

DISEMBODIED SOULS

THE *NEFESH* IN ISRAEL AND KINDRED SPIRITS  
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST, WITH AN APPENDIX  
ON THE KATUMUWA INSCRIPTION

SBL Press

*SBL*

Society of Biblical Literature



Ancient Near East Monographs

**General Editors**

Ehud Ben Zvi  
Roxana Flammini

**Editorial Board**

Reinhard Achenbach  
Esther J. Hamori  
Steven W. Holloway  
René Krüger  
Alan Lenzi  
Steven L. McKenzie  
Matti Nissinen  
Graciela Gestoso Singer  
Juan Manuel Tebes

Volume Editor

Ehud Ben Zvi

Number 11

**DISEMBODIED SOULS**

**THE *NEFESH* IN ISRAEL AND KINDRED SPIRITS  
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST, WITH AN APPENDIX  
ON THE KATUMUWA INSCRIPTION**

# DISEMBODIED SOULS

THE *NEFESH* IN ISRAEL AND  
KINDRED SPIRITS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST,  
WITH AN APPENDIX ON  
THE KATUMUWA INSCRIPTION

Richard C. Steiner

SBL Press

SBL Press  
Atlanta

DISEMBODIED SOULS  
THE *NEFESH* IN ISRAEL AND KINDRED SPIRITS  
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST, WITH AN APPENDIX  
ON THE KATUMUWA INSCRIPTION

Copyright © 2015 by SBL Press

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by means of any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed in writing to the Rights and Permissions Office, SBL Press, 825 Houston Mill Road, Atlanta, GA 30329 USA.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Steiner, Richard C., author.

Disembodied souls : the Nefesh in Israel and kindred spirits in the ancient Near East, with an appendix on the Katumuwa Inscription / by Richard C. Steiner.

pages cm. — (Society of Biblical Literature ancient Near East monographs ; 11)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-62837-076-8 (paper binding : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-62837-077-5 (electronic format) — ISBN 978-1-62837-078-2 (hardcover binding : alk. paper)

1. Nefesh (The Hebrew word)  
2. Inscriptions, Aramaic—Turkey—Zincirli (Gaziantep Ili)  
3. Bible. Old Testament—Language, style.  
4. Bible. Old Testament—Criticism, interpretation, etc., Jewish.  
I. Title.

PJ4819.N44S74 2015

492.29—dc23

2014039318

Printed on acid-free, recycled paper conforming to  
ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992 (R1997) and ISO 9706:1994  
standards for paper permanence.

לזכר נשמות סבי אשתי:

ר' נתן נטע בן ר' ראובן ורחל

שרה בת ר' יעקב וחנה

ר' יצחק יעקב בן ר' יוסף וואלף

חנה בת ר' ברוך יוסל

עברו באש התופת, ולא ידע איש את קבורתם.

ועל כגון זה אמרו:

אין עושין נפשות לצדיקים; דבריהן הן הן זכרונן.

SBL Press

SBL Press

## CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments . . . . .	ix
Abbreviations . . . . .	xiii
Introduction . . . . .	1
1. A Disembodied נפש at Samal and Its Ancient Near Eastern Kinfolk . . . . .	10
2. Women Trapping Souls . . . . .	23
3. Pillows and Pillow Casings . . . . .	28
4. Cloth Patches as Pillow Filling . . . . .	38
5. Souls in Bags . . . . .	43
6. Pillow-Traps for Dream-Souls . . . . .	46
7. From Dream-Souls to Bird-Souls . . . . .	55
8. Disembodied נפש elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible . . . . .	68
9. The רוח . . . . .	81
10. The Reunion of the Disembodied Soul with Its Kinsmen . . . . .	93
11. Afterthoughts on the Afterlife of the Soul . . . . .	101
12. Semantic Structure . . . . .	115
13. Alleged Evidence against the Existence of Disembodied נפש . . . . .	119
14. Conclusions . . . . .	124
Appendix 1: The Katumuwa Inscription from Zincirli . . . . .	128
Appendix 2: The Meaning of לצודר . . . . .	163
Bibliography . . . . .	167
Index of Ancient Texts . . . . .	199
Index of Subjects . . . . .	205

SBL Press



## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This monograph has a long and convoluted history. Its original kernel—a discussion of the biblical term כַּסָּת in the light of its Mishnaic Hebrew counterpart (chapter 3)—emerged from a course on biblical semantics and lexicology first offered at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University in 1976. From the very beginning, the course had a unit on the importance of Mishnaic Hebrew for biblical lexicology, and, after teaching the course for a number of years, I added the discussion of כַּסָּת to that unit. Decades later, when I offered the course in the spring of 2011, it dawned on me that, in shedding light on the meaning of Biblical Hebrew כַּסָּת in Ezek 13:18 and 20—verses that deal with women who pretend to trap נַפְשׁוֹת in כַּסָּתוֹת—Mishnaic Hebrew had illuminated the meaning of Biblical Hebrew נַפֵּשׁ as well.

I wrote an essay on the subject and, in January of 2012, I submitted it to two SBL editors, one after the other. I sent it first to James C. VanderKam, the editor of *JBL*, who responded virtually immediately. Then I sent it to Ehud Ben Zvi, the editor of *Ancient Near Eastern Monographs (ANEM)*. He, too, responded virtually immediately. Their responses were remarkably similar in other respects as well. They both informed me, in the nicest way possible, that my essay did not conform to the length restrictions that they were sworn to uphold. In addition, they both encouraged me to fix the problem by changing the length—albeit in opposite directions. Their kindness helped to alleviate my frustration at finding that my essay on the trapping of souls had itself become trapped in an academic limbo, a sort of no-publish zone. It was, in the eyes of SBL, much too long for an article and much too short for a monograph.

At the time, shortening the essay seemed like a daunting task, and so I decided to expand it into a monograph, under the guidance of Prof. Ben Zvi and his anonymous referees. That course turned

out to be far from easy. It took an additional three years of intensive work just to gain a passing familiarity with the seemingly bottomless pit of Sheol and the afterlife. It is my pleasant duty to thank Prof. Ben Zvi for his encouragement and advice and for honoring the end product with a place in the ANEM series.

Beginning in January of 2014, two years after contacting the SBL editors, I presented the then-current draft of this monograph to a doctoral seminar in the Bernard Revel Graduate School. I am deeply indebted to Prof. Aaron Koller, my colleague and former student, for volunteering to assist me in the running of that seminar and for reading and commenting on the monograph at two different stages. It was he who persuaded me that I could not avoid grappling with the problems surrounding the afterlife of the נֶפֶשׁ (chapter 11)—hellish problems whose snares I had hoped to avoid. Another participant in the seminar deserving of special thanks is Rabbi Shaul Seidler-Feller. After subjecting the draft that I circulated to painstaking scrutiny, he sent me no fewer than fourteen pages of corrections and queries.

Two other colleagues at the Bernard Revel Graduate School, Dean David Berger and Prof. S. Z. Leiman, contributed to this work in ways great and small. Dean Berger managed to scrape together a subsidy for the typesetting of this work at a time of serious financial deficits; Prof. Leiman provided invaluable bibliographic assistance with his well-known generosity. In addition, both of them were of great help in formulating the title of the monograph and—together with Prof. Joshua Blau—the Hebrew dedication. I would also like to thank my brother, Prof. Mark Steiner, who commented on several philosophical matters, and Prof. John Huehnergard, who helped with a cuneiform matter relevant to the Katumuwa inscription.

I am extremely grateful to four bibliophiles whose cheerful, patient assistance went far beyond the call of duty: Mary Ann Linahan and Zvi Erenyi of the Yeshiva University libraries, Maurya Horgan and Paul Kobelski of the HK Scriptorium. They took countless burdens off of my shoulders and countless hours off of the time needed to bring this work to completion. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Ms. Linahan was a major benefactor of this research project.

As always, my dear, devoted wife Sara has been my chief source of support. It is with profound gratitude that I dedicate this book to her grandparents לְרַ: Nosen Nute and Sure Rosenschein; Yitzchok

Yankev and Chane Weisz. If only they had survived Auschwitz, “their נפש would have been bound up with her נפש,” to paraphrase Gen 44:30 and 1 Sam 18:1.

Last but not least, I take this opportunity to thank those who helped me remain a נפש חיה, a “living soul,” in the face of health problems that coincided with the writing of this book. One of them is Dr. Stephen R. Karbowitz, my pulmonologist, who cared for my נשמת חיים as if it were his own. Another is Dr. Rivka S. Horowitz, my cousin and private “conciierge doctor,” whose deep love for her family makes her a worthy heir of her mother, Irene (Chaya) ז”ל. She richly deserves the title נפש חיה, in the postbiblical sense of “Chaya’s monument.” And, above all:

מודה אני לפניך, מלך חי וקיים, שהחזרת בי נשמתי וכו’

SBL Press

SBL Press

## ABBREVIATIONS

AASF	Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae
AB	Anchor Bible
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AHw	Wolfram von Soden. <i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> . 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965–1981.
ALASP	Abhandlungen zur Literatur alt-Syrien-Palästinas
ANET	J. B. Pritchard, ed. <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
AnOr	Analecta Orientalia
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AR	<i>Archiv für Religionswissenschaft</i>
ATD	Das Alte Testament deutsch
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1907.
BH	Biblical Hebrew
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956.
CANE	Jack M. Sasson, ed. <i>Civilizations of the Ancient Near East</i> . 4 vols. New York: Scribner, 1995.
CAT	Manfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, eds. <i>The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani, and Other Places</i> . AOAT 360. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995.

- CHANE Culture and History of the Ancient Near East  
 COS William W. Hallo, ed. *The Context of Scripture*. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002.
- Cowley A. Cowley, ed. *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1923.
- DBY Darby Bible  
 DDD Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. 2nd rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- DISO Charles-F. Jean and Jacob Hoftijzer. *Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'ouest*. New ed. Leiden: Brill, 1965.
- DNWSI J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling. *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*. 2 vols. Handbook of Oriental Studies, The Near and Middle East 21. Leiden: Brill, 1995.
- FAT Forschungen zum Alten Testament  
 GWT God's Word Translation  
 HALAT L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*. Leiden: Brill, 1967–1996.
- HALOT L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000.
- HAT Handbuch zum Alten Testament  
 HKAT Handkommentar zum Alten Testament  
 HO Handbuch der Orientalistik = Handbuch of Oriental Studies
- HSM Harvard Semitic Monographs  
 HSS Harvard Semitic Studies  
 HTR *Harvard Theological Review*  
 IBC Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
- ICC International Critical Commentary  
 IDB G. A. Buttrick, ed. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 4 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
- IEJ *Israel Exploration Journal*  
 JANES *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*  
 JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*

- JJS *Journal of Jewish Studies*  
 JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*  
 Josephus  
     *Ant.* *Antiquities of the Jews*  
     *J.W.* *Jewish War*  
 JQR *Jewish Quarterly Review*  
 JSS *Journal of Semitic Studies*  
 JSSSup *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement*  
 KAI H. Donner and W. Röllig, eds. *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*. 3 vols. in 1. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1966–1969.  
 KAT *Kommentar zum Alten Testament*  
 KHC *Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament*  
 KTU M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, eds. *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*. AOAT 24.1. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976.  
 JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*  
 JSS *Journal of Semitic Studies*  
 LCL *Loeb Classical Library*  
*Ma'agarim*. Electronic Resource. *Historical Dictionary of the Academy of the Hebrew Language*. Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language. Online, <http://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/>  
 MGWJ *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*  
 MH *Mishnaic Hebrew*  
 NIDB Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–2009.  
 NJPS *New Jewish Publication Society Version*  
 NRSV *New Revised Standard Version*  
 OBO *Orbis biblicus et orientalis*  
 OTL *Old Testament Library*  
 OTS *Oudtestamentische Studiën*  
 RB *Revue biblique*  
 RHPR *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*  
 RSV *Revised Standard Version*  
 SAA *State Archives of Assyria*  
 SAOC *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations*  
 SBLDS *Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series*

SC	Sources chrétiennes
SEL	<i>Studi epigrafici e linguistici</i>
SHCANE	Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions (supplements to <i>Numen</i> )
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
TADAE	Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni. <i>Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt</i> . 4 vols. Texts and Studies for Students. Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986–1999.
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds. <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
TDOT	Johannes Botterweck and H. Ringgren eds. <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–.
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
TSSI	John C. L. Gibson. <i>Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions</i> . 4 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971–2009.
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WO	<i>Die Welt des Orients</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>



## INTRODUCTION

For over a century, the Israelite נפש has fought a losing battle for the hearts and minds of biblical scholars, seeking to retain its traditional status as an entity separate from the body and capable of existing outside of it. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the outcome still seemed uncertain. At that time, it was still possible to assert that “*nefesh* is used as the name of the disembodied spirit”;<sup>1</sup> that “the Hebrews apparently retained down to historical times the conception of the soul as a separable thing, which can be removed from a man’s body in his lifetime, either by the wicked art of witches, or by the owner’s voluntary act in order to deposit it for a longer or shorter time in a place of safety”;<sup>2</sup> that “like many other peoples of antiquity, the ancient Israelites believed that the soul could slip in and out of the body at will.”<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, however, it is clear that even then biblical scholarship was in the process of abandoning the disembodied נפש—“giving up the ghost,” so to speak.<sup>4</sup> Already in 1913, we find H. Wheeler Robinson transporting the ancient Israelite נפש (according to the modern scholarly view) to

---

<sup>1</sup> Lewis B. Paton, “The Hebrew Idea of the Future Life. I. Earliest Conceptions of the Soul,” *Biblical World* 35 (1910): 10.

<sup>2</sup> James G. Frazer, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend and Law* (3 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1918–1919), 2:513.

<sup>3</sup> W. O. E. Oesterley, *Immortality and the Unseen World: A Study in Old Testament Religion* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1921), 15.

<sup>4</sup> See Joel B. Green, “Soul,” *NIDB* 5:359: “Biblical studies . . . since the early 20th century almost unanimously supported a unitary account of the human person.” Intellectual historians may be interested in the use of the word *unanimously* (< *unus animus* “one soul”) in a statement denying that the traditional concept of the soul has any scriptural basis!

the Roman period and attributing it to Paul: "A true Jew, he shrinks from the idea of a disembodied spirit."<sup>5</sup>

The process was, of course, a gradual one. An article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* from 1916 straddles the fence, as though the traditional view were compatible with the modern one: "The nature of the disembodied soul was never conceived by the ancient Semites as apart from the body which it once animated."<sup>6</sup> This transitional phase did not last long. It soon became widely accepted that "the *nephesh* cannot be separated from the body"<sup>7</sup> and that "the Hebrew could not conceive of a disembodied נַפֶּשׁ."<sup>8</sup> This view of Israelite thought is very much alive in contemporary scholarship.<sup>9</sup> In an article published in 2011, we read that "there is little or no evidence that belief in a soul existed, at least in the sense of a soul as a disembodied entity entirely discrete from the body."<sup>10</sup> An article from 2013 asserts that "in the 756 instances of . . . *nefeš* in the Hebrew Bible" it does not "ever clearly appear in disembodied form, apart from a physical object (always human in the Bible . . . ). After death, the Biblical Hebrew *nefeš* has no separate existence; when it departs, it ceases to exist and . . . 'goes out (*יָצָא*)' like a light."<sup>11</sup>

The modern view of the word נַפֶּשׁ is not new. It is found already in John Parkhurst's *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1762):

---

<sup>5</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 131.

<sup>6</sup> W. Carleton Wood, "The Religion of Canaan: From the Earliest Times to the Hebrew Conquest," *JBL* 35 (1916): 124.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Laurin, "The Concept of Man as a Soul," *ExpTim* 72 (1960–1961): 132.

<sup>8</sup> N. W. Porteous, "Soul," *IDB* 4:428b.

<sup>9</sup> For a rare exception, see Stephen L. Cook, "Death, Kinship, and Community: Afterlife and the קִדָּשׁ Ideal in Israel," in *The Family in Life and in Death: The Family in Ancient Israel. Sociological and Archaeological Perspectives* (ed. Patricia Dutcher-Walls; New York: T&T Clark International, 2009), 107: "The soul (נַפֶּשׁ) is separable from the body in biblical faith, as in ancient Near Eastern culture in general. . . ."

<sup>10</sup> James F. Osborne, "Secondary Mortuary Practice and the Bench Tomb: Structure and Practice in Iron Age Judah," *JNES* 70 (2011): 42 n. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Seth L. Sanders, "The Appetites of the Dead: West Semitic Linguistic and Ritual Aspects of the Katumuwa Stele," *BASOR* 369 (2013): 44.

נפש hath been supposed to signify the *spiritual part* of man or what we commonly call his *soul*, I must for myself confess, that I can find no passage where it hath *undoubtedly* this meaning. Gen. xxxv. 18. Ps. xvi. 10. seem fairest for this signification, but may not נפש in the former passage be most properly rendered *breath*, and in the latter a *breathing* or *animal frame*?<sup>12</sup>

In Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), we find an earlier and fuller exposition:

The Soule in Scripture, signifieth always, either the Life, or the Living Creature; and the Body and Soule jointly, the *Body alive*. In the fift day of the Creation, God said, Let the waters produce *Reptile animæ viventis*, the creeping thing that hath in it a Living Soule; the English translate it, *that hath life*: And again, God created Whales, & *omnem animam viventem*; which in the English is, *every Living Creature*: And likewise of Man, God made him of the dust of the earth, and breathed in his face the breath of Life, & *factus est Homo in animam viventem*, that is, *and Man was made a Living Creature*. And after Noah came out of the Arke, God saith, hee will no more smite *omnem animam viventem*, that is, *every Living Creature*: And Deut. 12. 23. *Eate not the Bloud, for the Bloud is the Soule*; that is, *the Life*. From which places, if by Soule were meant a *Substance Incorporeall*, with an existence separated from the Body, it might as well be inferred of any other living Creature, as of Man.<sup>13</sup>

This exposition comes in a chapter (44) entitled "Of Spirituall Darknesse from MISINTERPRETATION of Scripture."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> John Parkhurst, *An Hebrew and English Lexicon without Points* (London: W. Faden, 1762), 203.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), 339–40 = *Hobbes's Leviathan: Reprinted from the Edition of 1651 with an Essay by the Late W. G. Pogson Smith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), 481.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 333–472. Already in this title, it is clear that Hobbes rejected the traditional view of the soul in the Bible. For this and other challenges to Christian anthropological dualism, see John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism–Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

An even earlier source is the commentary of a major Jewish exegete in thirteenth-century Italy, Isaiah of Trani. In commenting on 1 Sam 25:29, he writes:

כל מקום שאומר הנפש, הוא הגוף והנשמה ולא הנשמה לבד, דכתיב והנפש  
אשר-תאכל וכתיב על-נפש מת, ואין לומר על הנשמה נפש מת.<sup>15</sup>

Wherever it says הנפש, it refers to the body and the soul (הנשמה) — not to the soul alone, for it is written אשר-תאכל (Lev 7:20), and it is written על-נפש מת (Num 6:6), where the phrase מת נפש cannot be used of the soul.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear from this discussion that the author's agreement with modern scholars is limited to the meaning of the word נפש. He does not deny that the Bible recognizes the existence of a soul separate from the body. For that, however, he believes that the correct term is נשמה, not נפש.

The philosophical component of the modern view is even older than the philological component. In his treatise on the soul, Aristotle writes: *ὅτι μὲν οὖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ ψυχὴ χωριστὴ τοῦ σώματος, ἢ μέρη τινὰ αὐτῆς, εἰ μεριστὴ πέφυκεν, οὐκ ἄδηλον*, "That, therefore, the soul (or certain parts of it, if it is divisible) cannot be separated from the body is quite clear."<sup>17</sup> Further: *καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καλῶς ὑπολαμβάνουσιν οἷς δοκεῖ μῆτ' ἄνευ σώματος εἶναι μῆτε σῶμά τι ἢ ψυχὴ*, "And for this reason those have the right conception who believe that the soul does not exist without a body and yet is not itself a kind of body."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See ספר שמואל — מקראות גדולות הכתר (ed. Menachem Cohen; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1993), 133b, s.v. נפש אדני צרורה בצרור החיים.

<sup>16</sup> This argument appears to assume that the use of Hebrew נפש in some passages in the sense of "person" somehow precludes its use in other passages in the medieval sense of נשמה, that is, "soul." It may even assume that נפש had only one meaning. If so, it seems likely that Isaiah of Trani, who refers to Rashi as המורה "the teacher," was influenced by the latter's revolutionary approach to lexicology. Rashi, unlike his predecessors, felt that words often have a single underlying meaning; see Richard C. Steiner, "Saadia vs. Rashi: On the Shift from Meaning-Maximalism to Meaning-Minimalism in Medieval Biblical Lexicology," *JQR* 88 (1998): 213–58.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima* (trans. D. W. Hamlyn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10 (2.1.12 413a) with changes in punctuation.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, 14 (2.2.14 414a).

There are many passages in the Hebrew Bible where it is possible to see a reference to the soul as traditionally understood. Such *possible* references to the soul, cited with confidence by earlier generations, may still be worth discussing. It may be possible to elevate them to the level of *probable* through the use of new evidence or the like. The problem with them, however, is that they can be (and have been) explained away through various exegetical maneuvers by those inclined to do so. The meaning “soul” is easy to dismiss because the plethora of other meanings that have been proposed for נפש (“person,” “life,” “life-force,” “breath,” “gullet,” etc.) virtually guarantees that there will be one among them to fit any given context. If not, figurative interpretation is always available as a last resort.

It is clear, therefore, that our initial focus must be on passages in the Hebrew Bible where נפש not only *may* mean “soul” but, in Parkhurst’s words, “hath *undoubtedly* this meaning”—passages in which it is *necessary* to see a soul separate from the body. From my perspective, only one of the passages cited by previous defenders of the disembodied נפש has the potential to be such a “smoking gun,” and I believe that it is worthy of special attention. We need to see whether the evidence can withstand intense scrutiny.

The passage in question is in Ezekiel 13:17–21:

17. ואתה בן־אדם שים פניך אל־בנות עמך המתנבאות מלבנה ונהבא עליהן:  
 18. . . . הוי למתפרות כסותות על כל־אצילי ידי ועשות המספחות על־ראש כל־  
 קומה לצודד נפשות הנפשות תצודדנה לעמי ונפשות לכה תחיינה:  
 19. ותחללנה אתי אל־עמי בשעלי שערים ובפתותי לחם להמית נפשות אשר לא־  
 תמותנה ולחיות נפשות אשר לא־תחיינה בכזבכם לעמי שמעי כזב:  
 20. . . . הנני אל־כפותותיכנה אשר אתנה מצדדות שם את־הנפשות  
 לפרחות וקרעתי אתם מעל זרועתיכם ושלחתי את־הנפשות אשר אתם מצדדות  
 את־נפשים לפרחת:  
 21. וקרעתי את־מספחותיכם והצלתי את־עמי מי־דכן ולא־יהיו עוד בי־דכן  
 למצודה . . . :

In this monograph, I shall argue that the passage means something like the following:

17. And you, man, set your face toward the women of your people who pose as prophetesses, (prophesying) out of their own minds, and prophesy against them.  
 18. . . . Woe unto those (women posing as prophetesses) who sew (fabric to make empty) pillow casings (and sew them) onto

the joints of every arm, and who make the cloth patches (for pillow filling, and put them) on the head of every (woman among them of tall) stature, in order to trap (dream-)souls. Can you (really) trap souls belonging to My people while keeping your own souls alive?

19. You have profaned Me [= My name] among My people for/with handfuls of barley and morsels of bread, proclaiming the death of souls that will/should not die and the survival of souls that will/should not live—lying to My people, who listen to (your) lies.

20. . . . I am going to deal with your (empty) pillow casings in which you (pretend to) trap (dream-)souls (and turn them) into bird-souls. And I shall free (from your clutches) the souls (of those who listen to your lies), for you (are pretending to) trap dream-souls (and turn them) into bird-souls.

21. And I shall tear your cloth patches (from your heads) and rescue my people from your clutches [lit., hands], and they will no longer become prey in your clutches [lit., hands]. . . .

At the end of the nineteenth century, it was suggested that the phrase *לְצַוֵּדֵד נַפְשׁוֹת* referred to a magical trapping of souls. James G. Frazer dealt with this subject already in 1890:

Souls may be extracted from their bodies or detained on their wanderings not only by ghosts and demons but also by men, especially by sorcerers. In Fiji if a criminal refused to confess, the chief sent for a scarf with which to “catch away the soul of the rogue.” At the sight, or even at the mention of the scarf the culprit generally made a clean breast. For if he did not, the scarf would be waved over his head till his soul was caught in it, when it would be carefully folded up and nailed to the end of a chief’s canoe; and for want of his soul the criminal would pine and die. The sorcerers of Danger Island used to set snares for souls. . . .<sup>19</sup>

After pages of such examples, Frazer remarked in a footnote, “Some time ago my friend Professor W. Robertson Smith suggested to me that the practice of hunting souls, which is denounced in Ezekiel xiii. 17 sqq. must have been akin to those described in the text.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1st ed.; 2 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1890), 117.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 120 n. 1.

Like Frazer, Alfred Bertholet took it for granted that the trapped souls were from living people,<sup>21</sup> while Richard Kraetzschmar asserted that at least some of them (the ones referred to in the phrase לְחַיֹּת נַפְשׁוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תָחִיָּנָה) were spirits of the dead in the underworld, roused from their rest through necromancy.<sup>22</sup> Kraetzschmar's necromantic interpretation, after being consigned to the "land of oblivion" for a good part of the twentieth century, was brought back to life in modified form by Karel van der Toorn and Marjo C. A. Korpel:

In my opinion the key expression 'hunt for souls' must be understood as an allusion to necromancy. The description transports us to a seance, in which a group of female diviners, by means of mysterious cords and veils, tries to communicate with the 'spirits of the dead.' The latter are called 'souls' by Ezekiel.<sup>23</sup>

The prophetesses killed the souls of good people, condemning them to eternal imprisonment in Sheol, the second death from which even the inhabitants of the hereafter were not exempt. . . . But they kept alive the souls of evil people to invoke them from the Nether World whenever they wanted to make use of their nefarious powers.<sup>24</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the suggestion that Frazer published in William Robertson Smith's name was developed by Adolphe Lods, citing many parallels from Frazer's work, and subsequently by Frazer himself.<sup>25</sup> To Frazer it seemed obvious that the

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Bertholet, *Das Buch Hesekiel* (KHC 12; Freiburg i. B.: J. C. B. Mohr, 1897), 72.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Kraetzschmar, *Das Buch Ezechiel* (HKAT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1900), 135. So, too, Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien* (6 vols.; Kristiania: J. Dybwad, 1921–1924), 1:65 (very briefly).

<sup>23</sup> Karel van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman* (trans. Sara J. Denning-Bolle; Biblical Seminar 23; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 123.

<sup>24</sup> Marjo C. A. Korpel, "Avian Spirits in Ugarit and in Ezekiel 13," in *Ugarit, Religion and Culture: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Ugarit, Religion and Culture, Edinburgh, July 1994. Essays Presented in Honour of Professor John C. L. Gibson* (ed. N. Wyatt, W. G. E. Watson, and J. B. Lloyd; Ugaritisch-biblische Literatur 12; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996), 105.

<sup>25</sup> Adolphe Lods, *La croyance à la vie future et le culte des morts dans*



נַפְשׁוֹת being trapped were disembodied souls of living people, no different from the ones he had studied in cultures all over the world. His interpretation of the magical aspect, far more developed than Bertholet's, is not without its advocates,<sup>26</sup> but the latter are outnumbered by those who reject it.<sup>27</sup> Some studies devoted to the term נַפְשׁ do not mention this critical passage from Ezekiel at all.<sup>28</sup>

---

*l'antiquité israélite* (2 vols.; Paris: Fischbacher, 1906), 1:46–48; James G. Frazer, "Hunting for Souls," *AR* 11 (1908): 197–99; idem, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament*, 2:510–13.

<sup>26</sup> Oesterley, *Immortality*, 16; Henry P. Smith, "Frazer's 'Folk-lore in the Old Testament,'" *HTR* 17 (1924): 74–75; Adolphe Lods, "Magie hébraïque et magie cananéenne," *RHPR* 7 (1927): 13; Daniel Lys, *Néphesh: Histoire de l'âme dans la révélation d'Israël au sein des religions proche-orientales* (Études d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses 50; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 161, cf. 179; H. W. F. Saggs, "'External Souls' in the Old Testament," *JSS* 19 (1974): 1–12; and Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001), 562; not to mention Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament: A Comparative Study with Chapters from Sir James G. Frazer's Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 615–17.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, J. A. Selbie, "Ezekiel xiii. 18-21," *ExpTim* 15 (1903–1904): 75; Paul Torge, *Seelenglaube und Unsterblichkeitshoffnung im Alten Testament* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1909), 27 n. 2; Johann Schwab, *Der Begriff der nefesh in den heiligen Schriften des Alten Testaments: Ein Beitrag zur altjüdischen Religionsgeschichte* (Borna-Leipzig: R. Noske, 1913), 40; G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* (ICC 21; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 146; Johannes Hendrik Becker, *Het Begrip nefesj in het Oude Testament* (Amsterdam: Maatschappij, 1942), 91–92; A. Murtonen, *The Living Soul: A Study of the Meaning of the Word nēfēš in the Old Testament Hebrew Language* (StudOr 23.1; Helsinki: Societas Orientalis Fennica, 1958), 55–56; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (trans. Ronald E. Clements; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 297; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 240; William H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1986), 195; Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 204; Rüdiger Schmitt, *Magie im Alten Testament* (AOAT 313; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2004), 285; and Jonathan Stökl, "The מַתְנַבְאוֹת in Ezekiel 13 Reconsidered," *JBL* 132 (2013): 73 n. 45. This list includes only works that deal explicitly with the meaning of נַפְשׁוֹת in Ezek 13:18–20.

<sup>28</sup> Max Lichtenstein, *Das Wort נַפְשׁ in der Bibel: Eine Untersuchung über die historischen Grundlagen der Anschauung von der Seele und die Entwicklung*



In addition to this anthropological controversy, there are philological controversies surrounding our passage. Are *כְּטוֹת* and *מְסֻחוֹת* (Ezek 13:18) short-lived Akkadianisms that disappeared after the exilic period, or are they native Hebrew words known also from tannaitic literature? Does *לְפָרְחָה* (13:20) mean “like birds,” “as birds,” “of birds,” “into birds,” or something else? To these, I shall add a third lexical question: Is *נְפָשִׁים* an error for *נְפָשׁוֹת* or a rare technical term, distinct from *נְפָשׁוֹת* in the singular as well? I shall argue that resolution of these lexical questions has much to contribute to the resolution of the theological controversy. Through study of the words *כְּטוֹת*, *מְסֻחוֹת*, *פְּרָחָה*, and *נְפָשִׁים* and comparison with ancient Near Eastern material, I shall attempt to demonstrate that the passage in Ezekiel refers quite clearly to disembodied souls.

Success in this area will provide us with an incentive to search for other disembodied *נַפְשׁוֹת* (as well as *רוּחוֹת*) in the Hebrew Bible and to investigate what happens to them after death. I shall try to show that the fragmentary and seemingly contradictory biblical evidence concerning the afterlife of the *נַפֵּשׁ* can be elucidated by evidence from archaeological sources, rabbinic sources (concerning Jewish funerary practice and the beliefs associated with it), and ancient Near Eastern literary sources—all converging to produce a coherent and plausible picture.

Before dealing with the passage from Ezekiel, I shall discuss the ancient Near Eastern context of our problem.<sup>29</sup> I shall attempt to show that, if “the Hebrew could not conceive of a disembodied *נַפֵּשׁ*,” he must have been a rather sheltered soul, oblivious to beliefs and practices found all over the ancient Near East. I shall begin with the new evidence bearing on our question that was discovered only six years ago in excavations at Zincirli, ancient Samal, in southeastern Turkey, near the Syrian border. This discovery alone is reason enough to reopen the question, for it, too, is potentially a “smoking gun.”

---

*der Bedeutung des Wortes נַפֵּשׁ* (Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1920); Risto Lauha, *Psychophysischer Sprachgebrauch im Alten Testament: Eine struktursemantische Analyse von לֵב, נַפֵּשׁ und רוּחַ* (AASF, Dissertationes Humanarum Litterarum 35; Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Cook, “Death,” 106: “A comparative approach is particularly helpful in interpreting death and afterlife in Israel, because the Hebrew Bible leaves a lot unsaid about this subject. . . .”