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# Soul Survivor

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Very recently (October 2020), scientists claimed to demonstrate that human consciousness is electromagnetic, meaning that the popular concept of mind/body dualism needs to be revised by an understanding that mental perception is no more than the brain's energy field.<sup>1</sup> The shocking potential outcome is that mind is tied to what is physical, so "soul" as usually defined does not exist. In another essay posted the same month, the author proposed that "the soul is not a thing, but is most certainly real."<sup>2</sup> Apparently beloved president, theist, and rationalist Abraham Lincoln doubted the immortality of the soul. Influenced early by Calvinistic predestination, which he abandoned later, he remained somewhat fatalistic.<sup>3</sup> But the soul is still alive in the modern world in one way or another. An Indonesian tourism TV ad claims that a visit there will inspire the senses, indulge the soul, and invite the spirit. English (especially religious) language retains expressions like "a lost soul," "saving a soul," "soul food," "soul music," "soul of discretion," "bless his/her soul," and "heart and soul." Some artists favor "art and soul." We describe events that "cut through our soul." A Hebrew language learning web site says that "Israel without Jerusalem" is like a body without a soul.<sup>4</sup> A 2011 movie speaks of a "soul surfer," which is the true story of an aspiring professional female surfer whose left arm was lost to a shark but fought back and eventually won several surfing contests.<sup>5</sup> People would say she displayed a professional spirit, soul, determination, etc. Nespresso claims its coffee has body and soul.<sup>6</sup>

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1. Caroline Delbert, "Controversial New Theory Says Human Consciousness Is ... Electromagnetic?" *Popular Mechanics* (27 Oct 2020). Accessed 22 Feb. 2021; <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/a34496675/consciousness-electromagnetic-theory/>.
  2. Vance Morgan, "The Soul is not a Thing, but it Most Certainly is Real" (20 Oct. 2020). Accessed 22 Feb. 2021; [https://www.patheos.com/blogs/freelancechristianity/the-soul-is-not-a-thing-but-it-most-certainly-is-real/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Christians+For+a+Better+Christianity&utm\\_content=43](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/freelancechristianity/the-soul-is-not-a-thing-but-it-most-certainly-is-real/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Christians+For+a+Better+Christianity&utm_content=43).
  3. Emanuella Grinberg, CNN, "Letter from close friend offers rare glimpse into President Lincoln's 'theist' beliefs." Accessed 22 Feb. 2021; <https://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/12/letter-from-close-friend-offers-rare-glimpse-into-president-lincolns-theist-beliefs/>.
  4. "Learn Hebrew Phrases with Audio." Accessed 22 Feb. 2021; [https://in-hebrew.co.il/english/hebrew-english\\_519.php](https://in-hebrew.co.il/english/hebrew-english_519.php).
  5. IMDb. "Soul Surfer (2011)." Accessed 22 Feb. 2021; <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1596346/>.
  6. Flickr. "Nespresso – coffee, body and soul." <https://www.flickr.com/groups/nespresso-coffee/pool/>.

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**A** lot has been invested in the idea that we exist without a body. Theological and missiological work past and present are intertwined with communication through print and proclamation about the reality of life after death as body and/or soul. What if "we" can exist only with a body providing and producing the biological impulses necessary for consciousness? Does the Bible offer evidence to the contrary?

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The problem with any use of "soul" today is that it immediately brings up the idea of a disembodied spirit. This is significant for many Jews and Christians because this is not what is communicated by the biblical texts where the word "soul" appears in English Bibles. A lot has been invested in the idea that we exist without a body. Theological and missiological work past and present are intertwined with communication through print and proclamation about the reality of life after death as body and/or soul. What if "we" can exist only with a body providing and producing the biological impulses necessary for consciousness? Does the Bible offer evidence to the contrary? If so, is this based on recognition of a "soul"?

## The "Soul" in English Bibles

The word "soul" is frequent in English Bible versions. Traditional Christian theology recognizes the existence of the human "soul." This is defined in modern, English dictionaries primarily as (more or less) the immortal spiritual or immaterial being of each human.<sup>7</sup>

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7. E.g., s.v. "soul" in *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, Version

An archaic English and biblical use of “soul” simply refers to a “person” or “being.” When the Titanic sank people would say “souls were lost” (i.e., people died) as with Acts 2:41 (KJV), “about three thousand souls were added,” meaning people alive on earth. This expression is hardly used anymore. Also archaic is the expression “give up the ghost,” which derives from the KJV (cf. Gen 25:8, where this means Abraham died). This has influenced popular understanding of an invisible, immaterial “person” or “soul” that exists after the physical body dies. Yet in Gen 25:8, the text likely means “he stopped breathing and then he died.”<sup>8</sup>

### The “Soul” in the OT

OT *nephesh* is often translated “soul” but in context does not mean what we mean today by “soul.” The first appearance of “soul” in the KJV is Gen 2:7, where God fashions a male person from dirt, breathes life into his nose, and he becomes a *nephesh* that is alive. Since he is alive mainly materially as well as, supposedly, immaterially, the NIV translates *nephesh* as “being.” Those reading the KJV are misled by the appearance of “soul” in this instance. In Gen 9:4 the *nephesh* is in the blood (the “lifeblood”), which is not the Greek idea of the soul.<sup>9</sup> It can also signify “a person” or “a person’s life” (e.g., Lev 24:17a, “if someone strikes mortally the *nephesh* of a person”; i.e., takes his/her “life”; cf. Gen 9:5). Another OT use is for personality, as in “his soul hateth” (KJV; Ps 11:5; even NIV keeps “soul” here because it expresses God’s personal displeasure). “He hates” has the same meaning and a “soul hating” is odd for modern ears. The translation “soul” is found in verses where longings, feelings, passions, intentions, tastes, or discouragement are in view (e.g., Song 1:7; Exod 23:9; Num 21:5; Gen 23:8). But these have to do with the “poetic soul” not a disembodied spirit being. That leaves the question if any text refers to a being in existence after death. Lev 19:28 prohibits cutting yourself for (the sake of) the ‘dead [*nephesh*]’ (per KJV and NIV); but the idea is actually not to do this as a means of protecting your life (so that you do not die, implied). There was the temptation to engage in magical (apotropaic) practices thought to ward off bad luck or spirits (e.g., Lev 26:10). In Lev 21:11, a high priest is forbidden to go where there are “*naphshoth* of death.” Are these dead “souls” or “bodies”? Most agree this is about a “corpse” (cf. Num 6:6). Contact with the *nephesh* in Num 9:10 created uncleanness, so it also refers to a dead person or corpse (cf. Num 5:2). It appears then that no OT text refers to the “soul” as a life force after death. When Ezekiel said “the *nephesh* that sins will die” he meant “the person” (Ezek 18:4). The Wisdom of Solomon (3:1; ca. 500 B.C.E.) has the statement, “But the *psuchai* [souls?] of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them.” There, the

2.3.0 (203.16.12), 2008–18, Apple, Inc.

8. S.v. *gava* in Koehler-Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 184, OakTree Software, version 3.6.

9. S.v. *nephesh* in L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, eds., *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 712. OakTree Software, version 3.6.

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context is about dead people being at peace (v. 3) and immortal (*athanasias*; v. 4). This reflects Jewish but not necessarily OT theology well before the NT period.

### The “Soul” in the NT and Gehenna

Jesus and his apostles would have confronted the Jews and engaged with them in light of traditional beliefs, so their comments should not necessarily be read as propositional revelation about topics such as the afterlife or anthropology. In Matt 12:18, KJV has “my soul is well pleased,” while NIV has “in whom I delight.” The latter recognizes the pronoun function of *psuchē* (as is true for OT *nephesh*). There is nothing here about an immaterial being. NIV keeps “soul” in Matt 10:28 along with KJV. There Jesus speaks of those who can *kill* the body (*soma*) but not *kill* the *psuchē* (“soul?”). This appears to perhaps be a place where an immaterial being is distinct in reality from a material person. Jesus said not to fear such a person, rather to fear the one who can *destroy* body and “soul” in *ge-enna* (= the Hinnom Valley, where trash was burned).

NT *psuchē* like OT *nephesh* could refer to a “life.”<sup>10</sup> Both KJV and NIV translate *Gehenna* as “hell”; but this could be imposing a modern theological meaning over the intended contextual and cultural sense when Jesus spoke these words. Jesus was telling his audience not to fear humans (who can only kill them physically on earth) but fear God, who has power to destroy them completely (physically and emotionally/ spiritually; i.e., to impose lasting ruin). By NT times, “Gehenna” had already in Jewish writings become a place where God would send wicked people, who commit certain serious sins like adultery.<sup>11</sup> In Targumic literature and the Book of Enoch, reference is made to *Gehenna* as the place of the condemned and the NT uses it most frequently. Jesus used this popular concept to accommodate his message to the theology of his ancient audience. Gehenna was understood as a place like purgatory, where the wicked suffered (up to a year) to atone for sins.<sup>12</sup> The notion of a place of perpetual torture in fire emerged

10. Cf. “Matthew 10:28 and Dualism.” Afterlife. Accessed 23 Feb. 2021. <https://www.afterlife.co.nz/articles/matthew-1028/>.

11. S.v. “GEHENNA” in *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906) by K. Kohler and L. Blau. Accessed 23 Feb. 2021. <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6558-gehenna>.

12. S.v. “Targum” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Catholic Online.

from Rabbi Kimchi's commentary on Ps 27:13 (ca. 1200 C.E.), who described the Hinnom Valley as a place where a fire was maintained for corpses to be incinerated.<sup>13</sup> Subsequent scholars have discovered no historical evidence for this. Kimchi's approach was likely just to scare people into obedience.<sup>14</sup> Maimonides ("The Rambam" 1135–1204 C.E.) thought that wicked people would be annihilated.<sup>15</sup> Much later the Romans did use it for burials and cremation. Some think a warning about fiery *ge-binnom* was related to the coming Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.<sup>16</sup> Another text where both KJV and NIV have "soul" or *psuche* is Matt 16:26. The question is asked what good is it to gain the entire material world and yet lose one's *psuche*. Here contextually this has to mean "physical life" (rather than ending up in a place of punishment in the afterlife). In Luke 12:20, NIV corrects KJV by saying your life will be required rather than "your soul." In Matt 22:37, loving God with heart, *psuche*, and mind, must mean devotion, emotion, and education. But in Acts 14:2, *psuche* is "mind."

### The "Soul" in a NT Greek Lexicon

Thayer's Greek lexicon recognizes only two major categories of meaning for *psuche* in the NT: "breath" and "soul." But "soul" covers all kinds of feelings, desires, emotions, or affections. Thayer does mention the soul in terms of something a person, as a moral being, can develop in preparation for eternal life. References cited are 3 John 1:2; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 1:9, 22; 2:11, 25; 4:19; and James 1:21; 5:20. He also observes the use of *psuche* in the NT (and also ancient Greek literature) as something distinct from the body, which exists after death. The only NT text mentioned, however, is Matt 10:28. Comparison is made to later texts like 4 Maccabees 13:14, "let us not fear him who thinks he is killing us" (NRSV), and then in verse 15 "for great is the struggle of the soul [*psuches*] and danger of eternal torment lying before those who transgress the commandment of God." However, in verse 13 *psuchas* is "lives" and the use of the body is urged (NRSV). Here we see the beliefs of some Jews in ca. 100 C.E., so Jesus' words in Matt 10:28 can be understood as addressing and accommodating Jewish beliefs to speak to their context. Earlier Greek writers such as Herodotus had described the "soul" (*psuche*) as "eternal" (*athanatos*); Jose-

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phus has the phrase "dissolves the soul [*psuchēn*] from the body."<sup>17</sup> Thayer also observes the use of *psuche* as something freed from the body—a so-called "disembodied soul." Texts for this are Acts 2:27, 31; and Rev 6:9; 20:4.

### John and "Soul"

John wished Gaius prosperity in physical health in line with his *psuche*. Both NIV and KJV use "soul," but what he meant was more likely Gaius' spiritual/psychological condition and not what we think of first today as a "soul." In Rev 6:9, in a vision, the speaker saw "souls" (both NIV and KJV; *psuchas*) under an altar belonging to people who had been martyred. In 20:4 John saw also in a vision the *psuchas* of those who had been beheaded as martyrs. In this case, these essences are what is left after the body is dead. Yet it's all part of a vision not history per se. These are the only texts that have a strong case for using "soul" as a disembodied spirit. However, John may be using the term as when Peter (1 Pet 3:20) said eight *psuchai* were rescued by water, referring to Noah's living family members; or when Acts records that 3,000 *psuchai* were baptized and added to the Church (2:41).

### Hebrews and "Soul"

The author of Hebrews told his audience to submit to its leaders since they are accountable to watch over people's *psuchon*. KJV has "souls" but NIV uses "you." The idea is not care for only the immaterial but the entire person (the "life").

### Peter and "Soul"

Peter spoke about reaching the goal of *psuche* salvation (1:9). By itself, this might sound to many modern readers like the disembodied person going to Heaven after death; hence NIV

Accessed 23 Feb. 2021. <https://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11306>.

13. S.v. "Gehonim: A place of hell for repentance of bodily sins. Rabbi David Kimchi's commentary of Gehenna, Circa 1200 CE. Psalm 27:13." Moral Uprising's Blog. Accessed 23 Feb. 2021. <https://moralupbringing.com/2015/03/26/gehonnim-a-place-of-hell-for-repentance-of-bodily-sins-rabbi-david-kimhis-commentary-on-psalm-2713/>.

14. Todd Bolen, "The Fires of Gehenna: Views of Scholar." BiblePlaces Blog, 29 April 2011. Accessed 23 Feb. 2021. <https://www.bibleplaces.com/blog/2011/04/fires-of-gehenna-views-of-scholars/>.

15. Rabbi Mordechai Blumenfeld, "Maimonides #13 - Resurrection of the Dead." Accessed 23 Feb. 2021. <https://www.aish.com/sp/ph/48929597.html>.

16. "War is Hell: Gehenna and the War with Rome" (12 July 2019). Accessed 23 Feb. 2021. <https://scribesofthekingdom.com/2019/07/12/war-is-hell-gehenna-and-the-war-with-rome/>.

17. S.v. *psuchos* in *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ¶ 10024, loc. 5593, citing Herodotus 2, 123; Plato's *Phaedo*, 245–46; Josephus (*Bellum Judaicum* 2, 8, 14). Public Domain. Oak-Tree Software, version 1.7.

has “soul” as KJV. That could have been a first-century belief. In 1:4, however, Peter referred to Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the grave. And then mentioned the inheritance in Heaven for the faithful awaiting the salvation to be revealed in the end time (v. 5). They are suffering trials in life now to demonstrate their faith is genuine (vv. 6–7a), leading to praise of Jesus when revealed (vv. 7b–8), because they are *currently obtaining* (participle) salvation, the goal of faith (v. 9). This salvation has begun and includes the whole person (physical, emotional, mental). In 1:22 he says they have already been engaged in purifying their *psuchas* (“lives”) through obedience. Peter also (2:11) plead with believers not to engage in lust because it wars against the *psuche*. NIV goes back to “soul” here along with KJV. But the danger was much greater than psychological, and the concern was likely not about apostasy and punishment in the afterlife. Such immoral activities threaten people physically and mentally, ethically and emotionally. “Soul” no longer communicates this in English, so fails as an appropriate contemporary rendering. In 2:25 Peter explained how they had gone astray like sheep, but had now returned to the One who shepherds and guards their *psuchon*. Doubtless the concern was over their wholistic lives (material and immaterial). As KJV, NIV maintains “souls” for traditional connotations. In 4:19 Peter says those suffering should devote their *psuchas* (“souls” KJV but “themselves” NIV) to doing good for God. Such activity is not only emotional, spiritual, or mental.

The Acts text (2:27) quotes Ps 16:10, where David (ostensibly) praises God (v. 9) for keeping him alive (v. 10), i.e., not letting “him” (my *psuche* in the LXX; *nephesh* in OT) end up in the grave or death realm (= *sheol*) in 10a, restated as experiencing that hole in the ground in 10b. Some translations have instead “see corruption/decay” because the Greek OT has this rendering. KJV has “hell” in v. 10a (based on *hades* in the Greek OT and/or *sheol* in OT), and “corruption” in 10b. Greek *hades* is the normal equivalent to *sheol* as the Netherworld. Jesus would never have been concerned about being left in Hell. This inaccuracy in the KJV causes problems. Hebrew *sheol* has been shown only to mean “realm of death.” We can conclude in Acts 2 that (because the parallel term in the second poetic line is “holy one”) the *psuche* is the physical person.

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### James and “Soul”

James (1:21) exhorted believers to move away from all immorality and humbly submit to what they had learned, which can save their *psuchas*. If salvation (forgiveness of sins) was not earned by good deeds, then the idea must have been that living ethically and godly would keep them from having wicked, wasted lives. In 5:20, KJV speaks of saving a “soul” (*psuche*) from death” while NIV has “save him.” Regardless, the rescue is likely from physical (not eternal) death (the odds of which increase with a wicked lifestyle).

### Conclusion

Theologian Karl Barth decided that a human is an “embodied soul and befouled body.”<sup>18</sup> To conclude, the use of “soul” as a post-mortem disembodied being is culturally contextualized in the Bible, but not necessarily taught as a doctrine. These data are pertinent for theological and missiological ministry because these tasks involve the reading and exposition of biblical texts and the proclamation of beliefs or doctrines about earthly and eternal life. *My sole concern is that soul be understood and used in line with contextual biblical expressions in light of sensitivity to current cultural communication.* Hopefully future revisions of English Bible versions will reflect these matters more correctly and consistently.

18. Cf. W. A. Elwell, “Doctrine of Man,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. W. A. Elwell, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 2:1385–88. See also Post-Barthian, “Soul of My Body: Karl Barth’s Anthropology.” Accessed 22 Feb. 2021; <https://postbarthian.com/2015/08/17/soul-of-my-body-karl-barths-anthropology/>.