

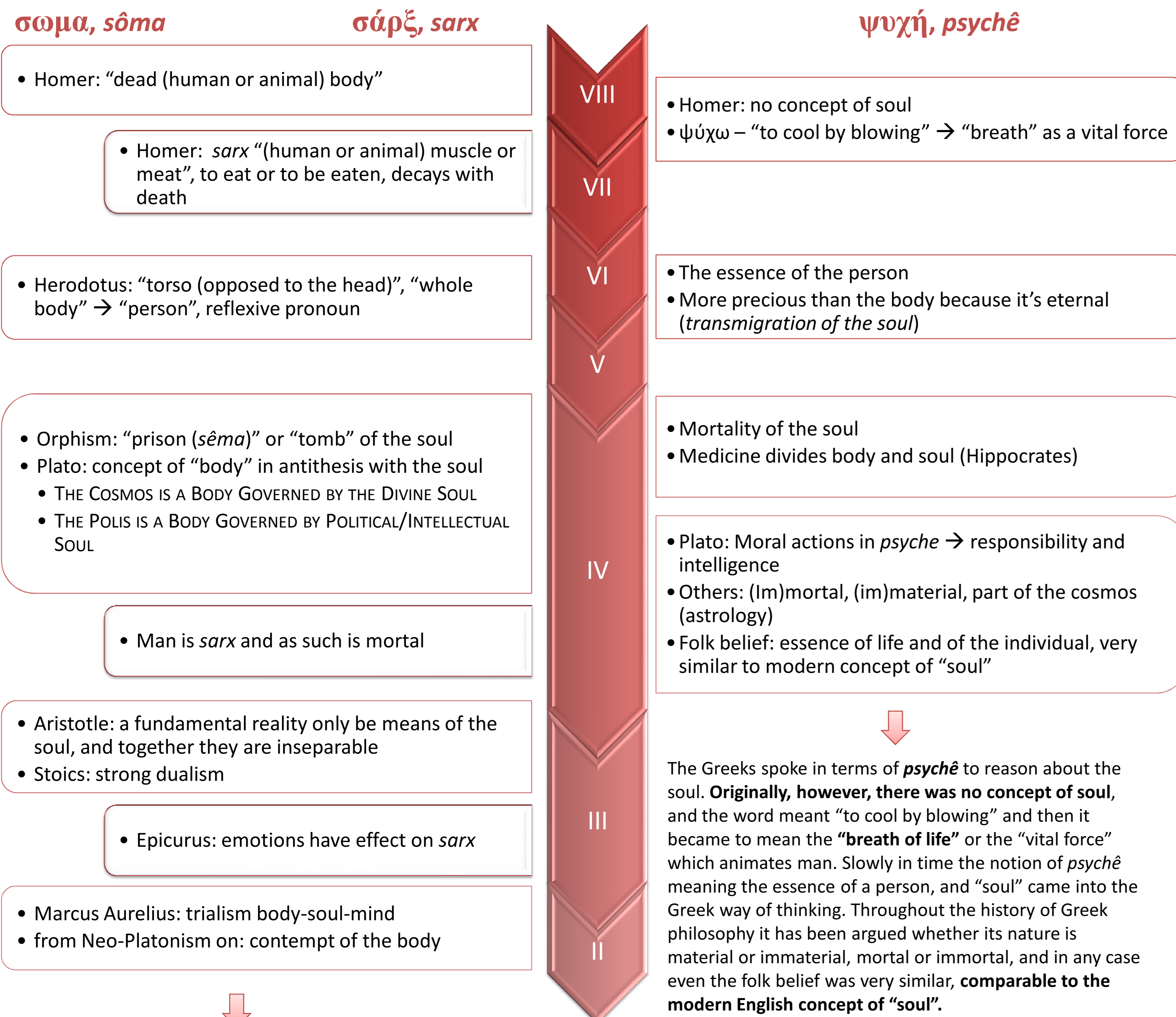
COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS AND THE EVOLUTION OF BODY AND SOUL IN THE WESTERN WORLD: FROM ANCIENT HEBREW TO MODERN ENGLISH

IN THE WESTERN WORLD: FROM ANCIENT HEBREW TO MODERN ENGLISH

A philological and comparative analysis of the **lexical items concerning personhood** in Ancient Hebrew, Ancient Greek and Modern English reveals semantic shifts concerning the relative lexical concepts. Ancient Hebrew presents an essentially **holistic idea of personhood**, whereas, via Biblical translations and Greek philosophical influences, the Western World has conceptualized humans as

being dualistic in nature. I analyze the **polysemy and semantic shifts** in the lexicon used for "body" and "soul" in Ancient Hebrew and Ancient Greek, which are the two linguistic systems known by St. Paul of Tarsus, and then confront them with Paul's usage context, and finally with Modern English, hypothesizing a possible case of linguistic relativity.

Body and Soul in Ancient Greek



When speaking of "body" in Ancient Greece, there were two main words: *sarx* and *sōma*, roughly translated respectively as "flesh" and "body".

Gr. *sarx* is closer to our translation than the second and originally meant "(human or animal) muscle or meat", and with time it was understood that it was **connected with death, but also with emotions which have an effect, especially negative, on the human body**. The word became **polysemically enhanced**, and the connotation which started as neutral, starts to shift negatively. Indeed according to cognitive linguists (Lakoff (1987) and Taylor (1995) for example) polysemy is a common way in which metonymical concepts are manifested in language.

Gr. *sōma*, more or less "body", on the contrary has origins that are not as clear, first attested in Homer in the sense of "cadaver" and in the 5th cent. Having the **sense of "torso", "body" and then shifting metonymically to be the "person" or even used as a reflexive pronoun**. Orphism introduced the concept of the **body as a tomb** or a prison of the soul, a mental image based on the conceptual metaphor THE BODY IS THE CONTAINER OF THE SOUL which proved to be productive also thanks to the quasi-homonymy *sōma/sēma*. Other conceptual metaphors were introduced by Plato, who systematized the concept of **body/soul dualism**, which pervaded from the 4th century BCE on, with exceptions such as Aristotle's view that there is a composition between soul and material, but not the other way round.

Paul's semantics of BODY and SOUL

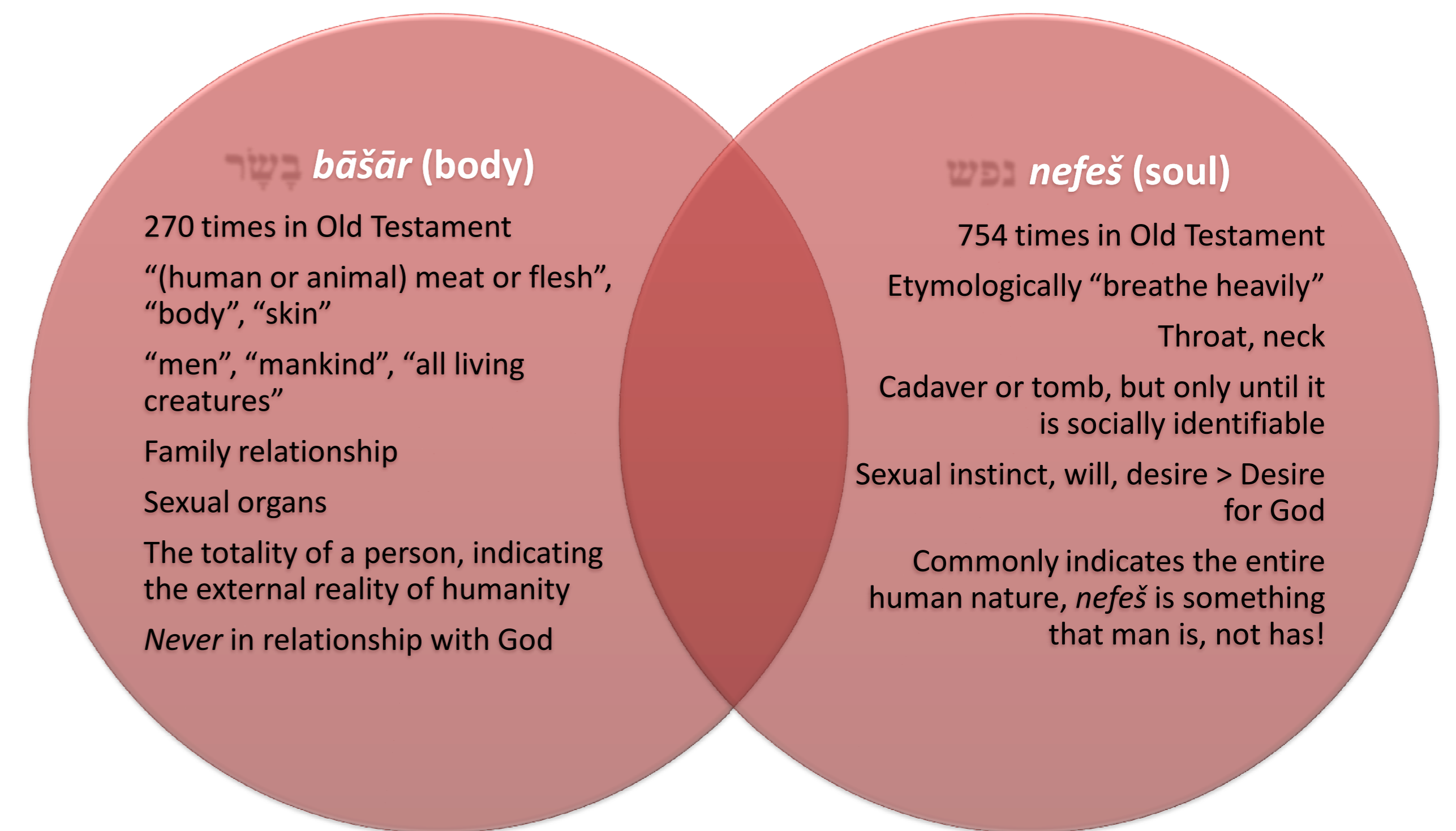
Paul's uses *sarx* to speak literally about flesh ("in *flesh* and blood"), or as a synecdoche for the entire human body ("I want you to know how much I am struggling ... for all who have not met me *personally*") and all humankind ("no *one* will be declared righteous"). What is particular to Paul is his usage of *sarx* to denote the rebel human nature, that is, not wanting to accept Christ ("Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."). Such **negative connotation given to *sarx* is unprecedented in the rest of the Greek Bible** and is proper to Paul, who uses it often in the context of "spirit/soul" as its antithesis. In this respect *sarx* is much more metaphorical than English "flesh/meat/body" or whatever other lexical item used.

Paul uses the Greek word "*sōma*" 91 times, and generally it is to **speak metaphorically about the body of the Christian church**, whose followers are all members, certainly influenced by the metaphor THE COSMOS IS A BODY. He often uses *sōma* generally to express the analogy with the parts of the body as a cosmic image of the Christian church, speaking of the parts of the body that seem the weakest or the smallest as being equally as important as the rest. This seems like a very positive view of the concept of body, far more metaphorical than previously imagined, in that the individuals in the Christian society are responsible for themselves and for the others.

Paul consciously never uses the word *sōma* in proximity of the word *psychē* (except in one instance where he uses a stock phrase), because he was well aware of the semantics of these words and what mental images would be prompted in his Greek readers (today we would call this a Stroop effect) The word *psychē* is used generally to mean "life" (e.g. "to give my life for you"), or "person" or "self". He makes careful use as to use it only in a neutral or positive sense, so as to **avoid ambiguities with his Greek audience** and their knowledge of the word.

A quick word on the notion of the Resurrection of the Dead: in Paul's conception, the *nefeš* would be resurrected when Christ came back for Atonement. This would mean that the person would be reunited with his or her body. For Paul, man is *nefeš* and soul and body are *inseparable*. No matter how you look at the linguistic data, his concept of the person would be no other way.

Body and Soul in Ancient Hebrew



Hebr. *bāšār* is a case lexical semantic discrepancy of active zone (Langacker, 1991), i.e. that facet which most directly participates in the metonymic relationship between a word and its construed sense. The semantic shifts, caused by highlighting (Croft, 1993) or by figure/ground effects (Koch, 2004), historically produced lexical semantic values of *bāšār* with the sense of "(human or animal) meat" or as a synecdoche for the "entire body," and metonymically or metaphorically for "men" in general, family relationships or euphemistically for both sexual organs. *Bāšār* also is used in ritual contexts, so that we have meats to be sacrificed, "flesh" to be circumcised. The Septuagint translation, that is, the canonical Greek translation from the Hebrew, uses *sarx* 145 times, *sōma* 23 times, and a handful of other translations for *bāšār*, which at times poses interpretational problems (cf. Evola, 2005). *Bāšār*, in any case, also simply meant "person" and the **external reality of humanity**. This was a quality proper to humanity, and as a matter of fact, notwithstanding the frequent use of anthropomorphisms in the Old Testament, *bāšār* was never used to describe God, as opposed to *nefeš*, which can roughly be translated as "soul". This suggests the "earthly" dimension of man and of humanity and what distinguishes Adam from God.

Hebr. *nefeš* is but one way to talk about the soul, and the concept is present in all Semitic cultures, for example in the Arab world. It is translated into English as "soul" although it is completely different from the Modern Western concept and even from the Ancient Greek. **About 90% of the times it is translated into Greek as *psychē*, certainly creating some confusion** (for example, sometimes it translates into something far less abstract than "soul", such as "throat" and "neck"). Although the origins of both *nefeš* and *psychē*, both dealing with "breath", *nefeš* is commonly used to holistically indicate the complete human nature, a person's essence, more so than *bāšār* or even *psychē*. *Nefeš* is more than Westerners' concept of soul, being **something that man is, not has, just as man is *bāšār* and does not have *bāšār***. These are two ways of looking at the same thing (à la Wittgenstein). To better understand the concept, **even a dead body can be *nefeš***, but only until it is within the sociality, within the social physical confines (i.e. the commune), only until it is still identifiable by the defunct's society, but when it is disposed of, it is no longer *nefeš*. *Nefeš* is also will, **desire, and sexual instinct**: it might come as a surprise to Westerners that the same word is used to describe a devotees yearning "erotically" for God (for example in the *Song of Songs*). **To say that *nefeš* is the person is not to say that the soul is the person, because *nefeš* includes and presupposes *bāšār***. Ancient Hebrews could not even conceive the thought of one without the other. The body keeps man grounded on the earth, and thanks to his soul he is able to transcend it and elevate himself above and beyond his environment. Almost unanimously Biblical scholars say that **the usage of pre-Platonic *psychē* as a translation of *nefeš* is insufficient, if not deceptive**.

Corpus Paulinum

- Romans
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Philippians
- Colossians
- 1 Thessalonians
- 2 Thessalonians
- Philemon

Conclusions

- Paul's usage of lexical items concerning the body and the soul where subtly chosen to avoid that the Greek speakers would not refer to the semantic values found in Greek philosophy; successively translators and interpreters of the texts erroneously gave his words the connotations of the Greek rather than the Hebrew traditions.
- Paul's vision of personhood is holistic; from this analysis of the lexical items concerning personhood, the semantic shifts concerning the relative lexical concepts successively brought forth a dualistic vision of his anthropology.
- For each translational or interpretative act, a representational perspective is of utter importance.
- Could this be a case of linguistic relativism (i.e. do Christians perceive themselves and the world around them in a certain way because of the language used?)
- Can we be talking about "perceptual dualism"?

Works Cited

- Croft, W. (1993). The role of domains in the interpretation of metaphors and metonymies. *Cognitive Linguistics* 4:335-370.
- Evola, Vito (2005) Cognitive Semiotics and On-Line Reading of Religious Texts. *Journal of Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* Vol. 6(N. 2).
- Koch, P. (2004). Metonymy between pragmatics, reference, and diachrony. *metaphorik.de* 07/2004.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, fire, and dangerous things: what categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Langacker, R. (1991). *Concept, Image, Symbol: The Cognitive Basis of Grammar* (second edition: 2002). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Taylor, J. R. (1995). *Linguistic categorization: Prototypes in linguistic theory*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.