

## WORD STUDY ON *NEPHESH* ("Soul")<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew word *nephesh*, most often translated "soul" is sometimes confused or blurred with either "spirit" or the simple idea of something being animate, as opposed to inanimate. The word "*nephesh*" can refer to such things as "life," "person," "mind," "heart," and more personal pronouns such as "himself," "he," & "I."

Obviously then, there is a fairly wide range of meaning carried by the Hebrew word *nephesh*: **1)** It can refer simply to the principal of life, or being animate: "*and man became a living soul*" ("*being*"-NASB"- Gen. 2:7; Job 10:1); **2)** It is used as a personal pronoun, such as "*I*" (Gen. 27:25), "*he*" (Gen. 34:3), "*himself*" or "*herself*" (Num. 30:4, 5, 10; Prov. 6:30; Isa. 44:20), "*ourselves*" (Num. 31:50; Jer. 26:19), "*you*" (Dt. 12:15; Jer. 38:17), etc.; **3)** The inner part of a person, or the "*real you*" inside of your body (Ex. 30:15-16; Dt. 4:9; Job 7:11; Ps. 49:15); **4)** The *heart*, or *seat of affections* (Dt. 14:26; I Sam. 18:1; Job 30:25; Prov. 21:10; Song 1:7; 3:1, 2, 3); **5)** Less often, it can refer to *the body and its appetites, practices*, etc. (Num. 11:6; Ps. 107:9; Prov. 13:4).

Unfortunately, on the other hand, the English word "soul" does not enjoy anywhere near the range of meaning that is found in the Hebrew. People, in hearing the word soul, often think of the ethereal part of a person, even to the extent of imagining a ghostly type of being, presence, or personality.

A correct appreciation and understanding of the range found in the Hebrew word *nephesh* will keep an individual from falling into the one dimensional trap such as the Jehovah's Witnesses have fallen into of attaching only one meaning to *nephesh*. The Jehovah's Witness, by realizing (correctly) that "*nephesh*" can mean "*living being*," but failing to recognize and/or admit that the term *nephesh* can carry other meanings as well, has run aground doctrinally.

"It is true that in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for soul (*nephesh*) can be used in reference to a living being. Genesis 2:7 is clearly an example of this. But because the word can be used in this sense does not mean that it is limited to this sense, or that man does not have an immaterial nature... (don't read) into the text of Genesis 2:7 something that is not there. Indeed, Genesis 2:7 is simply telling us what man is (a living being), not what he is not. In other words, while Genesis 2:7 affirms that man is a living being, it does not deny in any way that man has an immaterial nature. (In fact, Genesis 35:18 may be an example of *nephesh* being used of man's immaterial nature.)."<sup>2</sup>

"The root of the problem lies in Jehovah's Witnesses misconception of the soul as merely a principle of life, not an entity. The Bible clearly teaches in numerous places (Genesis 35:18; I Kings 17:21-22; Revelation 6:9-11 to state a few) that the soul departs at the death of the body, that it is not destroyed by physical death, and that it can be restored by God at His discretion."<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, while Scripture speaks of the "soul" (*nephesh*) of animals (Gen. 1:20, 24, 30; 9:12, 15, 16; etc.), it does not necessarily follow that they are going to be in heaven or go to heaven when they die. Clearly the first meaning (they possess life) is intended, not the latter meanings.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources: *TWOT (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament)*, *The New Bible Dictionary*, & additional references below. Note: This word study was done as part of the course work for the graduate class "*Old Testament Theology*", Dr. Terry Rude, instructor. Written by Mike Edwards, 05 August, 1996 (slightly revised Feb. 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning From the Scriptures With the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Harvest House: Eugene Oregon, 1993), p. 308

<sup>3</sup> Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Bethany House Publishers: Minneapolis, MN, 1985 edition), p. 106