

# WHERE DID THE IDEA OF AN "IMMORTAL SOUL" COME FROM?

From the booklet "What is Man?" by Keith W. Stump

**F**EW BELIEFS are more widely held than that of the "immortal soul." Virtually everyone is familiar with the concept. The average religious person, if asked, would state it something like this:

A human person is both *body* and *soul*. The body is the physical flesh-and-blood "shell" temporarily housing the soul. The soul is the nonmaterial aspect, made of spirit. At death the soul leaves the body, and lives on consciously forever in heaven or hell. (Some hold that liberated souls are reborn in new bodies in a series of "reincarnations" or "transmigrations.")

Some form of this concept is found among virtually all peoples and religions in the world today. The average religious person generally takes the idea for granted.

Science, which deals with the material universe and physical data, cannot verify or deny the existence of any such soul.

How, then, can one *know* whether or not man really has an "immortal soul"?

Few have stopped to ask *where* the concept came from in the first place. Many simply *assume* it has its origin in the Bible.

So prepare yourself for what could be one of the big surprises of your life!

The idea of an "immortal soul" long predates the founding of today's major religions. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus (5th century B.C.) tells us in his *History* that the ancient Egyptians were the first to teach that the soul of man is separable from the body, and immortal. This Egyptian idea was centuries before Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam came onto the scene.

Nowhere in the ancient world was the afterlife of more concern than in Egypt. The countless tombs unearthed by archaeologists along the Nile provide eloquent testimony to the Egyptian belief that man possessed a spiritual aspect extending beyond his physical life.

To the east, the ancient Babylonians also held a belief in a future life of the soul in a "lower world." But Babylonian beliefs were nowhere so elaborate as the Egyptian.

A person, the Egyptians believed, consisted of a physical body and not one but *two* souls that lived on after his death: a *ka* soul and a *ba* soul.

The *ka* was said to be a spirit replica of a man, containing the "vital force" given to him at birth. At death, the *ka* was believed to take up residence in a statue or picture of the deceased. The statue or picture was placed in the tomb for that very purpose. As the tomb was to be the eternal home of the *ka*, it was provided with everything the *ka* would need for a happy afterlife---food, furniture, games, reading material, grooming aids and the like.

The other soul, the *ba*, was held to be that part of man that enjoyed an eternal existence in heaven. It was believed to fly from the body with the last breath. The *ba* was often depicted on tomb paintings as a human-headed hawk hovering over the deceased's body. The ancient Egyptians believed the *ba* occasionally came back to "visit" the body in the tomb and to partake of the food and drink offerings there.

The famous *Book of The Dead*---a collection of ancient Egyptian funerary and ritual texts---lays out in great detail the many Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife. In one version of the work, dating from the 15th century B.C., the *ba* of a deceased person is pictured as asking one of the Egyptian gods, "How long have I to live?" To which the god replied: "Thou shalt exist for millions of millions of years, a period of millions of years." What better depiction of the concept of immortality?

### **Passed on to Greeks**

The idea of the soul's immortality did not cease with ancient Egyptian civilization. Notice again the testimony of the historian Herodotus:

"The Egyptians were the first that asserted that the soul of man is immortal...This opinion *some among the Greeks* have at different periods of time adopted as their own" (from *Euterpe*, the second book of Herodotus' *History*).

The pagan Greeks got the concept of an immortal soul from the Egyptians! The foremost advocate among the ancient Greeks of the idea of an "immortal soul" was the Athenian philosopher Plato (428-348 B.C.), the pupil of Socrates. Plato was the founder of the Academy, an institute for philosophical and scientific research just outside of Athens.

The pre-Socratic Greek philosophers had no real conception of any nonmaterial element in man. The philosophers Socrates and Pythagoras were among the first of the Greeks to adopt the Egyptian view. They subsequently had a great influence on the thought of Plato. It was Plato who popularized the immortal soul concept throughout the Greek world.

In the *Phaedo*---one of Plato's most famous works---Plato recounts Socrates' final conversation with his friends on the last day of Socrates' life. Socrates declared to them:

"Be of good cheer, and do not lament my passing ...When you lay me down in my grave, say that you are burying my body only, and not my soul."

Socrates' statement is little different from the teaching of most churches today!

Notice also the following assertion from Plato, again taken from the *Phaedo*:

"The soul whose inseparable attribute is life will never admit of life's opposite, death. Thus the soul is shown to be immortal, and since immortal, indestructible...Do we believe there is such a thing as death? To be sure. And is this anything but the separation of the soul and body? And being dead is the attainment of this separation, when the soul exists in herself and separate from the body, and the body is parted from the soul. That is death.... Death is merely the separation of the soul and body."

In Book X of *The Republic*---another of Plato's major works---he again wrote: "The soul of man is immortal and imperishable."

Statements by such ancient Greek and Roman writers as Polybius, Cicero, Seneca, Strabo---and even Plato himself---have led some modern historians to question whether Plato *really* personally believed the immortal soul doctrine. They suggest that he may have simply popularized what he knew to be a fiction as a means of keeping the citizenry in line through the fear of mysterious "unseen things" beyond this life.

The immortal soul concept, in other words, was a necessary companion doctrine to the doctrine of the terrible torments of parts of Hades or hell. Such fearsome teachings, some philosophers thought, were necessary to scare the masses into being good citizens.

Regardless of his motives and personal beliefs, Plato's teachings did have a wide impact. They spread throughout their known world and were accepted as truth by millions.

### **Plato and the Jews**

The Jewish communities of antiquity were deeply influenced by Greek philosophical ideas. Many will suppose that the Platonic view of the soul imprisoned in the flesh would have been nothing new to the Jews. But notice the testimony of Jewish scholars themselves:

"The belief that the soul continues its existence after the dissolution of the body is...nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture...The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato its principle exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended" (*The Jewish Encyclopedia*, article, "Immortality of the Soul").

Many of you will undoubtedly be surprised to discover that the idea of the immortality of the soul was not derived by the Jews from the Old Testament scriptures, but rather taken *from Plato*.

As we shall see, the Old Testament takes a *completely different* view!

## Another Surprise!

But what of the professing Christian world? Certainly here we should find the doctrine of an immortal soul independent of any Greek influence.

Now consider this fact:

Many of the early theologians and scholars of the professing Christian religion--- including such men as Origen, Tertullian and Augustine---were closely associated with Platonism.

Tertullian (A.D. 155-220), for example, wrote: "For some things are known even by nature: the immortality of the soul, the instance, is held by many ... I may use, therefore, *the opinion of Plato*, when he declares: 'Every soul is immortal'" (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III).

Notice, it is the opinion of Plato that is cited!

Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430)---held to be the greatest thinker of Christian antiquity---also taught the immaterial and spiritual nature of the human soul. But notice the source of his teachings. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states:

"He [Augustine] fused the religion of the New Testament with the Platonic tradition of Greek philosophy."

Why should those early professing Christian scholars have resorted to the opinions of a pagan Greek philosopher? Could it be that the immortal soul doctrine is not clearly supported in Christian Scripture?

Notice the much later view of Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation in Germany. More than a thousand years later, in 1522, he wrote:

"It is probable, in my opinion, that, with very few exceptions, indeed, the dead sleep in utter insensibility till the day of judgment .... *On what authority* can it be said that the souls of the dead may not sleep ... in the same way that the living pass in profound slumber the interval between their downlying at night and their uprising in the morning?"

Luther himself encountered difficulty in finding support for the immortal soul doctrine in the pages of Scripture.

Notice that he asked, "On what authority...?"

But the deep-seated teachings of centuries were not to be easily dislodged, even by Protestant reformers. Theologians and churchgoers alike persisted, for the most part, in their unquestioning embrace of the ideas passed down from the ancient pagan philosophers. As the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* summarizes:

"Traditional Western philosophy, starting with the ancient Greeks...shaped the basic Western concepts of the soul."

### **What the Bible REALLY Says!**

Notice the warning of the apostle Paul, who once personally confronted Greek thinkers on Mars' Hill in ancient Athens (Acts 17:15-34). To the Greeks in Colosse in Asia Minor he wrote:

"*Beware* lest any man spoil you through *philosophy* and vain deceit, after the *tradition of men*, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Col. 2:8).

Jesus Christ himself warned of "making the word of God of none effect through your *tradition*" (Mark 7:13). "In vain they do worship me," he lamented, "teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9).

So what *does* the Bible really say?

Consider first the teaching of the Old Testament. As we have seen, the Jews living in the Hellenistic world admit they took the immortal soul doctrine from Plato. It is *nowhere found* in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Notice Genesis 2:7: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man *became a living soul*."

Consider carefully: Man---formed *of the dust of the ground*, not out of spirit---"became" a living soul. A soul is what man *is*. It is not something a man *has*.

The Hebrew language further proves this point. The Hebrew word translated as "soul" in Genesis 2:7 in the widely used *Authorized Version* of the Bible is *nephesh*. *Nephesh*, in general, designates that which has temporary physical life. It means a creature whose life source comes through breathing. This is the *same word* used frequently in the first chapter of Genesis and elsewhere in reference to *animals*.

Notice, for example, Genesis 1:24: "And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature [*nephesh*] after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so."

Here the word *creature* is the identical Hebrew word that is used in Genesis 2:7 and throughout the Old Testament for "soul." In biblical usage, a brute beast is also a "soul"!

In Leviticus 21:11, Numbers 6:6, Haggai 2:13 and elsewhere, the word *nephesh* is even used with reference to a dead body.

*Nephesh* clearly has nothing whatsoever to do with any sort of immortal soul in man. The soul is not a separate entity from the body. It *is* the body! Man *is a nephesh*. He *is* a soul!

Many additional Old Testament scriptures reveal clearly the *mortality* ---not the immortality---of the soul. Ezekiel 18:4, 20, for example, declares that a soul can *die!* Read it for yourself: "The soul that sinneth, it shall *die.*" If the soul were immortal, how could it die? It's a direct contradiction of terms!

No wonder Jewish scholars today have to point to Plato as the origin of the immortal soul doctrine!

### **The New Testament Speaks**

What about the New Testament? Surely here we find biblical proof for an immortal soul. Or do we?

In the New Testament, "soul" is a translation of the Greek word *psuche*. *Psuche* is generally equivalent to the Hebrew word *nephesh*. Like *nephesh*, *psuche* is frequently rendered "life" in addition to "soul."

*Psuche* is twice used in the New Testament for the lower animals, exactly in the same way as the Hebrew *nephesh* can refer to the life of animals. In these two scriptures (Rev. 8:9 and 16:3), *psuche* is rendered "life" and "soul" respectively, with reference to the life of sea creatures.

The word *psuche* has no connotation whatsoever of "spirit essence" or "immortal soul"!

Jesus Christ, in fact, declared that God is able to *destroy* one's soul (Greek *psuche*, or life) in Gehenna fire (Matt. 10:28).

The words *immortal soul* are found nowhere in the Bible---Old Testament or New. The word *immortal* occurs *only once* in the entire Bible---in I Timothy 1:17, where it refers specifically to *Jesus Christ!*

The word *immortality* is found only in the New Testament, where it occurs fewer than half a dozen times. One of those places---I Timothy 6:16---clearly states that, of all humans, Jesus Christ "ONLY hath immortality"! Romans 2:7 admonishes Christians to "SEEK FOR ...immortality." If man already had immortality, he would not have to *seek* for it!

I Corinthians 15---the "resurrection chapter" of the Bible---shows that a Christian "puts on" immortality at a future resurrection of the dead (see verses 50-54).

As Jesus clearly stated: "That which is born of the flesh *is* flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit *is* spirit" (John 3:6). Man---born of the flesh---*is* flesh. He was not created with inherent immortality. He has only a temporary physicochemical existence. "For dust thou *art*, and *unto dust* shalt thou return," God told Adam (Gen. 3:19).

Only when mortal man is "born again" in a future resurrection will he finally put on immortality and *be* spirit! Why would a resurrection of the body be needed if the soul were already in heaven? The soul does not go to heaven! The mortal soul---man's physical life---dies and turns to dust.

The New Testament, then, teaches *the resurrection*---a rising from the dead---in direct opposition to the pagan Greek idea of an immortal soul. The resurrection is our only hope of eternal life! Jesus Christ's resurrection was a type or forerunner of the resurrection God promises to all who obey him (John 5:28-29; 11:25; Rom. 8:11; Phil. 3:10-11).

Man has no hope of future life *inherent* within himself!

### **The "Spirit in Man"**

Now understand an additional basic truth. Few have ever grasped it.

Since man's material "soul"---his body and its physical life processes---is corruptible and perishes after death, *how* is it possible for God to ultimately resurrect an individual? If everything is physical and turns to dust, what is there that remains of a person to be "brought back"? *How* are his personality, his memory and his character *preserved* by God until a day of resurrection?

The answer is simply that *not everything* about a man is physical! The Bible calls this nonphysical component the "spirit [Hebrew *ruach*, Greek *pneuma*] in man" (Job 32:8; Zech. 12:1; I Cor. 2:11). It is not *the* man. It is *in* man.

This spirit in man, however, has no consciousness apart from the physical human brain. It is not to be confused in any way with the fictional concept of a conscious "immortal soul." "The dead know not any thing," the Bible declares (Eccl. 9:5, 10). In the day of a man's death, "his thoughts perish" (Ps. 146:4). The Bible clearly pictures death as a *sleep*---a state of *unconsciousness* (Dan. 12:2).

It is also this "spirit in man" that sets man apart from the animals. It is what makes man *unique*. It imparts to the living human brain the power of intellect to comprehend materialistic knowledge. It is the source of human intelligence. It is *not* present in animal brain.

### **Whole World Deceived**

There is no scriptural basis whatever for belief in an "immortal soul" surviving consciously after death.

Throughout the centuries of professing Christianity, innumerable sermons have been preached and countless pamphlets written purporting to prove the soul's immortality. Upon careful and open-minded examination, they are all found to be riddled with surprising error.

The doctrine of the immortal soul is built on a foundation of biblical mistranslations, false premises and sloppy scholarship. Few had the spiritual courage to take a fresh, unprejudiced look at the question and accept the *true* Bible teaching.

For when the false doctrine of the immortal soul is toppled, along with it falls the equally pagan and false concept of Heaven and Hell---one of the cornerstones of traditional Christianity!

Satan the devil has succeeded---for the time being---in deceiving the whole world (Rev. 12:9). It was he who first introduced the idea that man does not really die, but is inherently immortal. "Ye shall not surely die," Satan lied to Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:4).

God's future for mankind is far more transcendent than the common picture of immortal souls floating on clouds and strumming harps for eternity. For those who choose it and fulfill the conditions, there *is* life after death by a resurrection. But that life will come through a *new birth* as an immortal spirit being into the very family of God---by means of a future *resurrection* from the dead!

It is time to cast off the fables and traditions of men and understand the great meaning and purpose of human life as revealed in the Bible!

Will *you* have the courage to look into it for yourself?