parable of the rich fool the word is used by him in the same sense as Isaac used it, and then by God with an ironical shift of meaning: 'I will say to my soul: Soul, thou hast many goods stored up for many years; rest, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him: Fool, this night they will demand thy soul of thee' (Luke xii, 19).

In all these senses the word 'soul' has a number of more concrete synonyms, especially the word 'flesh'. They often occur in parallel, practically never in contrast. Thus the psalmist cries out, 'My soul has thirsted for thee, and how much my flesh!' (Ps. lxii, 2); or again, 'My soul has pined for the courts of the Lord, my heart and my flesh have exulted in the living God' (Ps. lxxxiii, 2). 'Heart', we may observe in passing, is commonly used to express the seat of intelligence or cunning, less often of conscience, pride, humility, joy, practically never of the kindlier emotions, as in English. The Hebrews felt these feelings in their bowels.

Let us conclude our browsing through the dictionary by noting that while 'flesh' is never contrasted with 'soul' and is often a concrete synonym for it, 'spirit' on the other hand (Greek *pneuma*, Hebrew *ruach*) is never a synonym and is often a contrasted word. It often means very much the same as 'spirits' in English idiom; The Queen of Sheba lost her spirit when she saw Solomon's glory, Jacob's spirit revived when he heard that Joseph was still alive. If 'soul' means life, 'spirit' means full, vigorous, free life, transcending the humdrum limitations of the ordinary man. God will often take away one spirit from a man and give him another, for better or for worse.

Thus 'soul', however conceptually imprecise its biblical meanings may be, does signify a range of reality of which all men have immediate experience. The Bible indeed is a collection of writings embedded deeply in experience; to put it in a nutshell, it is the book of the Hebrew people's experience of God. But this

experience had a long history, it grew and deepened and developed. Their experience of soul, that is to say of life, self, feeling, desire was the correlative of their experience of God, and so it too had a history, which we must now consider. I speak of the history of the Hebrew *experience* of soul rather than of the Hebrew *idea* of soul, because while of course the biblical writers had ideas—they were human beings with human minds—their ideas were what we might call experience-ideas, not the abstract speculative concepts that the word 'ideas' suggests to people trained in the Greek traditions of western thought.

The earliest Hebrew experience of God, and therefore of life (soul), is almost wholly social. Experience of the personal, individual self (soul) is latent, not to say dormant in awareness of the social self (soul). In consequence their religion, like nearly all early religion, is completely this-worldly; for it is concerned with the life and fortunes of the social group, and the only group life of which they have any experience is life in this world. To begin with, I think it is true to say, there was little reflection on or pre-occupation with death, because it is the individual who dies, not the group. A man lives on in his descendants in the group, he leaves his name behind him. God is the God of the people and of the ancestors living on in the people, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The worst thing that can happen to a man is that after his death his name should be blotted out.

To ask at this stage of experience whether the soul survives after death is a meaningless question. (Indeed we shall see that for all biblical religion, of the new as well as the old testament, it would never become more than a secondary, rather trivial question.) 'Soul' means life, and death is manifestly the end of life. But if nothing *survives* after death, something does remain. The body obviously remains and is buried in the grave. And there remains also a shade or shadow—a ghost as we would say—in Sheol, which our Bibles translate usually by 'hell', sometimes by 'the grave'. The Hebrew Sheol corresponds almost exactly to the Homeric Hades. It is really no more than an imaginative shadow projection of the grave. Not by any conceivable extension of language could the Sheol existence be called life by the Hebrew, nor its inhabitants, conjured and consulted though they be, like Samuel's ghost by the witch of Endor, be called souls.

This conception, or rather lack of conception of death's after-

math, continues to hold the field even when a sense of personal religion, that is of the individual's life and self and of his personal relationship with the God of Israel, begins to emerge from the social religion of the earliest times. The religion of many of the psalms is intensely personal; yet it remains completely this-worldly, because the psalmist's experience of life is of life in this world. The nostalgic ideal of this religion is Eden, an earthly life of happy immortality. The psalmist knows that this cannot be, but he bends all his efforts to wheedling out of God as long a life as possible. God is reminded that he receives no worship from the dead in Sheol, and is implored in his own interests to renew the suppliant's life. 'My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. . . . I am a man who has no strength, like one forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave. . . . Dost thou work wonders for the dead, do the shades rise up to praise thee? Are thy wonders known in the darkness, or thy saving help in the land of forgetfulness?' (Ps. lxxxvii). There is the story of the sickness of Ezechias (Isaias xxxviii). The prophet was sent to tell him he would die, and he turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. Then Isaias was sent to him again to tell him his prayer was heard and fifteen years were added to his life. In his hymn of thanksgiving the king says, 'For Sheol cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for thy faithfulness. It is the living, the living man who thanks thee, as I do this day.'

But as these passages show, the more vivid this sense of personal religion becomes, the more inexorably does death become a pre-occupation. Read, for example, Pss xii, xv, xxix, xxxviii. I would suggest that this melancholy pre-occupation reaches its climax, perhaps we should say its nadir, in Ecclesiastes. Just as a sense of national religion, of the nation's relationship with God, involves a sense of national destiny, so a sense of personal religion elicits a concern with personal destiny. And here precisely is the contradiction of which Ecclesiastes has become so painfully aware; death rules out the possibility of any this-worldly personal destiny. Death is the ultimate vanity, and its shadow makes a vanity of life itself, it empties life of meaning. 'The wise man has his eyes in his head, and the fool walks in darkness; and yet I perceived that one destiny comes to all of them. . . . How the wise man dies just like the fool!' (ii, 14-16). 'For the destiny of the sons of men and

of beasts is the same; as one dies, so does the other. . . . All go to one place; all are from the dust and all turn to dust again' (iii, 19ff). 'A living dog is better than a dead lion' (ix, 4).

We must not try to explain away, or get round these shocking sentiments. Ecclesiastes occupies a crucial position in the history of revelation, that is of the Hebrew people's divinely controlled experience. The Preacher's sense of the vanity of all things is really his acute awareness that the old social this-worldly religion is *inadequate*. He states the problem, but he does not know the answer. It is very much the same problem with which the author of Job wrestles, the problem of personal human destiny in terms of divine justice and mercy. Perhaps the conclusion of Job, such a trite, happy-ending conclusion in which Job receives back double his old wealth and seven more sons and three more daughters, perhaps it is really a hint of the eventual solution; perhaps we may read it as a paradigm of resurrection.

Resurrection is the Bible's answer to the challenging contradiction of death. Resurrection is the conclusion to which the Hebrew experience leads. Not of course that they had actual experience of it; but their experience of God *plus* their experience of life (soul) issued necessarily in their hope of resurrection, first in the hope of national resurrection after disaster, and then by the pressure of their experience-thought in the hope of personal resurrection after death. Perhaps there is an inkling of this hope in Psalm xv, not only as re-interpreted in the light of Christ's resurrection, but in the psalmist's own mind; perhaps also in Psalm lxxii; certainly in Daniel xii, 1ff. But above all it is the Book of Wisdom which is the *locus classicus* in the old testament for faith in the resurrection. Its second chapter reads almost like a counterblast to Ecclesiastes; the Preacher's melancholy reflections are put into the mouths of the wicked as a philosophy of 'Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die'. In the fifth the wicked are duly confounded when they see the final and eternal reward of the just; 'Why has he been numbered among the sons of God, and why is his lot among the saints? . . . But the just live for ever, and their reward is with the Lord' (v, 5ff; 15).

Now it is true that the word 'resurrection' nowhere occurs in the Book of Wisdom, and the modern reader might easily suppose that the doctrine on which the author bases his anti-Ecclesiastes optimism is the immortality of the soul. He expressly

says, 'The souls of the just are in the hands of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, but they are at peace' (iii, 1ff); and again, 'The just man, though he die early, will be at rest' (iv, 7). These passages probably do, I will admit, refer to the life of the soul after death, conceived of as a resting or sleeping in peace. Doubtless the influence of Greek religious and philosophical thought about the soul had some influence on the Alexandrian Jew who wrote the book. Nonetheless the whole context and approach and flavour of his thought is Hebrew through and through. His phrase 'the souls of the just' would be equally well, perhaps better, translated 'the lives of the just'. And that other text we have quoted, 'The just live for ever, and their reward is with the Lord', can mean only one thing in a Hebrew context—resurrection. As we have seen, Hebrew thought is experience-thought; the only experience of life we have is of life in the body; and this is the life to which the religious men of the old testament clung so tenaciously, and for which, with a magnificently adventurous realism, they came to hope in a bodily resurrection after death. The resurrection of the body is the only positive answer the Hebrew mind could possibly give to the challenge of death. The immortality of the soul is altogether too pallid a doctrine to stir their interest or their hope. It appears in Wisdom as a mere corollary to the doctrine of resurrection, a necessary presupposition to make resurrection possible.

Hebrew religion in the Book of Wisdom remains social and this-worldly; but it has also become explicitly personal and next-or new-worldly. The new testament adds nothing to this development except a shift of emphasis. Christ *has* risen from the dead. So resurrection is no longer just something to look forward to, it is something that has happened. The believer hopes that he will rise again, because he believes he already has risen again in Christ. The Christian religion too is both this-worldly and next-worldly; but with Christ the next world becomes already *present* in this world as well as being *future* after this world. And the new testament hope, it must be emphasized, is *not* a hope of the soul's immortality, but of the body's resurrection. To see the truth of this assertion, you only have to feel the furious energy with which St Paul reacted in 1 Corinthians, xv, against the denial of the resurrection.

This same chapter will provide us with some interesting dictionary evidence on what St Paul meant by 'soul', *psyche*. He has been giving various comparisons to illustrate the resurrection, and he goes on (42), 'So also is it with the resurrection of the dead. . . . It is sown a *psychic* body (a soul-ish body, we might say; our versions in despair translate 'a natural body'), it is raised a *pneumatic* (spiritual) body. . . . Thus it is also written, The first Adam became a living *psyche* (soul); the last Adam became a life-giving *pneuma* (spirit). But it was not the *pneumatic* that came first, but the *psychic*, and then the *pneumatic*. The first man was of the earth earthy, the second man (he meant Christ of course) is from heaven. . . . As we have borne the image of the earthy one, let us bear also the image of the heavenly one.' Thus St Paul does not contrast soul and body; he contrasts soul and spirit. The body begins by having the qualities of soul, by simply being 'ensouled' under the first creation, and that is an earthy, this-worldly condition; it is destined in the redemption of the second creation to be endued with the qualities of spirit, to be 'enspirited', and given a heavenly, next-worldly condition. Elsewhere in this same epistle (ii, 14ff) St Paul uses *psychic* and *sarcic* ('soul-ish' and 'fleshly') as synonymous terms, thus showing that he is in the full linguistic tradition of the old testament. First he contrasts the *psychic* man (the 'natural' man in our versions) with the spiritual man, and then the *sarcic* man ('carnal' in our versions) with the spiritual.

So we can conclude, perhaps, by clearing up one not infrequent and most unfortunate misunderstanding. St Paul often contrasts flesh and spirit. He does *not* mean by this pair body and soul. By flesh he usually means natural, fallen, human nature, body and soul together, unredeemed, whose works include such spiritual sins as pride and witchcraft as well as fornication; by spirit he means the same human nature, constituted of the same body and soul, but now redeemed, and already by a hidden anticipation enjoying the spiritual incorruption and immortality of the body's resurrection.