

# Breath of life, humans and animals

## If humans and animals have the “breath of life,” would it not seem logical that both experience the same kind of death?

Reading in English that “of all that was on the dry land, all in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, died” (Genesis 7:22, NASU), it can be easy for some to conclude that both human beings and animals have the same “breath of life.” For the psychopannychist who advocates a monist anthropology that the human person is a creature entirely of this dimension, the Flood narrative of Genesis states that *all* which possessed the breath of life died.

In Genesis 2:7, we see that when God created Adam, He “formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (NASU). What actually animated Adam was a distinct *nishmat chayim* (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים), where it is nowhere stated that the animals were given at their creation. With Ancient Hebrew largely lacking the vocabulary of “mind” or “consciousness” or “reason,” we are right to recognize, as many interpreters have over the centuries, that the *nishmat chayim* or “breath of life”<sup>1</sup> is a distinct, immaterial component granted to Adam and all human beings.

No one can overlook that later in the account of the Flood, creatures which do not possess the “breath of life” receive the effects of the judgment, otherwise what need would there have been for animals to be preserved on the Ark? In Genesis 6:17 we encounter God’s decree, “Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish” (NASU). Here, those creatures which possess *ruach chayim* (רוּחַ חַיִּים) are targeted as being those which will endure His judgment. Likewise in Genesis 7:15, *ruach chayim* is used to describe the entry of the animals into Noah’s Ark: “So they went into the ark to Noah, by twos of all flesh in which was the breath of life” (NASU).

Recognizing that human beings are the only creatures which truly possess *nishmat chayim*, what is to be made of the assertion of Genesis 7:22? “[O]f all that was on the dry land, all in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life [*nishmat-ruach chayim*, נִשְׁמַת־רוּחַ חַיִּים], died” (NASU). Is this to be taken as a reference to both the human sinners and animals that were caught up in the Flood? Or, does Genesis 7:22 only speak of the human sinners who were caught up in the Flood?

Whether or not animals too possess *nishmat chayim*, leaving the door wide open for both animals and humans being largely compositionally indifferent, can only be answered from Genesis 7:22 when we conclude **who the Flood was primarily intended for**. This should actually not be too difficult to figure out: “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. The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Genesis 6:5-6, NASU). The principal recipients of the Flood, those who caused the Flood and were to be judged by it, **was sinful humankind**. No one can argue at all that the animals were responsible for the Flood, because at most the animals were most literally in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hugh Ross validly observes,

“The Flood accounts tell us of God’s grief and agonizing over humanity’s corruption. With a heavy heart He cleansed the world to keep it from utter ruin. He found one man, just one, who with his family could keep the human race from self-extinction and further suffering in the process.”<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the Flood was **to wipe out sinful humanity**, and in Ross’ words, “God saved 100 percent of the noncancerous tissue in the body of humanity.”<sup>3</sup> Those specifically to be eliminated by the Flood who possessed

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<sup>1</sup> ATS actually renders this as “soul of life.”

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis*, second expanded edition (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), pp 142-143.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

*nishmat chayim* were its human recipients. God as Creator was not hesitant to judge those within whom He placed a special consciousness-breath. 1 Peter 3:19-20 testifies to how in the period between His death and resurrection, Yeshua the Messiah made a proclamation of His victory to those who rebelled at the time of the Flood, being held in Sheol/Hades:

“He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through *the water*” (NASU).

Animals and humans both have *ruach chayim*, but only humans have *nishmat chayim*. In the case of the Flood, the death of those beings which had *nishmat chayim* was by no means just the result of an ecological catastrophe; it was the result of the great sinfulness of man.

(The discussion that Genesis 7:22 is speaking of the human recipients of the Flood, and not animals, is of course heightened by the debate over how extensive the Flood actually was. Was the Flood something that covered over every single square inch of Planet Earth, or did it only extend out as far as humanity had settled? If the Flood only devastated a localized, albeit rather broad area to the Ancient Near East, then the fact that those who possessed *nishmat chayim* were only human, is even more supported.)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Consult “The Flood: Global or Local?” in *Ibid.*, pp 145-161 for a further discussion.