Psalms 49:20 (Herbert Chisholm Anstey) 136876

Man: A Tripartite Being: Composed of Spirit, Soul and Body, In the Light of the Old Testament (49:20)

It may be asked, What do we know of the origin of spirit, soul and body? It is right that we should seek to know the meaning of what God has seen fit to write in His Word. Neither intellect nor science can answer this question. These notes from Scripture on this subject have helped the writer; they may also help and interest the reader.

Man, as God's creature, is made up of these three distinct parts. Like men, the animals are said in Scripture to possess both soul and body, but not spirit. In the Word of God (Gen. 1), where alone we can read anything of the origin of this present creation, God has been pleased to instruct us as to this matter. "Let the waters bring forth . . . the moving creature that hath life [or, in Hebrew, nephesh, soul]" (ch. 1:20); and again, in verse 21, "Every living creature that moveth [or, every living soul — the same word]." So also in verse 24, "Let the earth bring forth the living creature [or, living soul] after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so." God thus created them, by His word, living souls [ghahy nephesh] upon the earth; and verse 30 tells us that that class wherein there is soul [nephesh] includes every beast of the earth, every fowl of the air, and everything that creeps upon the earth.

But when we come to man, we read something different. As to all the animals, God had but spoken and had called them into being. At the fiat of their Creator they had come forth; but He now consults as to the creature that is to have dominion. That is man. Neither the earth, nor the air, nor the sea is called upon to produce him. He is to be made, and made also in the very image and after the likeness of God. "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness" (ch. 1:26). "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [n'shahmah ghahy] ; and man became a living soul [ghahy nephesh]" (ch. 2:7) —the same expression as we find used of the animals in Genesis 1:21. But what an important and twofold difference! First, man was, as to his body, God's own formation out of the dust of the ground — not, as they were, called into being by a word. Second, he was, as and when he was thus formed, the receiver (from God still) of this n'shahmah of life into his nostrils. Thus the formation of his body and his inspiration, by which it is said he became a living soul (ghahy nephesh), are by no secondary means. Both are immediately from God, two things which we do not read of any of the lower creatures.

But further, "There is a spirit [rooagh] in man: and the inspiration [n'shahmah] of the Almighty giveth them understanding" (Job 32:8); so says Elihu. But that the beasts have "no understanding" David tells us in Psalm 32:9, using this same word for "understanding." Again, he also says, "Man that is in honor, and understandeth not [same word], is like the beasts that perish" (Psa. 49:20). The prophet Isaiah also declares that they (the beasts) have not the spirit (rooagh). "Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit" (Isa. 31:3). With men, therefore, the beasts partake both of soul and body, but not of spirit. As to the spirit (rooagh) in man, it too (as soul and body are) is God's work. The first place we read this word rooagh in Scripture, it is applied to God (Gen. 1:2). We read that "in the beginning God [Elohim] created the heaven and the earth." Later, when the creation, as it at present exists, was formed, we read, "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." Elihu also, who applies this word to the spirit in man (Job 32:8), applies the same word to God in Job 33:4. This spirit God forms in man. "The Lord, which stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit [rooagh] of man within him" (Zech. 12:1).

That both soul and spirit were not confounded, but were known and distinguished, we may learn from other passages of the Old Testament. Hezekiah said that he spoke in the bitterness of his "soul [nephesh]"; but he adds, "In all these things is the life of my spirit [rooagh]" (Isa. 38:15-16). Job says, "I will speak in the anguish of my spirit [rooagh]; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul [nephesh]" (Job 7:11). Job also contrasts soul and spirit — the first being that of every living thing, and the second that which is alone in man — when he says, "In whose hand is the soul [nephesh] of every living thing, and the breath [rooagh] of all mankind" (Job 12:10).

As to the spirit being a separate formation of God in every man, and not a mere influence, we read of "the spirit [rooagh] of Zerubbabel," and "the spirit of Joshua," and "the spirit of all the remnant" in Haggai 1:14; of "the spirit of Elijah" (2 Kings 2:15); of "the spirit of Pul" and "the spirit of Tilgathpilneser" (1 Chron. 5:26), as well as of "the spirit of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1).

In one place only, where man is questioning about things existing "under the sun," is rooagh ascribed to beasts; and then it is by one who confesses his own ignorance of what he is writing about. He, himself wise, asks the question about it, "Who knoweth?" without answering (Eccl. 3:19-21).

The beasts perish (Psa. 49:12), but as to man, both soul and spirit are immortal. This, found fully in the New Testament, to which I do not now refer, we find also in the Old. It is written, "God hath made man upright" (Eccl. 7:29). Of his threefold formation we have already spoken —"spirit and soul and body." We may now look at what is immortal in him. Job, of whom we have already heard, who spoke of all three — spirit, soul and body (see Job 10:1,11-12), and lived most probably long before the writing of the book of Genesis — knew himself as one who would exist after death. In speaking of that event, and of the time when the worm should have destroyed this outward, visible frame, he says, "Yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:26). That is, I, the man Job, the complete workmanship of God, spirit, soul and body — "in my flesh shall I see God." For that which is destroyed by death (and even this, as to man, is only for a time) is merely this external shell, the tenement that contains both spirit and soul.

Daniel also may be referred to: "But go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days" (ch. 12:13). Daniel speaks of Nebuchadnezzar's "spirit [rooagh]" (ch. 2:1,3), and of his own "spirit [rooagh]" (ch. 7:15). This spirit and the soul and the body formed the man Daniel; and this man will stand in his lot "at the end of the days"; the body may have long since turned to dust; Daniel still rests and still waits to stand in his lot in the end of the days — an end not yet come. The soul departs at death from its tenement. It is not affected by death. "As her soul [nephesh] was in departing, (for she died)" (Gen. 35:18). Here too Ecclesiastes is clear as to the

future of the spirit, speaking now of man, and without doubt on the matter: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit [rooagh] shall return unto God who gave it” (Eccl. 12:17).

It is by means of the body that the varied feelings and emotions of man manifest themselves. Some of these are ascribed to the spirit in Scripture, some to the soul, some to both soul and spirit. Thus the spirit (rooagh) is troubled (Gen. 41:8; Job 21:4; Dan. 2:1); revives, or is strengthened (Gen. 45:27); is anguished (Ex. 6:9; Job 7:11); is endowed with wisdom (Ex. 28:3; Deut. 34:9); is jealous (Num. 5:14); is sorrowful (1 Sam. 1:15; 1 Kings 21:5); is contrite or humble (Psa. 34:18; Prov. 16:19; 29:23; Isa. 57:15; 66:2); is broken (Psa. 51:17; Prov. 15:13); is overwhelmed (Psa. 142:3; 143:4); is faithful (Prov. 11:13); is hasty (Prov. 14:29; Eccl. 7:9); is haughty (Prov. 16:18; Eccl. 7:8); is wounded (Prov. 18:14); is patient (Eccl. 7:8); is grieved (Dan. 7:15; Isa. 54:6); errs (Isa. 29:24; Ezek. 13:3). It learns too the humbling lesson that there is nothing under the sun for the “spirit” of man, but only “vanity and vexation” (Eccl. 1:14,17; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,16; 6:9).

Of the soul (nephesh) we read that it departs from the body at death (Gen. 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21-22), as we have seen the spirit does in Ecclesiastes 12:7; that it blesses (Gen. 27:4,19,25,31; Psa. 103:12); it loves (Gen. 34:3,8; Song of Sol. 1:7; 3:14); knows anguish (Gen. 42:21); has appetites or tastes (Lev. 7:18,20; Num. 21:5; Deut. 12:15,20-21; Job 6:7; 33:20; Psa. 78:18); has lusts or desires (Deut. 14:26; 1 Sam. 20:4; 1 Kings 11:37; Psa. 42:2; 84:2); hates (2 Sam. 5:8); abhors (Lev. 26:43; Zech. 11:8); thinks (Esther 4:13); sorrows (Lev. 26:16); is vexed (2 Kings 4:27; Job 19:2); is bowed down (Psa. 57:6); is troubled (Psa. 88:3); faints (Psa. 107:5,26; Jonah 2:7); is relieved (Lam. 1:11,16,19); is in bitterness (Job 10:1; Isa. 38:15); is weary (Jer. 31:25); sins (Micah 6:7) and therefore needs atonement (Ex. 30:1516; Lev. 17:11; Num. 15:28); has to be afflicted while it is made (Lev. 16:29,31); so also it needs redemption (2 Sam. 4:9; Psa. 34:22; 49:8,15; 71:23), salvation (Psa. 35:3) and conversion (Psa. 19:7). These lists, which are not exhaustive, may serve to illustrate what, in chief, is attached to, or emanates from, both soul and spirit.

From the fact that Scripture nowhere asserts that the beasts have “spirit,” also that we have quoted the passages insisting upon the contrary, as well as from a careful comparison of these two lists, I think it is clear that the “spirit” is the higher part in man. It (rooagh) is also spoken of the Spirit of God. Man becomes like the beasts, if he has no understanding, as David says; and it is “the inspiration [n’shahmah] of the Almighty” (Job 32:8) — not given to them as it was to man — that is the secret of this understanding in man. The understanding, therefore, is connected with the “spirit” in man, and not with the “soul.”

I find the word “soul [nephesh]” used for the whole man, just as it is often used now, in Genesis 12:5; 14:21; Exodus 1:5; Numbers 15:27-28, and in other places; but I have not found “spirit [rooagh]” so used for the man. How fitting, therefore, that we should find in Scripture, as we do, that sin, atonement, redemption, conversion and salvation are all connected with it, not with rooagh, but with nephesh, the soul; for it is the man, spirit and soul and body, that has sinned, and that needs this power of God to be put forward in grace on his behalf.

Gathering up from what has been said of both soul and spirit in the Old Testament, it is not difficult to see that the eternal existence of man is taught in it, and was accepted long before the light of the New Testament, as to these things, shone out in all its fullness. If man is blind, he cannot see it; and then he may go so far as to deny (as some have done, and do still) that it is there. Even in his blindness he may teach that man does not exist forever; but there it shines, God’s truth, nevertheless.

There is a solemn word in Malachi 2:16, where we read a final exhortation to the “spirit [rooagh]” which was led away through the desires and affections (Gen. 3:6; 1 Tim. 2:14) of the “soul.” “Therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.” “Vanity and vexation of spirit” ought to turn the man to God, ought to lead him to take heed, and to look above the sun for what he fails to find beneath it. But to deny the immortality of the soul or spirit, and the resurrection of the body, or, in a word, the eternal existence of the man whom God has formed, is thus to deal treacherously with ourselves and with God, and leaves still all the “vanity and vexation” there. “Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Blessed words, words of life and light, coming from Him who “made man upright”; words sounding amid all the wearying vista of this life for every poor sinner who will “take heed.”

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