

An Old Testament Understanding of the Human Soul

by

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Charles Hodge in his classic *Systematic Theology* begins our conversation about the importance of understanding the human soul, “When we are commanded to believe in Christ as the Saviour [sic] of men, we are not required merely to assent to the proposition that He does save sinners, but also to receive and rest upon Him alone for our own salvation. What, therefore, the Scriptures mean by faith, in this connection, the faith which is required for salvation, is *an act of the whole soul* [emphasis mine], of the understanding, of the heart, and of the will.”¹ Focusing on the proposition that faith is “an act of the whole soul,” it is the intent of this paper to biblically define the soul based on the Old Testament scriptures and specifically the usage of the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh* or *nepes*). After briefly discussing the importance of this research, we will quickly seek an understanding of the soul as referenced in Genesis 2:5-7 to ascertain the place of the soul in the creation of humanity. We will then survey the Psalms to learn how the soul was popularly understood and communicated to the larger Hebrew audience into the time of Jesus Christ.² The paper culminates with how the prophet Jeremiah would have understood his use of the word *nephesh* in Jeremiah 6:16, as later quoted by Jesus Christ in Matthew 11:29, and how this understanding applies to ministry today.

The Importance of this Research

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 91.

² I want to understand the human soul as Jesus would have understood it in His Jewish context. To the best of my understanding, it was N.T. Wright who first used this phrase, “the Psalms were Jesus’ prayer book.” If this is true, then the Psalms are the right place to seek this knowledge (Karen Jones, “N. T. Wright: In Tune: Developing an Ear for the Word with N.T. Wright,” in *Study the Word: 12 Christian Leaders on Bible Study*, ed. John D. Barry, Rebecca Van Noord, and Jessi Strong [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014]). See also Andrew Byers, “Saving the Psalms. Review of The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential by N. T. Wright,” *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International, 2013), 79. If the scope of this paper allowed, I would also examine the writings of Second Temple Judaism to more robustly understand the use and implications of *nephesh*.

Understanding the soul as it would have been understood in the Old Testament is essential to understanding Jesus' invitation, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."³ When Jesus invites people into discipleship, He offers them an Old Testament promise that He quotes from Jeremiah 6:16, "Thus says the LORD, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and *you will find rest for your souls* [emphasis mine]."⁴ It is the goal of this research to discover the intent of the word *nephesh* by understanding its semantic range in Old Testament writing, allowing readers to contextually ascertain what Jesus would have intended through the use of the word "soul" when He quoted the ancient prophet Jeremiah. It is my assumption in this paper that if Jesus had a new idea in mind for the soul, then He would have revealed something new as He did in other places.⁵ Instead He quotes the Old Testament in direct connection to an abiding relationship with

³ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Mt 11:28–30. All caps in this reference is part of NASB formatting to indicate that Jesus is quoting the Old Testament.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Je 6:16.

⁵ This is most clearly demonstrated in the sermon on the Mount with the equation, "You have heard it was said... but I say to you..." (Mt 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). Jesus demonstrated the authority to do this, so the fact that he doesn't with the Jeremiah 6:16 promise should highlight the importance of this work.

Himself.⁶ The implications of this alone demonstrate the importance of this research not only to the Christian life, but also to the gospel ministries of the local church.⁷

The Hebrew Word נְפֶשׁ (*nephesh* or *nepes̄*) and the Origin of Humanity

“Though, with these two exceptions [Job 30:15 and Isa. 57:16], the English word “soul” always represents the Hebrew *nephesh*, *nephesh* is not always translated ‘soul’.”⁸ With that rule in mind, the Hebrew word translated soul in Jeremiah 6:16, which Jesus quotes in Matthew 11:29, is נְפֶשׁ (*nephesh* or *nepes̄*). While *nephesh* is used within a certain context, it is important to first understand its semantic range. The Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament (TLOT) states, “*nepes̄* is one of the most studied words in the OT.”⁹ The TLOT continues,

The summary of the meanings and usages of *nepes̄* (abbreviated *n.*) in the OT are structured as follows: 1. Concrete meanings: (a) breath, (b) throat/gullet; 2. Longing/desire/craving: (a) hunger, (b) vengeance, (c) desire/wish/choice, (d) negative aspects, (e) fixed expressions; 3. Soul: (a) desirous, (b) hungry/sated, (c) melancholy/happy, (d) hoping, (e) loving/hating, (f) alive, (g) summary; 4. Life: (a) deliverance/protection/maintenance, (b) threat/detriment, (c) summary; 5. Living

6 Language considerations for this research: “In addition, the Old Testament quotations in Matthew come from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), not from the Hebrew text” (Jeff Cate, “Matthew, Gospel of,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016]). The author of the Gospel of Matthew would have quoted the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew text meaning the Greek word ψυχή from the Jeremiah 6:16 Septuagint text would have been used for Jesus’ quote rather than the Hebrew נְפֶשׁ (*Septuaginta: With Morphology*. Electronic ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979). Moving deeper, Jesus most likely spoke Aramaic and the Syriac word used in the Peshitta New Testament (which closely resembles the Aramaic language) is akin to the Hebrew *nephesh* (George Anton Kiraz. *Analytical Lexicon of the Syriac New Testament: Based on the SEDRA 3 Database of George Anton Kiraz*. [Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003]).

7 An engaging resource to demonstrate the importance of this research is: “Nephesh/Soul.” The Shema Series. The Bible Project. Accessed November 26, 2018, <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/shema-listen/>.

8 Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *The Companion Bible: Being the Authorized Version of 1611 with the Structures and Notes, Critical, Explanatory and Suggestive and with 198 Appendixes*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2018), 19.

9 Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 744.

being/person: (a) in laws, (b) in enumerations, (c) general expressions, (d) pron. usage; 6. *n. (mēt) corpse. The question of the concrete meaning is difficult [emphasis mine].*¹⁰

A comment on the Hebrew *nephesh* from Genesis 1:20 (this is the first usage of *nephesh* in the Bible) illustrates the TLOT's stated difficulty, "While the Hebrew word *nephesh* (often translated as "soul") can refer to animal life, it can also refer to human life or a person's life force (their soul) along with emotions, intellect, personality, and will (see Gen 9:5; 27:4; Exod 23:9; 1 Sam 19:11). *Nephesh* can also refer to human corpses (Num 6:6, 11)."¹¹ From a thorough research of the Hebrew word *nephesh*, you will find that it is used 733 times in the Old Testament and is translated in the following 75 ways: 251 of the 733 usages are translated "soul" (e.g. Gen 27:4), 142 occurrences are translated "life" (e.g. Gen 9:4), 88 times as "person(s)" (e.g. Gen 12:5), 35 times as "live" or a "life" (e.g. Gen 12:3 and Num 16:38 respectively), 21 times as "himself" (e.g. Ex 30:12), 16 times as "you" (e.g. Deut 12:15), 13 times as "desire" (e.g. Ex 15:9), 12 times as "yourselves" (e.g. Ex 30:15), 10 times as "creature(s)" (e.g. Gen 1:20), and 67 additional word translations for the one word *nephesh* that are used less than ten times each.¹² There is a significant semantic range in its Old Testament usage so it becomes clear that context is crucial in the proper interpretation and application of the Hebrew word *nephesh*.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid. Italics of last sentence was added to emphasize the TLOT's stated difficulty.

¹¹ John D. Barry, Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ge 1:20.

¹² This information is from a word study I did of the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ in the NASB utilizing Logos 8 software. Different scholars state different numbers of occurrences and usages of *nephesh*. For example, "The usual Heb. word *nepesh* (*n'sāmā*, Is. 57:16, is an exception) occurs 755 times in the OT. As is clear from Gn. 2:7, the primary meaning is 'possessing life'" (W. J. Cameron, "Soul," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* [Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 1124). As another example, "The word *nephesh* occurs 754 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. In the A.V. and R.V. it is translated "soul" 472 times, while in the other 282 places it is represented by forty-four different words or phrases" (Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *The Companion Bible: Being the Authorized Version of 1611 with the Structures and Notes, Critical, Explanatory and Suggestive and with 198 Appendixes*, vol. 2 [Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2018], 19).

¹³ "5315. נֶפֶשׁ **nephesh** (659b); from an unused word; *a soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, passion, appetite, emotion*:—any(1), anyone(2), anyone*(1), appetite(7), being(1), beings(3), body(1), breath(1), corpse(2), creature(6), creatures(3), dead(1), dead person(2), deadly(1), death(1), defenseless*(1), desire(12),

The early usage of *nephesh* springs forth in response to God’s initiating activity. Bria Burns introduces, “The Hebrew word often rendered as ‘soul’ is the word for ‘breath’ and therefore also for a ‘living thing.’ Genesis 2:5–7 describes the origin of the first human soul: it says that God ‘breathed into [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life.’”¹⁴ While the historical development of the origin of the soul is one mired in philosophical and theological debate, it is not the intent of this paper to dive into speculation, but to draw forth meaning from the biblical text itself. Hodge historically states, “The common doctrine of the Church, and especially of the Reformed theologians, has ever been that the soul of the child is not generated or derived from the parents, but that it is created by the immediate agency of God.”¹⁵ Use of the Hebrew word *nephesh* agrees with historical theology and points directly to God as the giver of all life:

Nepeš in the Old Testament is never the “immortal soul” but simply the life principle or living being. Such is observable in Genesis 1:20, 21, 24, where the qualified (living) *nepesû* refers to animals and is rendered “living creatures.” The same Hebrew term is then applied to the creation of humankind in Genesis 2:7, where dust is vitalized by the breath of God and becomes a “living being.” Thus, human being shares soul with the animals. It is the breath of God that makes the lifeless dust a “living being”—person.¹⁶

The Hebrew word *nephesh* does not simply speak to the origin of humanity, but also to the essence of our humanity; it not only informs our understanding of life ontologically, but of life existentially. “In Scripture, the human soul is the principle of biological life, the organ of

desire*(2), discontented*(1), endure*(1), feelings(1), fierce*(2), greedy*(1), heart(5), heart’s(2), herself(12), Himself(4), himself(19), human(1), human being(1), hunger(1), life(146), life*(1), lifeblood*(2), lives(34), living creature(1), longing*(1), man(4), man’s(1), men*(2), mind(2), Myself(3), myself(2), number(1), ones(1), others(1), ourselves(3), own(1), passion*(1), people(2), people*(1), perfume*(1), person(68), person*(1), persons(19), slave(1), some(1), soul(238), soul’s(1), souls(12), strength(1), themselves(6), thirst(1), throat(2), will(1), wish(1), wishes(1), yourself(11), yourselves(13)” (Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition* [Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998]).

¹⁴ Bria Burns, “The Origin of the Soul,” in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 70.

¹⁶ Carl Schultz, “Soul,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 743.

thought, imagination, memory, will, desire, and emotion, and the seat of personality. In the creation narrative, Adam’s material body becomes a ‘living soul’ by the breath of God. The ‘heart,’ ‘soul,’ ‘mind,’ and ‘spirit’ refer throughout Scripture to man’s inner being.”¹⁷ *Nephesh* is a comprehensive word of biblical anthropology as we learn from Louis Berkhof,

The main Scriptural distinction is as follows: the word “spirit” designates the spiritual element in man as the principle of life and action which controls the body; while the word “soul” denominates the same element as the subject of action in man, and is therefore often used for the personal pronoun in the Old Testament, Ps. 10:1, 2; 104:1; 146:1; Is. 42:1; cf. also Luke 12:19. In several instances it, more specifically, designates the inner life as the seat of the affections. All this is quite in harmony with Gen. 2:7, “And Jehovah God . . . breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Thus it may be said that man *has* spirit, but *is* soul.¹⁸

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to exhaustively research the fullness of this word in the Old Testament, it is widely agreed by scholars that when *nephesh* is translated as “soul” it is expressing the comprehensive essence of being human.¹⁹ This prevailing usage in the Old Testament is summed up, “Although Heb. *nepeš* has a wide range of usage, it most frequently designates the life force of living creatures. Far from referring simply to one aspect of a person, “soul” refers to the whole person.”²⁰ *Nephesh* teaches us that all of who we are matters, that both our bodies and souls matter in the great story of the Bible. Our bodies and souls matter at the

17 Joel B. Carini, “The Human Constitution,” in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

18 Louise Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 194.

19 “Only one passage in the New Testament suggests a differentiation between body, soul, and spirit: 1 Thess 5:23. Since the Old Testament clearly sees two parts to humans (body and soul/spirit; material and immaterial), it is best to interpret this single verse the same way for theological consistency. Many scholars do not consider soul and spirit in this verse as discrete, separate items. This verse is similar to the *shema* (Deut 6:4; cf. Matt 22:37; Mark 12:29–30), which tells us to love God with all our heart, soul, and might. The point is *totality*, not that heart, soul, might (and mind in the gospel references) are separable. The Old Testament uses both *nephesh* and *ruach* to describe the source of these inner parts. Totality is also the point of Heb 4:12 (which actually uses four items, not three)” (Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition. [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015], 41).

20 Henry L. Carrigan Jr., “Soul,” ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1245.

Creation, in the Fall, and in Redemption. As Walter Eichrodt declares, “The *locus classicus* for this phase of the semantic development is Gen. 2:7, which describes how Man by insufflation of the divine breath becomes a living being, *l^enepes̄ hayyā*. Here *nepes̄* is obviously not meant as a *tertium quid* between spirit and body, but denotes the totality which has come about through the combination of the body formed out of the earth and the divine breath breathed into it.”²¹

The Hebrew Word נְפֶשׁ (*nepesh* or *nepes̄*) in the Psalms

It is not surprising then that the psalmists use *nepesh* so many times because it references both the creative intent of God towards humanity and humanity’s capacity to respond to God. As we’ve now seen, *nepesh* speaks to both the origin of man and the essence of humanity as one who is God-breathed. As the Apostle Paul states, “for in Him we live and move and exist.”²²

Eichrodt explains in his *Theology of the Old Testament*:

What the Hebrew sought to express was rather that the impulses and emotions in question were manifestations of the vital energy within the person, being closely bound up with the life of the individual, and only existent in it. Finally this is also true of the highest psychical expression ascribed to the *nepes̄*, the longing for God. A man may lift up his soul to God [Pss. 25:1; 86:4; 143:8]; the soul may wait and hope [Pss. 33:20; 130:5f.], yea, thirst and be consumed with desire for God [Pss. 42:2f.; 63:2; 84:3; 119:81; 143:6; Lam. 3:25]; but when consoled by him it exults [Pss. 34:3; 35:9; 103:1f., 22; 104:1, 35; 146:1; Isa. 61:10] and rests in its God [Pss. 62:2; 63:9].²³

In the Psalms, *nepesh* is used 144 times in 141 verses with 115 of those usages being translated soul in the NASB.²⁴ Let’s now briefly view the use of *nepesh* in the Psalms and what can be

²¹ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Peter Ackroyd et al., trans. J. A. Baker, vol. 2, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1961–1967), 137.

²² *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, Ac 17:28.

²³ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 139. Verses in brackets were listed as footnotes in the source.

²⁴ Information from a word study of the Hebrew word נְפֶשׁ in the NASB utilizing Logos 8 software.

learned about the soul from this prevailing usage. After doing so, it becomes even more obvious that *nephesh* is not speaking only about a non-matter part of us, but about all that matters to God about us—namely, all of what make us who we are!²⁵ Eichrodt illuminates this conclusion from the usage of *nephesh* in the Psalms,

Particularly distinctive is the practice of the Psalmist in addressing himself as *napšī*, setting his whole being over against himself as a kind of higher ego (Pss. 42:6, 12; 43:5; 62:6; 103:1f., etc.). The use of *nepeš* to mean the individual life also gives rise, however, to a *second line of semantic development*, the outcome of which is to place the whole emphasis not on the element of individuality but on that of being alive. As an expression for this fact of being alive, for vitality, *nepeš* covers *every type of wish, desire or vital urge*.²⁶

Bible commentators have much to say about the use of *nephesh* in the Psalms. Bruce Waltke comments on Psalm 3:2, “The taunt ‘God will not deliver him’ reaches into his *nepeš*, a term that adds an intensely personal element to the notion of self (see n. 35).”²⁷ Interestingly, the reference to footnote 35 in this quote is critical to the purposes of this research—it clarifies the need for an understanding of the Old Testament usage of *nephesh* over and above our English rendering and contemporary understanding of the word soul:

Its traditional gloss, “soul,” misleads an English-speaking audience into thinking of “soul” in the New Testament sense of Greek *psychē*, “the seat and center of life that transcends the earthly” (W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and adapt. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich; 2nd ed. revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], p. 893). Hebrew *nepeš*, however, refers to the passionate drives and appetites of *all* breathing creatures, both animal and

25 This is why the doctrine of the incarnation is important. Jesus who is fully God condescended to become fully human to redeem all of us, not just part of us. This is also why the teaching of the bodily resurrection is so crucial to a right understanding of Jesus and the gospel. Michael Wittmer explains, “Jesus’ full human nature means God has said YES! To the whole creation. God, in the person of his Son, now possesses a full human nature—both body and soul. If the human body is evil, then Jesus cannot have one, and your body cannot be saved. Neither can the rest of you, because of a second cornerstone of the Christian faith: the resurrection” (Michael Wittmer, *Worldly Saints: Can you Serve Jesus and Still Enjoy Your Life?* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015], 43).

26 Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 138. Emphasis his.

27 Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 199.

human. In the NT a person has a “soul”; in the OT a person is a *nepesh* (B. Waltke, *TWOT* 2:587–91).²⁸

Waltke helpfully comments in similar fashion on *nephesh* in Psalm 6:3, “*And my soul is dismayed* (וַנִּפְשֵׁי גְבַהֲלָהּ) implies the reason for his urgent appeals. *Nepheš* is glossed “soul” reluctantly, because the English idiom demands it here. Unlike “bones,” *Nepheš* does not refer to a part of his body but to his whole psychic being.”²⁹

In the Tyndale Commentary series, Tremper Longman III comments on Psalm 6:1-3, “Although verse 2 pinpoints physical illness as a problem for the psalmist, verse 3a (*My soul is in deep anguish*) signifies that his physical ailment had psychological consequences. In Hebrew, *soul* (*nepesh*) here indicates one’s inner self, which now experiences distress.”³⁰ In the International Critical Commentary series, Charles and Emilie Briggs comment on Psalm 16:10, “*Nephesh* is here, as often, the person of the man himself. The poet is not thinking of the soul as distinguished from the flesh, but of himself as composed of both Soul and body. It is true the flesh does not go to Sheol at death, but only the soul. The psalmist is here thinking of his entire Self and not specifically of that part of himself which goes to the abode of the dead.”³¹ Building upon this, the IVP Bible Background Commentary comments on Psalm 42:2,

Within the Hebrew Old Testament the word translated as “soul” is *nephesh*. It refers to the “self” or to “a living being” (see Gen 2:7) but not to the “immortal soul” of the New Testament writings. There is no differentiation in the Hebrew usage between the body and the life principle, and therefore in passages like 1 Kings 19:4 *nephesh* is used to

28 Ibid., Note 35.

29 Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 59.

30 Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, The Tyndale Commentary Series (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 74.

31 Charles A. Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1906–1907), 121.

mean “life.” The body’s energy or life force can be drained by a “pouring out of the soul” (1 Sam 1:15; Ps 42:5), as it is in this lament.³²

In an introduction to the poetic writings of the Old Testament, Timothy Sandoval writes, “The threefold repetition of ‘our souls’ (124:4, 5, 7) emphasizes that their whole being was threatened; whereas ‘soul’ implies a distinction from the body, the Hebrew *nefesh* reflects one’s whole being or self.”³³ I emphasize from Sandoval, that there is a distinction from the OT usage of *nephesh* from our contemporary understanding of soul. Later in the same article, Sandoval almost casually comments on Psalm 143:1-6, “so that his entire being (*nephesh*) thirsts for God.”³⁴ While potentially casual in comment, the implications are far reaching in application.

***Nephesh* in Jeremiah 6:16 as Quoted by Jesus Christ in Matthew 11:29**

“Thus says the LORD, ‘Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls [*nephesh*].’”³⁵ *Nephesh* is used 54 times in the prophetic book of Jeremiah with only seven of those usages being translated soul in the NASB. It is interesting to note that, in Jeremiah, *nephesh* is most commonly translated as life (19 times).³⁶ *Nephesh*, by an Old Testament understanding, cannot and should not be separated from the life of the whole person—body and spirit. The soul is not part of a person, it is the

32 Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ps 42:2.

33 Timothy J. Sandoval, Alissa Jones Nelson, W. Derek Suderman, et al., “Introduction to Wisdom and Worship: Themes and Perspectives in the Poetic Writings,” in *The Old Testament and Apocrypha*, ed. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber, *Fortress Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 588.

34 *Ibid.*, 593.

35 *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, Je 6:16.

36 Information from a word study of the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ in the NASB utilizing Logos 8 software.

person created by and responsive to God.³⁷ That is why it is important to see Jeremiah's invitation in Jeremiah 6:16 in the proper light: "The prophet calls the community to a wholesome life in which the needs and rights of all under God are recognized and met."³⁸ As Curtis Zachary explained in his book *Soul Rest*, "This instruction introduced to Moses and the earlier prophets alluded to the way that we should live to find fulfillment connected to God."³⁹

From our study of the Hebrew word *nephesh*, in contrast to modern and contemporary usages of the word soul, it is clear that the Prophet Jeremiah does not have in mind a disembodied or compartmentalized view of soul when used in Jeremiah 6:16.⁴⁰ In the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, R. K. Harrison comments on the context of Jeremiah 6:16, "The people have been urged to follow *the ancient paths* of the Mosaic tradition, which will be the best because they are tried and true. In these they would find rest for themselves (cf. Matt. 11:29) in contrast to the sorrow of being yoked to paganism."⁴¹ The reference to rest for their souls in this context is a holistic well-being that comes from being in right relationship with God; hence, in right relationship with one another by following God's ways. Hetty Lalleman emphasizes the immensity of what God is offering His people at the crossroads of Jeremiah 6:16, "There they

37 "נֶפֶשׁ does not mean the soul as one part of man but the whole man living his life in responsibility" (Eduard Schweizer, Georg Bertram, Albert Dihle, et al., "Ψυχή, Ψυχικός, Ἀνάψυξις, Αναψύχω, Δίψυχος, Ὀλιγόψυχος," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–], 636).

38 J. R. Soza, "Jeremiah," ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 226.

39 Curtis Zackery, *Soul Rest: Reclaim Your Life; Return to Sabbath*, ed. Abigail Stocker et al. (Bellingham, WA: Kirkdale Press, 2018), 82–83.

40 "As frequently is the case in the Old Testament, **souls** is the equivalent of a personal pronoun, thus the basis for JB ('and you shall find rest') and REB ('and you will find rest for yourselves'). GECL has 'so your life will find fulfillment.' Since the nature of the rest is peace from Israel's enemies, TEV translates 'and you will live in peace.'" (Barclay M. Newman Jr. and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on Jeremiah*, UBS Handbook Series [New York: United Bible Societies, 2003], 195). Emphasis theirs.

41 R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 21, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 86.

are to look for the *ancient paths*, which are the *good way* to the life set before them when the covenant was made (see also Deut. 30:15–20). Peace and rest (cf. v. 14) will be found there (cf. Matt. 11:29).⁴² In Deuteronomy 28:65, God clearly warns the danger of not choosing His path: “Among those nations you shall find no rest, and there will be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and despair of soul.”⁴³ Just as all of humanity has its origin in God alone, so will we only find wholeness and peace (*shalom*) when we experience the essence of our being in response to God’s covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) extended to us.⁴⁴ The choice is before each of us, but let us never forget that we are recipients of rest through acceptance of the terms of God’s graceful invitation.

The *nephesh* is designed to live in a call-and-response relationship with its Creator. In the Hermeneia commentary on Jeremiah, William Lee Holladay strikingly speaks to the urgency of our response based on the fervency of God’s invitation,

Yahweh begs the people to find the road back to healthy community: if the people walk on that road, they will find “repose” (מְרִגּוּעַ). This word is a *hapax legomenon* in the OT, but the related מְרִגֵּעַ in Isa 28:12 carries the same meaning: these nouns and the related verb רָגַע refer to surcease from international pressure; it is close to the current phrase “national security,” the ability to live without constant tension and uneasiness before the threat of disaster from abroad. (The reflection of this phrase in Matt 11:29 has moved the center of meaning beyond purely national security!) The people refuse, however.⁴⁵

In the International Critical Commentary, William McKane emphasizes the crossroads:

⁴² Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 21, The Tyndale Commentary Series (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 103. Emphasis hers.

⁴³ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, Dt 28:65.

⁴⁴ God’s graceful initiation of covenant to which we are invited to respond is evidenced in every covenant God has established between Himself and humanity. For example, God’s initiation is witnessed to in the Mosaic Covenant (e.g. Ex 20:1-3) and in the New Covenant (e.g. 1 John 4:19).

⁴⁵ William Lee Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1–25*, ed. Paul D. Hanson, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 221.

A choice has to be made (v. 16) and Yahweh urges his people to make the right choice as they stand at the crossing of ways; they should do it on the foundation of such guidance as is given by the past experience of the community. There are old paths established by Yahweh and along these the people may safely walk. Let them ask which is the right road (Targ. אורחא דתקנא) or the road that leads to well-being and let them walk in it; so they will win a quietness of mind which will arm them for all the demands and difficulties of life's journey.⁴⁶

We are designed to find rest in God when we choose to walk in obedience to His ways. As Lawrence Richards comments on the crossroads of Jeremiah 6:16: "Each day brings us to new crossroads. Each day we must choose the good way, and walk in it. There is no peace like the inner peace that comes from knowing we have done what is right."⁴⁷ The rest of God has been graciously made available to humanity in Jesus Christ. As Jesus declares of Himself, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."⁴⁸

Implications for Christian Life & Ministry

It is important for believers in Jesus Christ to see the urgency of this beginning point of research on the human soul as it pertains to not only their eternal salvation, but also their ability to ascertain the promised abundant life of Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ If what Christ has for us is as comprehensive and holistic to our life as the Old Testament usage of *nephesh* implies, then it is essential to understand what exactly Jesus' promise does include for us today to ensure we are not reducing the gospel "to cheap forgiveness."⁵⁰ Peter Toon explains of Jesus' invitation to find

46 William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1986), 149.

47 Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*, electronic ed. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), 452.

48 *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, Jn 14:6.

49 In John 10:10, Jesus promises the abundant life to His followers: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

rest in His easy yoke: “In the Gospels the theology of rest is most clearly articulated in the words of Jesus: “come to me ... and I will give you rest.... and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28–30). The rest he promises is certainly for the world to come, but it is also for this world. It is the sense of security and peace that flows from a right relation with God, the Father, through obedience to his Son, the Messiah, and membership in his kingdom.”⁵¹ This aligns with our research on the Hebrew word *nephesh*.

In the Mentor Commentary on Jeremiah, John Mackay explains very insightfully and helpfully our best possible understanding of *nephesh*:

The reflection of this phrase in Matt. 11:29 is therefore not an improper application of what is in mind here, that true *šālôm* is found by following the path that leads to harmony with God. The focus is not primarily on some inner spiritual repose. Having ceased to trust in their own wisdom and having committed themselves to the path of trust in God, they would enjoy all the blessings that flow from covenant obedience. Their desires would be met and in the totality of their beings they would be vulnerable no more.⁵²

God’s rest is the place of security and peace for which we were originally designed by God, from which we work in rhythm with God (in the easy yoke of Christ), and through which we return to God. As the Apostle Paul learned by living in the easy yoke of Christ through many challenges and circumstances, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved

50 “Whether seen on bumper stickers, heard during altar calls, developed from a narrow interpretation of Lutheran or fundamentalist theology, or perpetuated in fluffy paperbacks, the reduction of the gospel to cheap forgiveness is ever with us” (“Reflections: Classic and Contemporary Excerpts,” *Christianity Today* [Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1987], 41).

51 Peter Toon, “Rest,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 674.

52 John L. Mackay, *Jeremiah: An Introduction and Commentary: Chapters 1–20*, vol. 1, Mentor Commentaries (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 280.

me and gave Himself up for me.⁵³ The abundant life is found in covenant faithfulness to God through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

If Jesus' quotation of Jeremiah 6:16 in His promise of Matthew 11:29 is to be seen as a response to our acceptance of His invitation to a saving relationship with Himself, then His promise for our *nephesh* enlarges our understanding of salvation in general and the atonement specifically. Jesus' invitation to find rest for our souls then sounds more like Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd of John 10, fulfilling the great promises of Psalm 23 that begins with the startling, and countercultural, promise, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want."⁵⁴ True rest is found in God's lordship of our lives: when we surrender to Him, cease striving, and know God not only propositionally, but also experientially in every area of our lives.⁵⁵ As Bruce Reichenbach elaborates of Christ's work on the Cross toward God and on our behalf, "Though addressing the sin is central, at the same time only by addressing the complete human condition—physical, economic, political, and environmental—can we attain well-being."⁵⁶ Jesus' promise for the soul is a promise for our whole being (our *nephesh*) because all of what makes us who we are will be with Him in His eternal reign. Michael Wittmer wittingly makes the point that Jesus' invitation for rest is not for some other-than-this-world part of us, but for our very humanity as we walk on this earth: "We are earthlings, for heaven's sake."⁵⁷

⁵³ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, Ga 2:20. There appears to be a connection between Jesus' invitation to carry His cross and to take His yoke. Both require of a person to submit to Jesus' lordship and live in Christian discipleship. Both are a death to self, but share in the life of Christ. As Romans 6:11 states, "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Ps 23:1.

⁵⁵ I am alluding to Psalm 46:10 in this assertion.

⁵⁶ Bruce Reichenbach, "Healing View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 126.

⁵⁷ Wittmer. *Worldly Saints*, 50.

The church should never again say that it is focused on “saving souls” if it is not also equally committed to “making disciples.” In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus did not just invite part of a person to find rest in Him, but Jesus invited the whole person to walk in discipleship with Him. Christian discipleship is a lifestyle defined and determined by a response to an invitation. Just as the *nephesh* was spoken into existence by God, so the *nephesh* will find rest according to how it responds to the invitation of God. In Mark 1:17 Jesus’ invitation comes with a promise, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”⁵⁸ Just as we must communicate to people about God’s invitation for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ for their eternal destiny, so we must encourage them to go deeper into their relationship with Jesus to find fulfillment and abundance in the Christian life. The local church must care about not only people’s eternal destinies, but about their physical, emotional, relational, economic, and environmental well-being. Just as the *nephesh* (“soul”) points to the whole life of a person, so the local church must care about and minister to a person’s whole life.

⁵⁸ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, Mk 1:17.

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