THE OLD TESTAMENT USAGE OF NEŠĀMĀ

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There is, in the Old Testament, a group of words which are usually translated in the English versions by such terms as ‘life, soul, spirit, breath, wind’, or less commonly ‘person, body, mind’ or ‘heart’. It is probable that the various connotations of each of these rests ultimately on a primary meaning, ‘to breathe’ 1). The two most common of these are nepeš and rûah, both of which are accorded a very wide range of usage 2), but much less frequently used is the word neshamā, which might, on this account, be expected to have a more restricted application. It is clear that both nepeš and rûah can be used of either man or beast as the case may require, and it has generally been assumed that neshamā shares this indiscriminate application with them 3). An examination of each individual occurrence of the word, however, suggests that this is not necessarily the case. While the root occurs in Post-Biblical Hebrew, Jewish-Aramaic, and Syriac, and is translated in the Septuagint by a variety of different words, it is proposed here to examine only the usage of the word in the Hebrew Old Testament, on the assumption that the Septuagint translators and the Rabbis held the same view of its meaning as is commonly held today on the strength of its apparent universal application in some of the verses discussed below, and are therefore unlikely to throw light on its Biblical usage. Accordingly, it will be well to proceed direct to the consideration of the Old Testament use of the word.

The word occurs in the Old Testament twenty-six times, once in

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a verbal form, twenty-four times as a noun, and once in an Aramaic form 1). These occurrences may be tabulated as follows:

\[\text{'eššōm}; \text{Is. xlii 14.} \]
\[\text{nršāmā}; \text{Deut. xx 16, Josh. xi 11, 14, 1 Kings xv 29, xvii 17, Is. ii 22, xlii 5.} \]
\[\text{'anršāmā}; \text{Dan. x 17.} \]
\[\text{hannršāmā}; \text{Josh. x 40, Ps. cl 6.} \]
\[\text{nišmat}; \text{Gen. ii 7, vii 22, Is. xxx 33, Pr. xx 27.} \]
\[\text{wnišmat}; \text{Job xxvi 4, xxxii 8, xxxiii 4.} \]
\[\text{minnišmat}; \text{2 Sam. xxii 16, Ps. xviii 16, Job iv 9, xxxvii 10.} \]
\[\text{nišmāti}; \text{Job xxvii 3.} \]
\[\text{wnišmāč}; \text{Job xxxiv 14.} \]
\[\text{inršāmōt}; \text{Is. lvii 16.} \]
\[\text{nišmrťak} \text{(Aramaic); Dan. v 23.} \]

The texts including the word may be divided into four groups, according as it is used of the breath of God, the breath imparted to man by God, the breath in man, and finally the cases where no specific indication is given on these points.

A. Breath of God:

1. 2 Sam. xxii 16. David praises God after his deliverance from Saul, ‘Then the channels of the sea appeared, The foundations of the world were laid bare, By the rebuke of the Lord, At the blast of the breath of his nostrils (\text{minnišmat rūh 'appō}) 2). (Cf. Ps. xviii 15).

2. Job iv 9. Eliphaz speaking, (8) ‘... they that plow iniquity, And sow trouble, reap the same. (9) By the breath of God they perish (\text{minnišmat } \text{rūh yōbēḏā}, and by the blast of his anger are they consumed’.

3. Job xxxiv 14. Elihu speaking of God, ‘If he set his heart upon man (\text{koń-yāšīm } \text{rēlāw libbō}, if he gather unto himself his spirit and his breath (\text{rūhō wnišmāč } \text{rēlāw yešōp}); (15) All flesh shall perish together (\text{jīghwa } \text{kol-bāśar yāhad}). And man shall turn again unto dust (\text{wěḏām } \text{al-āpār yāšū}).

This text presents a certain amount of difficulty. The majority of scholars prefer to read \text{yāšū} for \text{yāšīm}, following the Septuagint and Syriac versions, and to delete \text{libbō} as an original marginal gloss

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2) Quotations from the R.V.