

ASPECTS OF A WHOLE:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NEPHESH AND RUACH IN HEBREW ANTHROPOLOGY

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For some time, the typical dualist understanding of man has dominated how we see ourselves as humans. The existence of an immaterial soul was, for many, taken for granted. Recent findings in the field of neurology, however, have caused many to question the legitimacy of this perspective, including theologians. Many who would cite the apparent dualism of the New Testament might be surprised to learn that Old Testament view of man is much more unified. The Hebrew understanding employs several highly nuanced words to capture man's existence. In this paper, the reader will be introduced to two of these terms, *ruach* (henceforth referred to as *R*), and *nephesh* (henceforth referred to as *N*). Afterward, the significance of these terms to the current understanding of man will be explored before applying such information to the Christian life today.

Finding which term to begin with is a difficult task given the amount of overlap that they share, but for this purpose, *R* provides a good starting point. In the most basic sense, *R* is wind. Wind really is a fitting image. It is outside the grasp or control of man. Rather, only YHWH can dispense the wind as he wishes. Wolff phrases it well in calling *R* a "mighty phenomenon standing at YHWH's disposal."¹ It is precisely because of this that *R* is closely associated with YHWH's power. His *R* carries into Egypt a plague of locusts (Ex. 10.13) and unleashes his wrath (Ezek. 13.13). It is his wind, his *R*, that dries up the waters of the great flood (Gen. 8.1) and provides quail for his people (Num. 11.31). His *R* does more than interact with the environment surrounding man, though. It also takes the form of his wind, or his breath if you will, on man. His *R* sends Othniel out to battle for Israel (Judg. 3.10). It endows Samson with the strength to

1. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: PA, Fortress Press, 1973), 33.

tear a lion asunder (Judg. 14.6). As Wolff points out, YHWH's *R* resting on the shoot of Jesse (Isa. 11.2) should denote YHWH's authorization.² *R* is, then, God's power around man in his environment and over man in his actions. Perhaps the most important aspect of *R* in regards to anthropology is illustrated as God's creative power in man, which brings life.

Ezek. 37.6ff, while certainly speaking metaphorically, illustrates the nature of man as the ancient people of God would have understood it. God formed man from the dust of the earth, but the body of flesh and bone was not alive until God breathed into it the breath of life. While Genesis does not use *R* to describe this action, the idea of YHWH's breathing bringing life is present in use of "neshamah." Man lives because of the wind/breath/power of YHWH, who is life, fills his body. Likewise, when man dies, the body returns to the earth from which it was taken, and the *R* returns to the one who breathed it.³ The temptation is to here see *R* as a soul-like substance. To indulge in this thinking would be dishonest to both concepts. *R* is a power, YHWH's power, which animates and sustains man. This power has many purposes in man, but it is not a substance, nor does it really belong to man, though man is often described as having his own *R*.⁴

As *R* is seen as a vital life-giving power to the body, it was often associated with the function of the mind (1 Chron. 28.11,12), intellect (Isa. 29.24), or will (Exod. 35.20,21) of a person. These faculties do not belong exclusively to the *R* though. As earlier stated, the Hebrew mind saw man as a unified whole. *R* is merely a perspective on that whole. It is

2. Wolff, 35.

3. Ibid., 33.

4. Glenn E. Whitlock, "The Structure of Personality in Hebrew Psychology," *Interpretation* 14, no.1 (January 1, 1960): 5, *ATLAReligion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed October 27, 2011).

nuanced in many ways, all of which point to one truth: life is a gift from YHWH, and man can only live a full life because of YHWH. The *R* is God's power and instrument around, on, and in man.

While the idea of *R* revolves mainly around YHWH, the idea behind *N* revolves primarily around man. At its base, *N* is the throat. In Hebrew thought, the throat is the organ of breathing as well as the organ of eating.⁵ Both processes are necessary to sustain life. The image of this needy organ lies in the background of many, if not all of *N*'s various nuanced meanings. For example, it is not hard to see how the concept of physical need could become associated with physical desires beyond breath and food. Thus, *N* also encompasses sexual appetite. While such desire might lead to sinful craving, it has just as much potential to be a part of the joy of life that God intended, as Seebass points out.⁶

N transcends the physical, though. Wolff states it well in saying, "It is only a short step from the *N* as specific organ and act of desire to the extended meaning whereby the *N* is the seat and action of other spiritual experiences and emotions as well."⁷ *N*, like the physical desire it encompasses, also houses the positive and negative emotions as well as the spiritual practices of man. It becomes frightened (Ps. 6.3), feels sympathy (Job 30.25), and experiences despair (Ps. 42.5), vulnerability (Jer.4.31), anguish (Ps. 31.7) and suffering (Isa. 53.11). Man's desirous *N* can also exhibit greed. It has been suggested that the phrase, "to raise the *N*," may

5. Wolff, 13.

6. H. Seebass, "Nephesh" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 9, edited by G. Johannes Botterweck. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 506.

7. Wolff, 17.

have come from the picture of a greedy man craning his neck.⁸ In the rare instance where *N* is used of YHWH, it speaks of his disdain or hate (Isa. 1.14), but also of his love (Jer. 12.7). *N* also speaks of the love between man and woman (Song. 1.7) and rejoices in YHWH (Ps. 35.9). The *N* seems to encompass all basic needs necessary for life and the desires and emotions that compose and drive life.

It is only natural, then, that the meaning of *N*, as the vital organ needed for life and the seat of emotional flavors of life, would be extended to encompass the individual life itself. This can be seen in the way many authors place *N* parallel with life, “hayyim” (Prov. 8.35, Ps. 30.3). Wolff points his readers to Lev. 17.11, “For the life (*N*) of a creature is in the blood...it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life (*N*).” As the sacrificial system goes, it was the blood/life of the sacrifice that served as a substitute for the life of the person. The idea of *N* as life is also present in Lev. 24.17, “If anyone takes the life (*N*) of a human being, he must be put to death.”⁹

As closely as *N* is tied to the idea of the individual life, we must not confuse it with the typically understood soul. Wolff correctly reminds his readers that the *N* is not an “indestructible core of being, in contradiction to the physical life, and even capable of living when cut off from that life.”¹⁰ In regards to Sheol, one must resist the temptation to associate *N* with the idea of a disembodied, substantial soul that continues a post-mortem existence. *N*

8. Ibid., 17.

9. Wolff, 19.

10. Ibid., 20.

does not prevail over death in any way.¹¹ Rather than the traditional understanding of a substantial soul, Seebass suggests that *N* should be viewed as an “impassioned, abounding vital energy.”¹² This, “psychic power” and “abounding energy” has the ability to “exercise all gloominess.”¹³ This should be viewed as more than mere happiness, though. *N* is meant to express joy in life. Hence, “we read accordingly much more often of the *N* praising and even calling on itself to offer praise than of its experiencing joy...It is by nature so affirmative of life that any additional expression of joy has the nature of a supplement.”¹⁴

Oddly enough, this joyous, vital energy inherent in *N*, along with all of the other nuances, is best captured in the need inherent in *N*. Man needs and desires life. The physical need for life can be seen in the essential need of the throat, as well as the vulnerability of the neck, yet another nuance of *N*. Beyond this, though, man as *N* seeks to fulfill his need and desire for emotional validation and, above all, his need for YHWH. Man is in need of sustainability beyond his ability. Thus, Man’s *N* ultimately seeks life from YHWH, who himself is life.

So what significance do these concepts hold in today’s view of man? These concepts illustrate both what man is and what he is not. As previously stated, for centuries, man has been considered a compound of fleshly body and immaterial soul. Modern science is on the verge of, if it has not already, disproving this conception of humanity. The Hebrew

11. Ellis R. Brotzman, “Man and the Meaning of Nephesh,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, no.580 (October 1, 1988): 409, *ATLAREligion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed October 27, 2011).

12. Seebass, 509.

13. *Ibid.*, 510.

14. Seebass, 509-510.

understanding of man would seem to validate this shift. These ancient people did not see man as a compound of different substances. Rather, man was a unified whole. *R* and *N* held different nuances, but served as different perspectives on one being as opposed to different parts of a being. Glenn Whitlock has described this unity very well, "... *Nephesh* does not refer to a thing in itself. It is not a faculty of the mind, but the total person. It is a symbol for the identification of the whole life of a man, especially in its affective and non-bodily form... there is no indication of a sharp dichotomy between body (*basar*) and soul (*nephesh*)."¹⁵

So what is a Christian leader in today's world to do with this information? Well, if ambition is abounding, one could use this information as a safe way to introduce a more probable understanding of human anthropology to one's Christian community. Studying *R* and *N*, along with other OT anthropological terms is a very safe way of beginning this conversation. These are Bible words and ideas, after all. Perhaps after studying and coming to an understanding of these terms, neuroscience's dismissal of a substantive soul might be less shocking. This does, however, open the door to many of the hard questions whose answers some may not be ready to hear, or perhaps even we have not yet discovered. Again, this is a rather ambitious application.

These terms also hold many more approachable, yet challenging applications. *N* for instance, holds many challenges for the Christian life, but, for me, one in particular stands out. Americans are independent people. We tend to "pull ourselves up by the boot straps," which is to say we rely on our own power rather than that of others, including, many times, God. This mentality exists on different levels for people, but it is observable throughout our culture. *N*

15. Whitlock, 9.

stands in direct conflict with this. It emphasizes our weakness and vulnerability. It should be pointed out, though, such neediness does not carry a negative connotation. Rather, it is simply acknowledged as part of being human. We are in constant need, and the thing we ultimately need and desire most, life, lies completely outside of our grasp. *N* emphasizes reliance on the power of YHWH rather than the power of man. How many ways can this be applied to our daily lives? I see sermons, small group material, and worship songs practically jumping out of the ideas inherent in *N*.

These OT terms are rich concepts that run deep with vivid imagery and numerous ideas. *R* reminds us that man exists because of the power of YHWH, while *N* reminds us that man is a needy being who must seek YHWH to fulfill the powerful desire to not only live, but live a life of vitality. As it has been shown, these concepts challenge not only the traditional composite understanding of man as body and immaterial soul, but also various aspects of life as we choose to live it out. It truly is amazing the potential that these ancient words hold to influence the thoughts of millions of Christians today.

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