The semantic field of the Hebrew word ⱴֵֽפֶ in the OT¹

Hui Er Yu and Johannes Malherbe

Abstract
The Hebrew anthropological term יְִפֶ occurs 754 times in the Old Testament. It was rendered stereotypically as ψυχή in the LXX and later into English as ‘soul’. The later was viewed as a poor translation since it motivated Christians to develop a dichotomous conception of the human constitution. This has led to centuries-old controversy concerning the Hebraic conception of the person. Although the word יְִפֶ is as hard to define as it is to translate, this article aims to determine its semantic field through a brief literature review of יְִפֶ and its Greek equivalent ψυχή. The result indicates that the meanings of יְִפֶ in the OT are more related to the physical aspects of human beings and that its translation as ‘soul’ calls for re-examination.

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_yaml, ψυχή, soul, anthropology, dichotomy

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1. Introduction

The word וָנֶֶ֫פֶ, occurring 754 times in the MT\(^3\) of the OT, is ‘as hard to define as it is to translate’ (Jacob 1974, 9:617). For instance, KJV renders it variously as follows: ‘soul’ (475 times); ‘life’ (120 times); ‘person’ (26 times); a reflexive pronoun (20 times); ‘heart’ (16 times); ‘mind’ (15 times); ‘creature’ (ten times); the personal pronoun (nine times); ‘dead’ (five times); ‘body, dead body, pleasure’ (four times each); ‘desire, will’ (three times each) ‘man, thing, beast, appetite, ghost, lust’ (two times each); ‘breath’ (once), and so on. In 14 cases, KJV gives no English equivalents for וָנֶֶ֫פֶ (Murtonen 1958:9–10). In the example of its lexical meaning, DCH regards the sense of וָנֶֶ֫פֶ in Psalm 23:3 as belonging to the category of ‘soul, heart, mind’ (Clines 2001, 5:725), which contradicts its rendering as a ‘whole person’ in TDOT (Seebass 1998, 9:510). In fact, the DCH offers twelve\(^4\) different lexical meanings of וָנֶֶ֫פֶ, the TDOT only six meanings.\(^5\)

Such differences may result from the fact that lexicographers get their meanings from different existing sources, such as those found in grammar books and various translations (Silva 1994:137). This implies that lexical meaning is profoundly affected by the lexicographers’ choice of references (e.g. different versions of translations) and that correct translations are essential for compiling lexicons. Furthermore, the accuracy of translation is indispensable for correct interpretation of the Bible. For example, the translations of the Hebrew anthropological term וָנֶֶ֫פֶ, rendered stereotypically as ψυχή in the LXX and later into English as ‘soul’, have been motivating Christians, influenced by Greek philosophy, to develop a dichotomous conception of the human constitution. This has led to centuries-old controversy concerning the Hebraic conception of the person (Murphy 2006:17). Murphy (ibid.:36) points out that ‘most of the dualism that has appeared to be biblical teaching has been a result of poor translation’ (italics added). Considering the poor translation of וָנֶֶ֫פֶ as ‘soul’ already in the 16\(^{th}\) century, Parkhurst (1778:408) argues,

> וָנֶֶ֫פֶ 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.

Briggs (1897:30) also argues that ‘soul in English usage at the present time conveys usually a very different meaning from וָנֶֶ֫פֶ in Hebrew’. Brueggemann (1997:453) points out that it is ‘unfortunate that “living being” (וָנֶֶ֫פֶ) is commonly rendered “soul”’.

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3 The abbreviations in this study follow those in The SBL handbook of style 2014.

4 The meanings of וָנֶֶ֫פֶ in DCH include: (1) palate, throat, gullet, (2) neck, (3) appetite, hunger, desire, wish, (4) soul, heart, mind, (5) breath, last breath, soul, (6) life, lives, eternal life, (7) being, creature(s), (8) person, individual, dead body, slave, (9) personal pronoun, reflexive pronoun (oneself), possessive pronoun (10) sustenance, (11) perfume, and (12) sepulchre, funerary monument (Clines 2001, 5:724-734).

5 The meanings of וָנֶֶ֫פֶ in TDOT include: (1) throat, gullet, (2) desire, (3) vital self, reflexive pronoun, (4) individuated life, (5) living creature, person, and (6) the וָנֶֶ֫פֶ of God (Seebass 1998, 9:497-517).
Chinese Christian scholars are not exempted from this kind of controversy. For example, Watchman Nee (1903–72), the most influential figure in the Chinese Christian community of the 20th century (Zēng 2011:161), misconstrues the principle of literal translation and thus maintains that שׁנִֶפֶ is ‘魂 hún (soul)’ is the only appropriate rendering. This is one of the reasons that leads to his teaching on tripartite anthropology (Nee 2006[1928]:47–48), which is a dominant perspective very much alive in the church in China today (Xú 2013:39). A good majority of Chinese Christians are directly or indirectly influenced by Nee’s theology (Lĭ 2004:309). In his two crucial works, The Spiritual Man and The Release of the Spirit, Nee asserts that Christians should subjugate the soul and the body so that the spirit can be released. This gives rise to the negative attitude towards this world among Chinese Christians and leads to extensive controversy among contemporary Chinese theologians (Zēng 2011:160, 162).

The foregoing cases verify Eugene A Nida’s argument (1952:65–66): if the Hebrew שׁנִֶפֶ is consistently rendered as ‘soul’, it will ignore the literary or situational context. Diminishing the word’s wealth of referents (e.g. breath, life, mind, living thing, person, self) leads to inaccurate interpretation and misunderstanding.

Nowadays, the majority of biblical scholars agree that ‘at least the earlier Hebraic scriptures know nothing of body-soul dualism’ (Murphy 2006:17). This can be traced back to John Laidlaw’s proposition (1895:58) that ‘the antithesis soul and body...is absent from the Old Testament’. H Wheeler Robinson (1926:69) also maintains that ‘the Hebrew conception of personality on its psychological side is distinctly that of a unity, not of a dualistic union of soul (or spirit) and body’. Three decades after Robinson writing, C Ryder Smith (1951:3) observed that ‘some recent psychologists seem to teach that the Hebrew was right in emphasizing the unity of man’. Owen (1956:167) notes that שׁנִֶפֶ ‘has scarcely any of the connotations of the word “soul” in radical body–soul dualism’. In his interpretation of Genesis 2:7, Brueggemann (1997:453; see also Laurin 1961:132; Laidlaw 1895:53) notes that ‘the articulation of “breathed on dust” in order to become a “living being” יִנָּחַ ת הָלָל precludes any dualism’. Amos Ḥakham (2003:29; see also Di Vito 1999:228) suggests that שׁנִֶפֶ ‘always refers to the body and soul as a single unit’, rather than ‘soul’ only.

Given the significance of correct translation, this article conducts a brief literature review of שׁנִֶפֶ in order to determine its semantic
field. The following sections are dedicated to fulfilling the purpose through (1) the discussion on etymological issues, (2) a brief survey of the etymological study of נפ, (3) the exploration of נפ in the Hebrew OT, and (4) נפ and its Greek equivalent ψυχή in the LXX and the NT.

2. Etymological issues

Etymological study has played an important role in the determination of words’ meaning in the Hebrew OT, especially when the OT contains no less than 1,300 hapax legomena and ‘about 500 words that occur only twice out of a total vocabulary of about 8,000 words’ (Silva 1994:42; see also Eng 2011:27; Carson 1996:33). But in the past decades many have pointed out the dangers of uncritically deriving meaning from etymology (Barr 1961, Ch. 6; Silva 1994, Ch. 1; Carson 1996:28–33). As Vendryes (2013[1925]:176) argues in his Language: a linguistic introduction to history:

Etymology...gives a false idea of the nature of a vocabulary for it is concerned only in showing how a vocabulary has been formed. Words are not used according to their historical value. The mind forgets—assuming that it ever knew—the semantic evolutions through which the words have passed. Words always have a current value, that is to say, limited to the moment when they are employed, and a particular value relative to the momentary use made of them.

Put simply, etymology is not a reliable or an appropriate approach in determining the meaning of a word (Carson 1996:32). This echoes Ferdinand de Saussure’s arguments (1986:81):

The first thing which strikes one on studying linguistic facts is that the language user is unaware of their succession in time: he is dealing with a state. Hence the linguist who wishes to understand this state must rule out of consideration everything which brought that state about, and pay no attention to diachrony. Only by suppressing the past can he enter into the state of mind of the language user. The intervention of history can only distort his judgment.

Silva (1994:42) points out that ‘[t]he relative value of [the] use of etymology varies inversely with the quantity of material available for the language’. That means, while lacking comparative material, the determination of the meaning of the hapax legomena in the OT

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8 Though etymology is ‘a clumsy tool’ for discerning meaning, Carson (1996:33) suggests, it is critical in the diachronic study of words, in the study of cognate languages, and in the understanding on the meanings of hapax legomena, etc.

9 Of Saussure’s influences upon the field of biblical studies, one is that he pioneers ‘the distinction between “diachrony” (the history of a term) and “synchrony” (the current use of a term)’ (Osborne 2006:87; see also Eng 2011:13). For Saussure (1986:90), the synchronic viewpoint has the priority to define a word’s meaning. For full discussions on synchronic and diachronic linguistics, see Saussure 1986, part II and part III.

10 Osborne (2006:87) observes that ‘Saussure did not deny the validity of etymology together; rather, he restricted it to its proper sphere, the history of words’.
heavily relies on etymological study even if ‘specification of the meaning of a word on the sole basis of etymology can never be more than an educated guess’ (Carson 1996:33). Since שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ occurs 754 times in the MT, etymology has little value for discerning its meanings according to Silva noted above. In brief, the meanings of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ gleaned from etymological considerations are nothing but ‘an educated guess’, which call for re-examination.

Silva (1994:43) observes that OT scholars have spent ‘a remarkable amount of energy searching for cognates and proposing new meanings’. Thus, a brief survey of the etymological study on שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ is helpful for understanding its divergent translations in various Bible versions and dictionaries.

3. A brief survey of the etymological study on שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ

שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ has many cognates in the Semitic languages, among which Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Arabic cast most light on Hebrew usage (Fredericks 1997, 3:133).


In Ugaritic, the word npš is cognate to שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ. It means (1) throat, (2) appetite, (3) person, people (collectively), (4) soul, (5) funerary monument, stela, (6) offering (Gordon 1998:446; Brotzman 1987:206–207).

The Arabic equivalent for שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ is nas, whose meanings comprise (1) soul, mind, (2) inclination, (3) life, (4) person, self (Waltke 1999:588).13

This short investigation of cognates of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ in the Semitic languages provides one of the reasons why שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ is sometimes rendered so differently in various Bible versions or dictionaries. The composition of the Bible versions and dictionaries is probably influenced by the extent to which etymology is applied. This seems to account for the divergence in the meaning of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ between TDOT and DCH (see footnote 1, 2). For example, TDOT does not include the sense of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶשׁ as sustenance, perfume, funerary monument; but DCH does.
As mentioned above, while etymological considerations can be of interest, they often represent nothing more than ‘an educated guess’. Thus, a better way to find out what שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ means in the Hebrew OT is to examine its usage in the Hebrew OT (Tomas 1986:3). This semantic approach is the enterprise to which the present study now turns.

4. שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ in the Hebrew OT

4.1 Introduction

The Hebrew word שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ is a key term in the OT. שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ is probably ‘a primitive noun that does not derive from a verbal root’ (Seebass 1998, 9:498). It is feminine; Zimmerli (1979:289) regards the masculine plural נְפָּשִׁׁים in Ezekiel 13:20 as an obvious mistake. In the OT text, this word has various meanings, including ‘breath’, ‘living creature’, ‘person’, ‘life’, ‘appetite’, ‘corpse’. Though it can be utilised to refer to animals or God, over 700 of its appearances refer to man (Tomas 1986:1). As noted above, ‘soul’ is an unfortunate, poor translation of שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ. Then, what does שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ mean in the OT?

4.2 שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ as breath

The basic, concrete meaning of שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ in the OT is probably ‘breath’ (Waltke 1999:588; Fredericks 1997, 3:133). While interpreting שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ, ‘the Hebraic trait of thinking concretely must be kept foremost in mind’ (Warne 1995:62). Instead of abstract soul, Wolff (1974:10) notes that שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ is ‘designed to be seen together with the whole form of man, and especially with his breath’. For example, Genesis 35:18 describes Rachel’s physical death right after giving birth to a son with great difficulty as ‘the going out of the שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ, that is, the breath’ (Brotzman 1987:146). In 1 Kings 17:21–22, after Elijah’s prayer to raise the widow’s son, the child’s שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ that is, breath, returned upon his inward parts, and he lived (Robinson 1921:80). Brotzman (1987:148) connects these two verses and concludes that ‘death is described as the “going out of the breath” while the restoration of life is described as “the returning of the breath”’. The idea is unambiguously that of ‘the breath as animating the physical organs of the body’ (Robinson 1921:80). Conversely, its departure brings death (Warne 1995:63).

The connection between שׁנֶֶ֫פֶ and breath is also found in Genesis 2:7, where the Lord breathed (נָפַּח) into Adam’s nostrils the breath (נְשָּׁמָּה) of life; and he became a living person/being (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה)
The association of נְשָּׁמָּה with שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ with here demonstrates the human being’s distinctive status. Humanity is ‘unique and superior to the animal creation in that his existence is the result of a divine animation’ (Warne 1995:65). On the contrary, the withdrawal of נְשָּׁמָּה causes death. At death, the human being taken out of the earth goes back to earth again (Gen 3:19), but the divine breath that animates and preserves a person’s body during his/her earthly life ‘returns to the heavenly regions’ (Porter 1908:212, 251). Indeed, everything related to humanity is ‘earthly and material’, even if it is created by God himself. And the reality is that humanity’s existence as a living person is due to God’s ‘infusion of the breath of life’ (Wolff 1974:60).

The comparison of שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ and נְשָּׁמָּה warrants further investigation here. One might say that שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ is employed ‘to define the animation of the human as a living person’ as explored below; while נְשָּׁמָּה is employed ‘to define more precisely a human person’s dependency upon God for his or her life’ (Warne 1995:64; see also Stacey 1956:90). Jacob (1974, 9:618) observes that שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ always includes נְשָּׁמָּה but is not limited to it. Finally, a human being does not have שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ, he is שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ (Wolff 1974:10); whereas, a human being is not נְשָּׁמָּה, but has it (Smith 1951:6).

Put simply, ‘breath’ is the basic, concrete meaning of שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ in the OT.

4.3 שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ as living creature, person

Given the fact that the cessation of breathing means the end of life (Jacob 1974, 9:618), שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ, then, does not designate ‘an immaterial principle within the human person, which could have its own independent existence apart from the person’ (Warne 1995:62). Rather, שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ is ‘an integral part of the human organism, and [is] perceived as inseparable from the concretely existing human person’ (ibid.:62–63). Interpreted in these terms, שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ can be related to ‘living creature, person’ (Seebass 1998, 9:515) that lives by breathing (Parkhurst 1778:408).

The locus classicus of this use of שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ is probably Genesis 2:7, where the combination of the material (the dust of the ground) and the immaterial (the נְשָּׁמָּה ‘breath’ of life from God) makes the man become a living שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ. That means, ‘man is, in his essential nature, a שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ, a person, an individual’ (Brotzman 1987:27). This gender-inclusive usage is very suitable for legal texts and lists of persons (Seebass 1998, 9:515). Two examples of the former (legal texts) are Leviticus 17:10, where ‘Every man...who eats any blood...I will set my face against the שֶׁנֶּ֫פֶ [person] that eats blood’, and Leviticus...
23:30, where ‘Every שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ [person] who does any work on this same day, that שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ [person] I will destroy from among his people’ (Wolff 1974:21). Examples of the latter (lists of persons) include Exodus 12:4: ‘according to the number of karşֶנֶֶ֫פֶּ [persons]’ and Jeremiah 52:29: ‘in the 18th year of Nebuchadnezzar, 832 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ [people] from Jerusalem’ (Westermann 1997:755).

The preceding examples demonstrate that שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ can be used to designate a single person (Lev 17:10; 23:30), a plural (Exod 12:4),21 or ‘a collective expression for a whole group of individuals’ (Jer 52:29; Wolff 1974:21). One more instance of the collective use of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ is found in Genesis 12:5, where the people Abram took with him to Canaan are called [שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ]. Wolff observes (ibid.): ‘This collective use of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ is shown very clearly where numbers are mentioned: the offspring of Leah number 33 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ (Gen 46:15), of Zilpah 16 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ (v.18), of Rachel 14 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ (v. 22) and of Bilhah 7 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ (v.25); all the offspring of Jacob who came to Egypt were 66 (v. 26) or 70 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ (v. 27).’

In a word, שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ, along with its meaning ‘breath’, means ‘living creature, person’ and can be used as singular, plural, or collective.

### 4.4 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ as vital self

After interpreting שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ as ‘living creature, person’, it is obviously easy for the emphasis to shift to more abstract concepts such as ‘vital self’ (Seebass 1998, 9:510; Von Rad 2001, 1:153) in this section and ‘life’ in the following section. Seebass (1998, 9:512; Westermann 1997:752) points out that a crucial distinction between שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ as vital self and שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ as life resides in the fact that שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ is usually the subject in the former, while it usually is the object in the latter.

Seebass (ibid.:510) maintains that many texts show that ‘humans have a relationship with themselves as individuals; this is unmistakably the case when שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ denotes the vital self’. Seebass’s argument refers to the pronominal use of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ, which is found in both prose and poetry. The regular pronominal use of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ in prose is found in Genesis 12:13, where Abram says to Sarai: ‘Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you and my שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ [i.e. I] may live on account of you’ (Brotzman 1988:403). In poetry, שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ with a personal suffix (e.g. ‘my שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ’ or ‘your שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ’) is usually employed to parallel a simple pronoun (ibid.), or that involved in the inflection of the verb, and so on. (Johnson 1964:16). For example, Job 30:25 reads:

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Have I not wept for him who was having a hard time?

Did not my נפש [I myself] grieve for the poor? (ibid.)

Johnson (1964:18; cf. Brotzman 1988:403) calls this a ‘pathetic periphrasis’ (italics added), asserting that ‘the use of this term as a substitute for the personal pronoun often betrays a certain intensity of feelings’ (ibid.). Johnson (ibid.) further notes in regard to Isaac’s blessing of his son in Genesis 27:4, 19, 25, 31: ‘Thus, when נפש is used of the subject of the action in bestowing a blessing, it appears to spring from and certainly serves to accentuate the view that the speaker needs to put all his being into what he says, if he is to make his words effective.’

Samson’s sacrificing himself to destroy his enemies is another example (ibid.).

The rendering of the English Version (i.e. ‘Let me נפש die with the Philistines’ [Judg 16:30]) is far from doing justice to the emotional content of the original, and one is forced to admit that the Hebrew really defies anything like a satisfactory translation.

Following Johnson’s accent on the intensity of feelings, Goldingay (2007:257) interprets נפש along with a personal suffix ‘as a whole being, and specifically a being with longings’. Thus, Psalm 63:1 may be rendered as ‘God, you are my God, I search for you; my whole being נפש thirsts for you’; verse 5 as ‘As with a rich feast my whole person נפש is full...’; verse 8 as ‘My whole person נפש has stuck to you; your right hand has upheld me’ (ibid.:254; emphases added). Again, the intensity of feelings and emotions can be grasped in the texts where the נפש is the precise subject of the psalms of lamentation; it is frightened (6:3), it despairs and is disquieted (42:5f., 11; 43:5), it feels itself weak and despondent (Jonah 2:7), it is exhausted and feels defenseless (Jer 4:31), it is afflicted (Ps 31:7; cf. Gen 42:21) and suffers misery (Isa 53:11). The נפש is often described as being bitter (מר), that is to say embittered through childlessness (1 Sam 1:10), troubled because of illness (2 Kgs 4:27), enraged because it has been injured (Judg 18:25; 2 Sam 17:8) (Wolff 1974:17).

Moreover, נפש rejoices (Isa 61:10) and loves (Song 1:7) (Briggs 1897:27). For Seebass (1998, 9:511), נפש as vital self ‘makes expressions denoting repulsion appear even more vivid’. For instance, it abhors (Lev 26:11), detests (Num 21:5), and loathes (Job 10:1).

As to the reflexive pronominal use22 of נפש, an interesting example is seen in Leviticus 11:43–44, which ‘deals with ritual uncleanness,
and this uncleanness is expressed in terms of reflexive action’ (Brotzman 1988:403). In Hebrew, reflexive action is expressed either with Hithpael stems (וְלֹֹׁ֤א תִִֽׁטַמְאוּּ֙ בָּהֶֶ֔ם ‘Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them’ (v. 43) and הִׁתְקַדִׁשְׁתֶּֽם ‘consecrate yourselves’ (v. 44)) or with Piel stems plus ‘your [plural]’ (וְלֹֹׁ֤א תְטַמְאוּּ אֶת־נַפְשֹֹׁׁׁ֣תֵיכֶֶ֔ם ‘Do not make yourselves unclean’ (v. 43) and הִׁתְקַדִׁשְׁתֶּֽם אֶת־נַפְשֹֹׁׁׁ֣תֵיכֶֶ֔ם ‘consecrate yourselves’ (v. 44)) (cf. Runge, Westbury, and Lyle 2014, Lev 11:43–44; Brotzman 1988:403).

Briefly, the pronominal use of נֶֶ֫פֶ both in prose and poetry manifests נֶֶ֫פֶ as vital self. Indeed, a person does not have a vital self but is a vital self (cf. Köhler 1957:142).

This study will now turn to a discussion of נֶֶ֫פֶ denoting God’s vital self.

As has been seen, over 700 out of 745 appearances of נֶֶ֫פֶ in the OT are related to humanity, that ‘aspires to life and is therefore living (which also makes [humans] comparable with the animal)’ (Wolff 1974:25). It is rarely used to refer to God. This is because God does not have the bodily, physical appetites and cravings common to humans, nor is his life restricted by death (Waltke 1999:591; see also Marter 1964:104). Thus, one can find that substantial strata of the OT avoid referring to the נֶֶ֫פֶ of God, such as ‘the older strata of the Pentateuch, up to and including Deuteronomy’ (Wolff 1974:25). Merely 21 occurrences can be seen in later language, mainly prophetic and poetic (ibid.:25, 232, n. II.6).

In some passages, נֶֶ֫פֶ is used of God in conveying ‘forcefully his passionate disinclination or inclination toward someone’ (Waltke 1999:591). More frequently, God’s נֶֶ֫פֶ is employed as the subject of the act to depict God’s aversion to his disobedient people with intensity and passion (Westermann 1997:756; cf. Harvey 1973:171). For example, Jeremiah 6:8 reads, ‘be warned, O Jerusalem, lest my [נֶֶ֫פֶ] be estranged from you’; Jeremiah 5:9, 29; 9:8 report, ‘should my [נֶֶ֫פֶ] not take vengeance on such a people?’ (Westermann 1997:756). But as for a positive reading, Westermann (ibid.:757) notes that ‘the positive counterpart occurs only rarely with נֶֶ֫פֶ as the subject’. For example, Isaiah 42:1 reads ‘in whom my [נֶֶ֫פֶ] is well pleased’. Jeremiah 12:7 has ‘I will give the one I [נֶֶ֫פֶ] love into the hands of her enemies’ (Wolff 1974:25). In other cases, נֶֶ֫פֶ is used as God’s unfettered desire in Job 23:13, or appears merely as a reflexive pronoun, such as Amos 6:8; Jeremiah 51:14, where God swears by himself (ibid.; Seebass 1998, 9:516).

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23 Marter (1964:104) writes, the reason why physical appetites were never attributed to God is because ‘the pagan neighbors of Israel consistently attributed the grossest bodily appetites to their gods’.
In conclusion, Marter (1964:101) notes that ‘[d]oubtless these passages may be considered as examples of anthropomorphism, but if so they emphatically illustrate that in the Hebrew mind the identification of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ with the human individual was so complete that the Hebrews could even attribute [שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ] to God as an individual’.

4.5 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ as life

In more than 200 instances the word שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ means ‘life’ (Brotzman 1987:45). Seebass (1998, 9:512) points out that ‘the word denotes not life in general but life instantiated in individuals, animal or human’. These uses can be relegated into two categories: שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ as individual life (ibid.) and שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ related to blood (Brotzman 1987:45).

4.5.1 שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ as individual life

Due to the many appearances of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ in this sub-category, grouping its main uses according to certain common features is helpful in understanding its meaning as ‘life’. In such usage, שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ is usually the object in sentences as noted earlier. First of all, שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ is related to ‘threats to life’ (Seebass 1998, 9:513; Westermann 1997:753; Brotzman 1987:45). The first instance is the use of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ ‘life’ as the direct object of שַׁבָּק ‘seek’, i.e. ‘to seek the life of someone’ (ibid.). One of the 18 texts (Logos bible software, word study שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ) that represent this usage is Exodus 4:19, where ‘the LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead” (NASB1995). Another example is the use of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ as the object of נָכַר ‘take’. Ezekiel 33:6 reads that the sword comes and takes life from them, i.e. the sword kills them (Brotzman 1987:48); both Elijah (1 Kgs 19:4) and Jonah (Jonah 4:3) request the Lord to take their life from them (ibid.).

Secondly, שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ as life occurs in the talion formula of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ for שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ (Waltke 1999:590; Seebass 1998, 9:513; Westermann 1997:753; Brotzman 1987:48–49). The earliest version of this use is probably Exodus 21:23 (Stuart 2006, 2:492; Seebass 1998, 9:513), ‘But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life [שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ for שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ]. Though ransom is permitted in cases of accidental killing of the שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ, it is unambiguously prohibited in cases of murder (Num 35:31; Seebass 1998, 9:513). In Deuteronomy 19:21, the principle of ‘שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ for שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ’ applies in cases of false witness as well. Moreover, 1 Kings 19:2 ‘has Jezebel say that she will make Elijah’s life like that of one of the prophets of Baal: life for life’ (ibid.). The collocation שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ for שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ is even employed in the OT once to refer to the life of animals:
'Anyone who takes the life of someone's animal must make restitution—life for life' (Lev 24:18; Brotzman 1987:50).

Thirdly, שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ is related to risks ‘in battle or in other, more general, circumstances’ (ibid.:61). An instance of this usage is found in 2 Samuel 23:17 (see also 1 Chr 11:19), where David was unwilling to drink water brought by his followers at the risk of their lives (Seebass 1998, 9:512). Similarly, Judges 9:17 reports that Gideon cast his שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ in the battle, i.e. he ‘exposed his life to the danger of fighting for the sake of Israel’ (Brotzman 1987:61–62). Even more drastic is the very archaic, poetic composition in Judges 5:18, where Zebulun and Naphtali had fought valiantly and well; the former is especially depicted as a people who risked their lives (שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ) to the point of death (ibid.:61; Seebass 1998, 9:512).

Fourthly, many passages with שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ have to do with ‘the deliverance of life’ (Westermann 1997:752; see also Waltke 1999:590; Seebass 1998, 9:512). Almost all the verbs within this semantic domain have שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ as object. For example, with יֵנַל, ‘and deliver our lives from death’ (Josh 2:13; Isa 44:20); with יְנַל, ‘if you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be put to death’ (1 Sam 19:11); with יָנוּל, ‘rescue my life’ (Ps 6:5); with יָנִי, ‘he will save the lives of the needy’ (Ps 72:13; Waltke 1999:590). Finally, In Psalm 49:15, the poet is confident that God will יֵנַל ‘redeem’ his life out of the grave (ibid.).

In sum, שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ as ‘life’ refers not to life in general, but to life in individuals, with seemingly more emphasis on physical life.

4.5.2 שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ related to blood

Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:11, 14 and Deuteronomy 12:23 are ritual texts which ‘most clearly illustrate the connection between שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ and blood’ (Jacob 1974, 9:619). In these texts שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ ‘has nothing whatever to do with a breath-soul or a blood-soul; it simply denotes the vital force’ (ibid.). Just as Seligson (1951:28) notes, it is a common conception that humanity ‘at an early stage of culture identified blood with the vital force’, as represented in the OT. In the same vein, Johnson (1964:22) views vitality as the defining characteristic of שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ.

Pedersen (1926, 1:171–176) goes further to suggest that in the OT each body part, including blood, represents a ‘principal denomination’ of the vital life, or שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ, which manifests itself in and through various body organs. For Laurin (1961:132), this is ‘simply the principle of synecdoche’, given that שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ is the individual in his/her totality. Thus, the OT does not understand שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ as being

24 The שׁנֶֶ֫פֶּ as not a breath-soul or a blood-soul means that it is not perceived as a ‘separate, distinct “part” of the person’ (Warne 1995:69).

equated with the blood, but perceives the vital life-force as being manifested through various physical parts, such as blood in this case (Warne 1995:69–70).

Finally, Jacob’s observation (1974, 9:619) on the relation between נפ, blood and breath is worth noting: ‘The relation between נפ and blood is probably along other lines which are independent of the relation between נפ and breath. Basic to both, however, is the idea of the body as a living organism. When breath and blood leave the body, then every form of life disappears.’

4.6 נפ as desire, appetite

The meaning of נפ can readily be figuratively extended from the life principle to refer to one’s desire or appetite. The physical desire ranges ‘from the sexual drive of a wild donkey in heat (Jer 2:24), to the physical appetite (Prov 23:2; Eccl 6:7)’ (Fredericks 1997, 3:133). Thus Jeremiah 2:24 reports, ‘a wild donkey accustomed to the desert, sniffing the wind in her craving [נפ נמא] in her heat who can restrain her’?

In other cases, נפ signifies the desire for food: ‘you may eat grapes according to your appetite [נפ], until you are satisfied’ (Deut 23:24; cf. Psalm 78:18; Waltke 1999:588). Isaiah 56:11 reads, ‘They are dogs with mighty appetites [נפ]; they never have enough’ (Brown et al. 2000:660). Proverbs 12:10 states that a righteous man is one who knows the נפ of his beast, i.e. he is ‘a person who provides for his animal’s need for food and drink’ (Brotzman 1988:401).

4.7 נפ as corpse, body

As has been discussed earlier, נפ refers to vitality. Thus, נפ as a deceased or a corpse, for Westermann (1997:756), is difficult to explain. He argues: ‘The usage probably derives from the general meaning ‘person’; one could regard this designation as a euphemism designed to avoid direct reference to the corpse (ibid.).’

However, for Wolff (1974:22), the shift of meaning of נפ from vitality to corpse is understandable. He argues: ‘The semantic element ‘vitality’, which also applies to the animal, has largely contributed to the fact that נפ can be a term for the person and the enumerable individuals, from which, in extreme cases, the meaning ‘corpse’ follows (ibid.:25).’

Commenting on Ezekiel 13:19, Wolff (ibid.:22) further notes that ‘Ez. 13:19 distinguishes נפש who ought not to die from those who

26 Johnson (1964:13) asserts that the frequent association of נפ with נמא expresses ‘a wide range of activity from the simple desire for food...to the worshipper’s longing for fellowship with God’.

27 For Westermann (1997:756; cf. Seligson 1951:78ff.), semantic polarization (a feature of the Semitic languages) proposed by Johnson (1964:22) is not a satisfactory explanation for the usage of נפ as corpse.
ought not to live...This statement suggests a detachment of the concept שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ from the concept of life; stress lies on the individual being as such. This makes the extreme possibility of speaking of a נֶפֶשׁ מֵת (Num 6:6) comprehensible.

The use of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ to denote a corpse only appears in 12 texts\(^{28}\) in the OT, and is confined to the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Haggai (Brotzman 1987:131). These texts are related to ‘a series of legal ordinances concerned with pollution through contact with a corpse’ (Westermann 1997:756). For example, according to Numbers 6:6, the Nazirite must not go near ‘a person who has died—a dead individual, a corpse’ (Wolff 1974:22). Here the author of Numbers ‘is not thinking of a ‘dead soul’, or of a ‘slain life’, but simply of...a corpse’ (ibid.), a dead body (נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם) (NIV2011; ESV). In the combination of נֶפֶשׁ, נֶֶ֫פֶ is understood as ‘body’. Wolff (ibid.) goes further to accentuate that even without the addition of מֵת, נֶפֶשׁ can still mean the corpse of a human individual in certain cases, such as Numbers 5:2; 6:11.

4.8 Conclusion

The investigation in this section has shown that שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ can have the following possible meanings: (1) breath, (2) living creature, person, (3) vital self (pronominal use, the whole being/person), (4) life, (5) desire, appetite, (6) corpse, body.

It has also shown that the meanings of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ in the OT are more related to the physical aspects of human beings (Waltke 1999:591).\(^{29}\)

5. שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ and its Greek equivalent ψυχή in the LXX and the NT

5.1 Introduction

Among the anthropological terms, ψυχή has been the centre of controversies since the beginning of the early church (Jewett 1971:334). To make things worse, OT scholars with great unanimity view the rendering of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ with ψυχή as ‘insufficient or even misleading’ because of its introducing the ‘Greek doctrine of the soul’ or Greek spiritualism or dualism (Westermann 1997:759). However, Bratsiotis (ibid.) maintains that there is ‘an astonishing correspondence’ between the Hebrew word שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ and the Greek word ψυχή if one can commence with the pre-Platonic usage of ψυχή.\(^{30}\) If this is the case, the semantic range and usage of שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ in the OT could be further illuminated by its Greek equivalent ψυχή. In what

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\(^{28}\) The occurrences are as follows: שֶׁנֶֶ֫פֶ or נֶפֶשׁ אָּדָּם: Lev 19:28; 21:1; 22:4; Num 5:2; 6:11; 9:6,7,10; 19:13; Hag 2:13; נֶפֶשׁ מֵת: Lev 21:11; Num 6:6 (Brotzman 1987, Ch. 8).

\(^{29}\) This is not to say that ‘the OT presents man as physical only’ (Waltke 1999:591). There are other OT ideas conveying the psychological dimension of humans, such as ‘the “spirit” of man’, ‘the heart [לֵבָּב] of man’, humans in the image of God, and a human’s relation to God (ibid.).

\(^{30}\) Bratsiotis (cited in Westermann 1997:759) suggests, ‘breath’ is the basic meaning of ψυχή, which also means: life, person, the seat of desire and emotions, the centre of religious expression, etc.
follows the researcher examines the use of ψυχή in the LXX and the NT respectively.

5.2 The use of ψυχή in the LXX

According to Lys (1966:186–187), out of 754 occurrences with נֶפֶ in the OT, 680 are rendered as ψυχή in the LXX. Though the stereotyped rendering of נֶפֶ in the LXX fails to provide a significant clue for the understanding of this term, Lys finds that the more frequent use of the plural in the LXX denotes the tendency to individualise, that can be observed elsewhere in the LXX. He writes:

It is clear from this that the LXX has a tendency to consider the ‘soul [נֶפֶ]’ in a more individualistic way than does the Hebrew text; the latter was still under the influence of the collective soul; the LXX is more respectful of the reality of each being as an individual person to be distinguished from another (ibid.:188).

For Lys (ibid.:194–202), more crucial clues for understanding the various senses of נֶפֶ can be found through the investigation of its translations with something other than ψυχή. He observes the LXX does not utilise any other word with such regularity. The divergent Greek renderings of נֶפֶ, when explained in terms of the context, remain within the range of senses that נֶפֶ has in the OT, with ‘person’ and a pronoun (‘self’) outnumbering all the other renderings.

It is also important to note that the LXX uses ψυχή 62 times for words other than נֶפֶ, such as for בֶֶ֫טֶן ‘belly’ (ibid.:207–216). For Lys (ibid.:216), this interesting phenomenon shows that ‘the LXX... did not understand ψυχή in a Platonic way at all’.

Commenting on the preceding investigations, Lys (ibid.:227) writes: ‘[I]t is obvious that where the LXX avoids translating נֶפֶ by ψυχή, it is not in order to reserve ψυχή for a dualistic meaning, since elsewhere ψυχή follows the various Hebrew meanings of נֶפֶ (even when נֶפֶ is absent). The LXX never goes in the direction in which ‘soul’ would be understood as opposite to ‘body’ (as in Platonic dualism).’

In sum, the LXX employs ψυχή in much the same way as the Hebrew uses נֶפֶ. The Greek rendering of the Hebrew term appears to ‘carefully avoid dualism and is an excellent, faithful understanding and interpretation of נֶפֶ’ (ibid.:228).
5.3 The use of ψυχή in the NT

In investigating ψυχή in the NT, the first fact to notice is the surprising infrequency of this term, especially when compared to other anthropological terms in the NT. For example, in the MT, נֶֶ֫פֶּ (754 times) is roughly twice as common as נֶֶ֫פֶּ, but in Paul the corresponding word ψυχή appears merely 13 times, while πνεῦμα appears 146 times (Stacey 1955:274). Despite his rare use of ψυχή, Paul’s anthropology has been misunderstood as dichotomy (body and soul) or trichotomy (body, soul and spirit), which has prevailed in Christian traditional interpretation. However, new criteria for evaluating Paul proposed by Lüdermann in the late 19th century became determinative for doing justice to Pauline anthropology (Warne 1995:157). For example, Lüdermann (in Jewett 1971:336) interprets ψυχή as that which ‘enlivens the outer person’, and which is ‘intimately connected’ with the physical dimension of human. He further states: ‘The word ψυχή always appears...in a connexion which shows the human being in a situation of inferiority, and is not to be brought into agreement with the all-embracing and loftier idea of ψυχή found elsewhere in the classical and Hellenistic usage’ (Lüdermann in Stacey 1956:125; 1955:276).31

Since Lüdermann, the concept of ψυχή has been understood as similar to the Hebrew term נֶֶ֫פֶּ, and ‘an interpretation of Pauline anthropology in Hebraic terms has become much more common’ (Warne 1995:157–158).

Then, how is the term ψυχή employed by Paul and other NT authors? To this question the present study now turns. Of the 103 occurrences of ψυχή in the NT, none is found in Galatians, Philemon, 2 Thessalonians, the Pastorals, or 2 John. ψυχή is seen relatively frequently in the Synoptics and Acts (53 times). The statistics prove ‘no particular preference by any one NT author’ (Sand 1990, 3:501).

A quick review of the usage of ψυχή in the NT is conducted according to the following groupings: (1) Paul and the deutero-Pauline writings,32 (2) the Synoptics and Acts, (3) the Johannine corpus, and (4) other writings (ibid.:500).

5.3.1 ψυχή in Paul and the deutero-Pauline writings

ψυχή in Paul and the deutero-Pauline writings is used rarely (13 times) in comparison with the OT as noted above. In the few texts where it occurs, Paul follows ‘the Hebraic conception of man33 as an intrinsic unity, with a diversity of aspects’ (Stacey 1955:276).

31 In the same vein, Hicks (2003:107) asserts that ‘what is definitely lacking in the New Testament is any concept of the soul as something to be set over against the body, something superior to it and longing to be free of it, and something that can exist independently of it. Though these concepts would have been well known in New Testament times and were appearing in contemporary Jewish writings including Philo, the New Testament writers clearly rejected them’.

32 The reason for reviewing this grouping first is that Paul’s anthropology has been misunderstood as dichotomy (body and soul) or trichotomy (body, soul and spirit).

33 Jewett (1971:449; see also Zerbe 2008:173) points out that there are two instances within the Pauline corpus ‘where the basic Judaic uniformity in the use of ψυχή is temporarily broken’, for example, Paul’s reformulating the ψυχικός-πνευματικός distinction in 1 Cor 15:44, 46 in order to repair the damage caused by Gnosticism (Reis 2009:590-591). Heckel (2006:125) argues that Paul is not teaching a body-soul dualism, but a
He also perceives ψυχή as ‘the vitality or life-force that makes a living being, or a being living’ (Zerbe 2008:172; see also Bultmann 2007:204; Harvey 1973:169). Thus, ψυχή in Paul means ‘whole natural life of the person’,34 ‘the individual person as subject’,35 the seat of feelings, thought and will36 (Warne 1995:158–202; see also Stacy 1956: 122–123).

1 Thessalonians 5:23 has been used to support the trichotomous view of the human person and needs further investigation. In Christian tradition, Paul’s trio πνεῦμα—ψυχή—σῶμα has been understood as the formulation of anthropological trichotomy (Sand 1990, 3:502). Nonetheless, the threefold connection of spirit, soul and body is ‘confined to this text alone in Paul and, therefore, cannot provide an adequate basis for a conclusive statement concerning Pauline anthropology’ (Warne 1995:199). Furthermore, it is the terms ὅλοτελής and ὅλόκληρος that point to the real meaning, instead of the trio πνεῦμα—ψυχή—σῶμα (Stacey 1956:123; see also Green 2009, 5:359). Stacey (ibid.) argues that Paul is accentuating the whole person to be preserved to the Parousia. Bultmann (2007:205) also suggests that this text ‘evidently means only that the readers may be kept sound, each in his entirety’. Similarly, Jewett (1971:347) states that Paul’s insistence in the benediction is to manifest that ‘God works to sanctify the whole [person]’.37 Sand (1990, 3:502) further notes that ‘if one considers the apostle’s other anthropological statements, one sees that the three words are used in 1 Thess 5:23 against adversaries who incorrectly see and evaluate human beings dualistically.’

Finally, Robinson (1926:108) contends: the triad of πνεῦμα, ψυχή and σῶμα is far from a systematic dissection of the different constituents of humanity; ‘its true analogy is such an Old Testament sentence as Deuteronomy 6:5, where a somewhat similar enumeration emphasises the totality of the personality’.

Accordingly, ψυχή in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 is better understood as the seat of feelings, thought and will, as suggested by Warne (1995:199).

5.3.2 ψυχή in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts

In the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, ψυχή (53 occurrences) means earthly, natural physical life,38 true life (in distinction from purely physical life),39 the whole being,40 the seat of emotions and feelings,41 and human vitality in the widest sense (cf. Sand 1990,
Matthew 10:28 juxtaposes God, who can destroy both σῶμα and ψυχή, and humans, who can destroy the σῶμα, but not the ψυχή. Jeeves (2006:104) notes that for some, the face value of this pericope could certainly be seen as a proof text to assert the survival of the separate soul at death. As such, the doctrine of the immortal soul seems to be alluded to here. However, ‘the reference to God’s power to destroy the ψυχή and σῶμα in Hades is opposed to the idea of the immortality of the soul’ (Schweizer 1974, 9:646; see also Nolland 2005:436). For Schweizer (ibid.), a human being ‘can be thought of only as a whole, both ψυχή and σῶμα’. Associating this text with Mark 8:35, where true life preserved by God is distinguished from purely physical life, Schweizer (ibid.:643, 646) further elucidates that the ψυχή, that is, ‘the true life of man as it is lived before God and in fellowship with God’, is not influenced by the cessation of physical life. He concludes: ‘God alone controls the whole man, ψυχή as well as σῶμα...man can be presented only as corporeal, but what affects the body does not necessarily affect the man himself, for whom a new body has already been prepared by God (ibid.:646).’

The body-soul dualism is rejected by Lucan writings as well. Luke 16:22 and 23:43 denote that after death the human being as a whole will either abide in Hades or in Paradise. The resurrection appearances of the risen Lord are also delineated with great bodily realism in Luke. In Acts 2:31, Luke avoids referring to the ψυχή not being left in Hades as read in Psalm 16:10, but notes that the σὰρξ of Jesus does not see corruption. All these demonstrate that Luke is unambiguously teaching a corporeal resurrection (the continued life of the whole person), rather than the Hellenistic immortality of the soul (ibid.:646–647; see also Sand 1990, 3:502).

5.3.3 ψυχή in the Johannine corpus

ψυχή occurs 20 times in the Johannine corpus. In most appearances (13 times), it means physical life of Jesus, of any other person, or even of creatures in the sea. In other cases, it simply means human being (Rev 18:13), the seat of emotion/thought/will (John 12:27), or appetite/desire (Rev 18:14).

The remaining four occurrences of ψυχή in this grouping are problematic and are therefore briefly explored here. In John 10:24a, the Jews asked Jesus, ἕως πότε τὴν ψυχήν ἡμῶν αἴρεις, which is rendered as ‘How long will you keep us in suspense?’ in popular 42


Rev 8:9; 16:3. 44
English versions (NIV, NASB, ESV, NRSV, etc.). Michaels (2010:596) notes that though this rendering 'makes excellent sense in the context, no such meaning is attested in biblical, classical, or Hellenistic Greek'. He (ibid.; see also Morris 1995:461, n. 71) examines the context and finds a similar construction in verse 18a (οὐδεὶς αἴρει αὐτὴν ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ), where αὐτός is the pronoun for τὴν ψυχήν μου, meaning that ‘no one takes it [Jesus’ life] from me [Jesus’]. Therefore, the appropriate translation of John 10:24a, for Michaels, seems to be ‘How long will you take away our life?’ or ‘kill us’. He explains:

It appears that the language of ‘killing’ or ‘taking away life’ is used here metaphorically, as in our colloquial English expression, ‘the suspense is killing me’...In the wake of the ‘split’ dividing them (v. 19), they [the Jews] are uncertain what to expect, for they are no longer in control. The notion of ‘killing’ or a prolonged death, therefore, is by no means inappropriate as a metaphor for their frustration (ibid.).

Michaels’s argument seems to be reasonable. ψυχή in John 10:24a means ‘life’, which is consistent with Johannine usage of ψυχή (13 out of 20 occurrences as ‘physical life’).

The second problem text is found in 3 John 2, which seems to indicate a distinction between the physical and the spiritual life. Nevertheless, Schweizer (1974, 9:652) suggests that ψυχή is not an antithesis to the bodily dimension here. As noted earlier, ψυχή means the true life before God and in fellowship with God; thus, it might be sound even when one is sick in body. ‘The hope is that the two [true life and body] will be in harmony, not that they will be separated from one another’ (ibid.:651–652).

The last two difficult passages are Revelation 6:9 and Revelation 20:4. In both cases, ψυχή is translated ‘soul’ in the majority of English popular versions (NIV, NASB, ESV, NRSV, etc.). Defying the foregoing rendering, Schweizer (ibid.:654) contends that here ψυχή is the person who ‘survives death prior to his resurrection’, who is conscious and corporeal. However, ‘this intermediate state is not a true life; this will come only with the new corporeality at the resurrection’ (ibid.).

In Revelation 20:4, ψυχή is the person in ‘the final state after the first resurrection’ (ibid.). Obviously, here ψυχή is not referring to ‘a purely provisional and definitely non-corporeal state’ (ibid.). This is substantiated by ‘the relation of the word to the relative masculine pronoun, which shows how much it embraces the whole person’ (ibid.). Thus, ψυχή is now a word for a person living in
eschatological salvation. Again, ψυχή does not convey ‘any clear distinction between a non-corporeal and a corporeal state’ (ibid.).

If Schweizer is right, ψυχή in Revelation 6:9 and Revelation 20:4 refers to the ‘person’ in the intermediate state and in the final state after the first resurrection respectively.

Thus, the meanings of ψυχή (20 times) in the Johannine corpus consist of physical life (14 times), true life (once), human being/person (three times), the seat of emotion/thought/will (once), or appetite/desire (once).

5.3.4 ψυχή in other writings of the NT

This section examines statements using ψυχή in other writings of the NT. ψυχή in Hebrews is largely traditional and refers to the person himself (Sand 3:503), or to the true and authentic life before God (Schweizer 1974, 9:650–651). The problem pericope is Hebrews 4:12, where the word of God can pierce ‘as far as the division of soul [ψυχή] and spirit [πνεῦμα], of both joints and marrow’ (NASB1995). One may interpret this text as a support for anthropological trichotomy. However, Ellingworth (1993:263) asserts: ‘It is probably misconceived to seek precise definition in such a poetic passage. The general meaning is clearly that the active power of God’s Word reaches into the inmost recesses of human existence’.

Besides, as noted already, the majority of occurrences of ψυχή in Hebrews denote ‘person’ or ‘life’. Thus, the rendering of it as ‘soul’ seems to be inappropriate in this text. This is why Cockerill (2012:216) translates it as ‘life’. In sum, there is no definite trichotomy in view here (Schweiser 1974, 9:651).

The remaining appearances of ψυχή in James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude all refer to the whole person, or self.

5.4 Conclusion

After examining the usage of ψυχή in the LXX and the NT, one finds that both utilise ψυχή along with the Hebrew conception of שׁנֶפֶ. The translators of the former interpret שׁנֶפֶ into Greek terms faithfully, and seem to avoid dualism carefully. Surprisingly, compared to the occurrences of the word שׁנֶפֶ in the OT (754 times), NT authors employ ψυχή much less—only 103 times. When ψυχή is used in the NT, its meanings still fall within the semantic range of שׁנֶפֶ of the OT, such as life, which comprises physical life and true life before God and in fellowship with God, individual person, the whole being or self, the seat of emotions, thought and will, appetite/desire, and human vitality in the widest sense.

47 Jas 1:21; 5:20 denote the salvation of the whole person (Davids 1982:95).
48 The usage of ψυχή as the whole person or the self ‘is characteristic of Peter and Luke’ (six times in 1 Pet: 1:9,22; 2:11, 25; 3:20; 4:19, and 15 times in Acts , e.g. Acts 2:41, 43) (Davids 1990:60). The two occurrences of ψυχή in 2 Pet 2:8, 14 also mean the person (Schweiser 1974, 9:653).
49 The only appearance of ψυχή in Jude is in v. 15, which refers to every person (NRSV).
6. Conclusion

In the past, etymology has been widely used to propose meanings of נפש in the OT, such as neck, throat, sustenance, and perfume. However, because of its high occurrences in the OT, etymological studies are not an appropriate approach to define its senses. Thus, examining its meaning and usage in the OT itself is indispensable in defining its semantic range. This was the goal of section 4 in this study and the result demonstrates that the possible meanings of the OT נפש are (1) breath, (2) living creature, person, (3) vital self (pronominal use, the whole being/person), (4) life, (5) desire, appetite, (6) corpse, body.

Next, this study delved into the usage of ψυχή, the Greek equivalent of נפש, in the LXX and the NT. The findings derived from such investigations make it obvious that both the LXX and the NT faithfully follow the denotation of נפש in the OT and cast some insights on its usage. For example, the translators of the LXX never translate ψυχή with ‘throat or neck’ and avoid bringing about the implication of dualism when interpreting it. Similarly, it was found that the NT writers never use ψυχή to convey the idea of dichotomy or trichotomy. This implies that ‘soul’ is an inappropriate rendering of ψυχή in the NT. If the meaning of ψυχή in the NT is similar, if not identical, to that of נפש in the OT, then, the translation of נפש with ‘soul’ calls for re-examination.

For further study, the author suggests using the possible meanings of נפש listed above to re-examine its 754 occurrences in the OT.

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50 One development of the meaning of ψυχή in the NT is worthy of notice. That is, it refers to both physical life and true life before God and in fellowship with God. This is slightly different from the usage of the OT ψυχή, which is almost restricted to physical life.

51 The author has re-examined all occurrences of נפש in the Psalms and found that its appropriate translations fall within the semantic field proposed by the author. For the details of the examination, see the author’s original dissertation, ‘Translating Nephesh in the Psalms into Chinese: An Exercise in Intergenerational and Literary Bible Translation’ (Doctoral dissertation, South African Theological Seminary, 2017), Appendix I.

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