

The Material Aspect of Humanity... Heart and Mind

When discussing material aspects of man, such as the heart and mind, the English language handles this subject in a definitive manner; however, the Hebrew understanding is more abstract. This poses a real challenge to translation. How are abstract ideas of one language translated into other languages that do not share these concepts culturally or linguistically?

For example in English, the term "heart" is seen as the seat of emotion or kindness (i.e. good-hearted, cold-hearted, soft-hearted, hard-hearted or broken-hearted). In Hebrew, the term "heart" has a broader meaning, going beyond the meaning held by Western culture, to include the thoughts and logic of a person. In contrast, English considers the term "mind" to represent the seat of thought. It is for this reason that there are no Hebrew terms for the English word "mind".

Heart

As a physical organ deep and hidden within the human body, Hebrews sees the heart as the source of one's inner self, the seat of emotion, understanding, volitional will and conscience. Most biblical references to the heart are typically a figure of speech of some aspect of human personality. A word study of the term "heart" in Hebrew ("leb", Strong's #3820) and in Greek ("kardia", Strong's #2588) can shed light on this issue.

The heart can think, understand and be intentional:

For You have kept their **heart** from understanding, therefore You will not exalt them. (Job 17:4)

Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your **heart** all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons. (Deut 4:9)

How long? Is there anything in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy falsehood, even these prophets of the deception of their own **heart**, (Jer 23:26)

For wisdom will enter your **heart** and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; (Prov 2:10)

Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute **heart** to remain true to the Lord; (Acts 11:23)

The anger of the LORD will not turn back until He has performed and carried out the purposes of His **heart**; in the last days you will clearly understand it. (Jer 23:20)

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the **heart**. (Heb 4:12)

not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the **heart**. (Eph 6:6)

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The heart can feel and have emotion:

Love / Hate

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the **heart**, (1 Pet 1:22)

He turned their **heart** to hate His people, to deal craftily with His servants. (Ps 105:25)

Joy / Sorrow

All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my **heart** from any pleasure, for my **heart** was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. (Ecc 2:10)

Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and a glad **heart**, for the abundance of all things; (Deut 28:47)

But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your **heart**. (John 16:6)

Delight / Bitterness

Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my **heart**; for I have been called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts. (Jer 15:16)

Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose **heart**. (Col 3:21)

Fearful / Astonished

The oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and is about to come to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, and the **heart** of the Egyptians will melt within them. (Isaiah 19:1)

Say to those with anxious **heart**, "take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you." (Isaiah 35:4)

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. (Deut 28:65)

In the morning you shall say, 'Would that it were evening!' And at evening you shall say, 'Would that it were morning!' because of the dread of your **heart** which you dread, and for the sight of your eyes which you will see. (Deut 28:67)

The heart reflects one's true character.

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Evil / Purity / Good

At that time they will call Jerusalem 'The Throne of the LORD,' and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name of the LORD; nor will they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil **heart**. (Jer 3:17)

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his **heart** was only evil continually. (Gen 6:5)

The **heart** is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)

Blessed are the pure in **heart**, for they shall see God. (Matt 5:8)

Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your **heart** and the **heart** of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your **heart** and with all your soul, so that you may live. (Deut 30:6)

You shall therefore impress these words of mine on your **heart** and on your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. (Deut 11:18)

Hardness / Sincerity

Yet Pharaoh's **heart** was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Ex 7:13)

Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of **heart**, fearing the Lord. (Col 3:22)

Rebellious / Obedient

But this people has a stubborn and rebellious **heart**; they have turned aside and departed. (Jer 5:23)

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving **heart** that falls away from the living God. (Heb 3:12)

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the **heart** to that form of teaching to which you were committed, (Rom 6:17)

Integrity / Corruption

"Did he not himself say to me, 'she is my sister'? And she herself said, 'he is my brother.' In the integrity of my **heart** and the innocence of my hands I have done this." (Gen 20:5)

A perverse **heart** shall depart from me; I will know no evil. (Ps 101:4)

The fool has said in his **heart**, "there is no God." They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good. (Ps 14:1)

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Arrogant / Humble

The arrogance of your **heart** has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place, who say in your **heart**, 'who will bring me down to earth?' (Oba 1:3)

And all the people know it, that is, Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria, asserting in pride and in arrogance of **heart**: (Isaiah 9:9)

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. (Matt 11:29)

Throughout the Bible, as the seat of mankind's deepest convictions, beliefs and volitional will, it is the heart that is recognized as the root of mankind's problem. As representing the essence of a man, the heart is the primary focus of God's commands, calling and home for the Holy Spirit.

Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your **heart** and the **heart** of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your **heart** and with all your soul, so that you may live. (Deut 30:6)

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his **heart**... (Matt 13:19)

that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your **heart** that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the **heart** a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (Rom 10:9-10)

who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our **hearts** as a pledge. (2 Cor 1:22)

Mind

As mentioned earlier, there are no Hebrew words for the English term "mind." While Western culture understands the term "mind" to refer to how one thinks and reasons, like the term "heart", the Hebrew concept is much broader.

The following are a few examples of how several Hebrew words can be translated as "mind".

and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My **mind** (leb – Hebrew word for heart); (Jer 19:5)

As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing **mind** (nephesh – Hebrew word for soul); for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever. (1 Chron 28:9)

What comes into your **mind** (ruwach – Hebrew word for spirit) will not come about, when you say: 'We will be like the nations, like the tribes of the lands, serving wood and stone.' (Ezek 20:32)

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Jews did not see a distinction between what they understood (ideas or logic) and what they felt (emotion); Hebrew linguistics reflected their view of life, and how it was dynamically intertwined with both living and experience.

In the New Testament, there are several Greek words used for the term “mind.” While in English, the term “mind” is morally neutral, the New Testament views the word in a moral context and as a reflection of the orientation of one’s heart.

For example, in a negative moral context, the mind may be “on the flesh” (Rom 8:5-7), “depraved” (1 Tim 6:5), “defiled” (Tit 1:15), “blinded” (2 Cor 4:4) or “hardened” (2 Cor 3:14)

In a positive moral context, the mind may be implanted with “God’s laws” (Heb 8:10), “renewed” (Rom 12:2), “sincere” (2 Pet 3:1), “love” (Matt 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27) or “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16).

This final example sums up the challenging issue of translating abstract concepts into other languages. The well-known verse of Deuteronomy 6:5 is quoted three times in the New Testament:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart (lebab) and with all your soul (nephesh) and with all your might (meod). (Deut 6:5)

The Hebrew terms emphasize the total personal devotional focus on God: “lebab” refers to the intentional will and full extent of man, “nephesh” refers to the involvement of the will of the whole being, and “meod” refers to the utmost degree of effort and commitment.

When Deuteronomy 6:5 was quoted in the New Testament, the concept of total devotional commitment was difficult to translate into Greek:

And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.” (Matt 22:37)

This quotation rendered only “mind”.

AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH (Mark 12:30)

This quotation rendered “mind and strength”.

And he answered, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” (Luke 10:27)

This quotation rendered “strength and mind”.

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Despite the development of human language for the purpose of precise communication, the Bible and the subtle nuances of Hebrew language affirm the complexity of both the material and immaterial aspects of human nature. Jewish thought understood that human nature had a complex and intertwined quality; it was not neatly divided in concept and function.

Thus, when understood as the Hebrews intended, terms such as “heart” add greater depth to relevant biblical passages. And in light of the image that man was created, understanding and appreciating the complexity of human nature provides a glimpse into the complex nature of our Creator.

References:

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