

The Ancient Hebrew Understanding of the Human Soul

A Reflection by David Keller

The “Overture” in Genesis 2:7 –

“...then the Lord God formed the human of dust from the earth, and breathed into the human’s nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being (a living soul).”

First the human (*adam* in Hebrew) is bonded with the earth (*adama* in Hebrew). The human is **formed from the earth, the ground**. The human is **physical** until the divine vital power enters the human’s physical body. Only then does the human become a **living being** (body and life are united and the creation of the human is completed).

The **living soul** is a unity of the physical and psychic aspects of human life. The living soul springs forth from a life-less physical condition as a direct result of God’s “breathing” the divine vitality into the human’s nostrils.

The Human Being Is A soul –

The “overture” declares that a human being is NOT a corporeal substance that God then “supplies” with a soul (*nephesh* in Hebrew). Rather, a human being is a **living soul**. The **essence** of a human being is her or his soul, and the soul encompasses and reflects every aspect of that person’s life. “Soul” and “body” are NOT sectors of a person’s life; they constitute the **totality** of a living soul. The body does NOT “house” the soul. A human being is a living soul and all the physical, emotional, psychic, rational, and spiritual aspects of each person’s life are reflected and implemented in the way we live.

When Mary of Nazareth proclaims to her relative, Elizabeth, “My soul magnifies the Lord...” she is telling Elizabeth that every thought, desire, action, and word in her life enlarges God’s presence, both in her and in the world around her.

As a Jew, Mary knew that “soul”:

- ...is the totality of each human being (senses, characteristics, appearance, actions, demeanor, learning, wisdom, and even possessions)
- ...includes a person’s heart and spirit
 - the *heart* is the operating force and center of the soul; it is the origin of volition and volition (“will”) springs forth from the totality of the soul; the heart discerns and desires the ways the soul, in all its aspects, will affect a person’s life and influence on the world.
 - the *spirit* of a person is the motivating power of the soul; it is the energy that springs forth from the soul and results in specific words and actions.