

# Does *Ruwach* Life Require Active Respiration?

by Chard Berndt

The *ruwach* (“spirit” or “breath”) mode of life is a chief criterion for associating organisms in a biblical classification scheme. It is a subset of *nephesh* (“soul”) life, and, together with the priority of water, sky, and land<sup>1</sup> in the Creation account, it helps to define the hierarchical associations of God’s living works. For creatures that respire actively, by moving air in and out of a body cavity, we can confidently assert the presence of “breath” life. But what about those creatures that obtain oxygen in simpler ways, particularly when they do so passively? For example, is an earthworm’s “subcutaneous respiration” really to be regarded as *ruwach*, or “breath”?

When encountering my Biblical Classification of Life scheme, some have raised the general question that bears on the above question: Should the medium in which an organism obtains oxygen really be so significant in establishing its life hierarchy? That is, does the annelid worm, employing passive gas transfer in an aerated soil environment, really have a characteristic life beyond that of a nematode worm, that does essentially the same thing in an oxygenated *water* environment? Or to take it a step further, does an earthworm have a characteristic life beyond that of a fish, which furthermore employs an *active* transfer of oxygen in a water environment?

To begin, we must separate this discussion from the emotional argument. When comparing an earthworm to a fish, the fish’s greater anatomical and physiological complexities are unquestionable, and we might regard the fish as bearing higher value on this basis. Yet that sentiment is unrelated to the question at hand, which is whether or not the earthworm specifically possesses the biblical *ruwach*. If it does, then it possesses an additional mode of life that the fish doesn’t, regardless of its relative simplicity. Unfortunately, our indoctrination into the “complexity equals higher” tenet of evolution seems to interfere with a fresh biblical look at the matter; The Bible certainly regards complexity (in particular, locomotive complexity), but also upholds essence and essential life nature, an attribute not limited to the physical realm.

As another point of preliminary clarification, it should also be understood that *ruwach* is not unique to mankind. Preachers that attempt to present our special place in the creation typically offer our possession of “spirit” as synonymous to the “image of God.” Admittedly, the Creation account speaks of the breath of life only when referring to man’s creation, but this provides emphasis concerning the intimate *manner* in which that breath was given. In fact, it is not the word *ruwach* that is used of mankind in Genesis 2:7, but its less-frequent counterpart *neshamah*. As it is, creatures other than mankind are regarded as having *ruwach* in the Flood account’s Scriptures to be discussed later, and in additional Scriptures such as the following:

Thou hidest thy face, they [the many creatures listed prior in the chapter] are troubled: thou takest away their breath [*ruwach*], they die, and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy spirit [*ruwach*], they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth. – Psalms 104:29-30

It is not man's *ruwach* that sets us apart from the rest of the living creation, but rather it is our God-image, among other things.<sup>2</sup>

So, returning to our discussion: If creatures other than man possess *ruwach*, which are they? The account of the Great Flood speaks on this matter. First, it establishes without question that *all* creatures of sky and land were destroyed, except those boarded on the ark. This is made clear through the use of specific terms that parallel the Creation account itself. In the interest of sticking to our earthworm subject, we will just examine the portions that relate to land creatures. The three terms employed in Genesis 1:24-25, echoed six times in the Flood account, are *remes*, *chay*, and *behemah*<sup>3</sup>. In the Creation account, these three describe land creatures exhaustively, and when listed in succession repeatedly in the Flood account, the same completeness is likewise suggested.

Furthermore, the specific declaration that *all* creatures (or *every* creature) upon Earth were destroyed is repeated seven times (six times along with *remes*, *chay*, and *behemah* as mentioned above). For example,

They, and **every** beast [*chay*] after his kind, and **all** the cattle [*behemah*] after their kind, and **every** creeping thing [*remes*] that creepeth upon the earth after his kind....  
– Genesis 7:14

To add to this remarkable emphasis on the completeness of the Flood's destruction upon all life on land, we might also consider the absurdity of the idea that *any* land creature, if somehow not included in these lists, could have survived such a duration (the floodwaters covered the Earth completely for over one hundred days, and the majority of the land for over two hundred days).

Second, if the Flood account indicates that all creatures were destroyed, what does it say about *ruwach* creatures in particular? Are these a subset of those destroyed, or is there a one-to-one correspondence? Let us look at the first mention of *ruwach* in the Flood account:

And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh, wherein *is* the breath [*ruwach*] of life, from under heaven; *and* every thing that *is* in the earth shall die. – Genesis 6:17

Note that if one is to determine from this verse whether “everything that is in the earth” corresponds directly with “all flesh, wherein is the breath of life,” then the “and” is critical. In the KJV text above, it is written in. In the NIV it is left out. So, some ambiguity prevails, which might be understood better through two restatements. First, the “subset” version:

*...to destroy all flesh which has the breath of life, from under heaven, and along with these, everything that is in the earth shall die.*

Next, the “one-to-one” version:

*...to destroy all flesh which has the breath of life, from under heaven. Thus, everything that is in the earth shall die.*

I think that the second version best captures the meaning of the verse, and reads closest to major Bible translations of the verse. Furthermore, this is more consistent with the parallel sentence structure of biblical Hebrew, which often states the same thing two different ways for emphasis.

But because of the ambiguity of Genesis 6:17, it may be helpful to look at the other Scripture in the account that might indicate that some of the destroyed creatures were not *ruwach* creatures:

<sup>21</sup>And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man:

<sup>22</sup>All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died.

<sup>23</sup>And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained *alive*, and they that *were* with him in the ark. – Genesis 7:21-23

The framing verses of this passage surely include earthworms, which are among “every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth,” and among “every living substance which was upon the face of the ground.” The question, then, is whether or not verse 22 is a special qualifier in the Flood account, suggesting that *among* the complete destruction, *also included* were those “in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land....”

But this verse, as a possible qualifier that land *ruwach* creatures were a subset of all land creatures destroyed, poses a major problem: the term *ruwach* alone is not used here. Rather, “breath” is translated here from both *neshamah* and *ruwach* in succession. As mentioned earlier, the rarer *neshamah* is the only “breath” term used in the Creation account, as an emphasis upon the special way in which God brought life to Adam. So too here, an emphasis is being placed upon those that sustain their breath life in a higher way, namely by active inhalation, through “nostrils.” So at most, one could conclude here that simpler modes of obtaining oxygen, e.g. subcutaneous respiration, are not regarded as *neshamah*-driven breath. But this does not necessarily exclude these simpler creatures from the designation of breath-life itself, or *ruwach*.

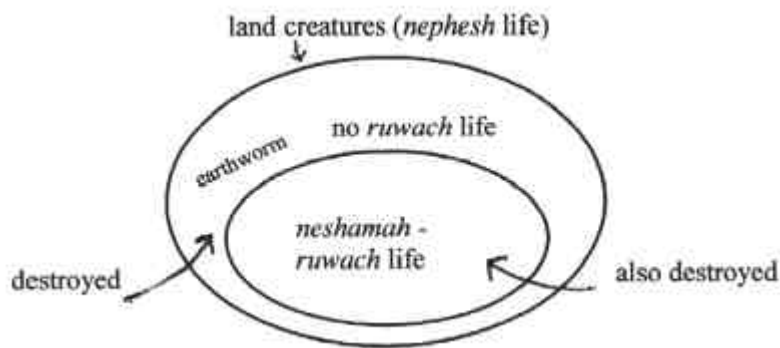
So, what is the purpose of this verse? If *neshamah-ruwach* is the subset of land creatures, rather than *ruwach* itself, as verse 22 suggests, then perhaps the second half of that verse (“of all that was in the dry land”) follows as a necessary clarification that *aquatic* creatures possessing *neshamah*-

*ruwach* (nostril-driven breath), were *not* destroyed outright in the Flood. I believe that the inspired writer wanted to show that the destruction was complete, *even to the extent* of the most splendid organisms of land and sky, *but not of those higher air-breathing aquatic creatures* (whales, leviathan, walruses, etc.).

So it comes down to two interpretations of this Scripture, again either “subset” or “one-to-one.” Perhaps two restatements of Genesis 7:22 will show the difference. First, the idea of *ruwach* life being a subset of all terrestrial life might render the verse to read as follows:

*Of all life of the land, all who have the breath [neshamah-ruwach] of life were also destroyed.*

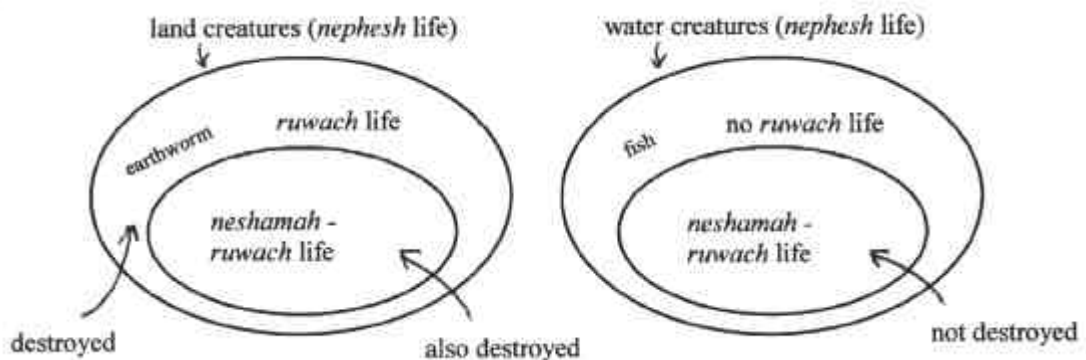
So, diagrammatically, the subset interpretation (in which *neshamah-ruwach* is essentially redundant to *ruwach*) appears like this:



On the other hand, the idea of the one-to-one correspondence of land creatures and *ruwach* might read:

*All who breathe in [neshamah] the breath [ruwach] of life, who live on the land, were destroyed.*

And, diagrammatically, the one-to-one interpretation (in which *neshamah* is seen as an additional modifier) appears like this:



In conclusion: The Flood account indicates an utter destruction of all creatures of land and sky, which includes the earthworms. Genesis 6:17 favors the interpretation that all of these creatures

possess *ruwach* (breath) life, yet it remains somewhat unclear. Genesis 7:22 could perhaps be understood to say that this destruction involved any creatures not possessing *ruwach* life, and yet, rather than to exclude, it confirms only that creatures with *neshamah-ruwach* life were *among* those destroyed. The use of *neshamah* as a rarer mention of “breath,” which in this case modifies *ruwach*, more plausibly suggests that *ruwach* is inclusive of both passive and active respirations of air, and is the more general term. Thus one cannot conclude that *ruwach* life necessitates active breathing. Furthermore, no other Scriptures place such a restriction on *ruwach*, and so there is every reason to conclude that an earthworm possesses this life nature. Fish, however, do not respire in an air environment, and are certainly not *ruwach* creatures. Therefore, a creature possessing any form of passive respiration in air, such as the earthworm, possesses an additional mode of life that a non-breathing aquatic creature, such as a fish, does not possess.

So, is an earthworm “higher” than a fish? Not in anatomy or physiology, and not in the sense that it is a “creeping” creature, as per distinctions made in Leviticus 11. Yet it is a creature of land (created Day 6) rather than of water (created Day 5), and possesses an additional mode of life, *ruwach*, reserved for select aquatic creatures, all flying creatures, all land creatures, and mankind. In this regard, it may indeed be a higher creature, or at least a creature on a lower rung of a higher ladder.

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*Biblical Classification of Life*: [www.creationbydesign.com](http://www.creationbydesign.com)

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<sup>1</sup> In the Biblical Classification of Life scheme (BCL), water, sky, and land are the major “Habitats”—capital “H”, as opposed to localized habitats (which may include any combination of the three). Modern science regards these as the hydrosphere, atmosphere, and lithosphere, respectively, and all life therein as the biosphere. The Creation account presents the three Habitats twice, firstly when describing Earth’s preparation for creatures (Days 1-3) and secondly when describing the filling of Earth with creatures and mankind (Days 5-6).

<sup>2</sup> See “Mankind Set Apart” <<http://www.creationbydesign.com/articles/MankindSetApart.pdf>>

<sup>3</sup> *Behemah* is often translated “livestock” or “cattle,” and sometimes “beast;” Its context, though, shows that it always refers to a hooved beast (whether wild or domesticated). *Remes* refers to creeping creatures of land (including four legged, many legged, and no legged), and is translated consistently among Bible versions. *Chay*, when used as a specific modifier for land animals, refers to everything in between, which is to say, “unhooved beasts,” even though it is often translated as “wild animals” or “beasts.”