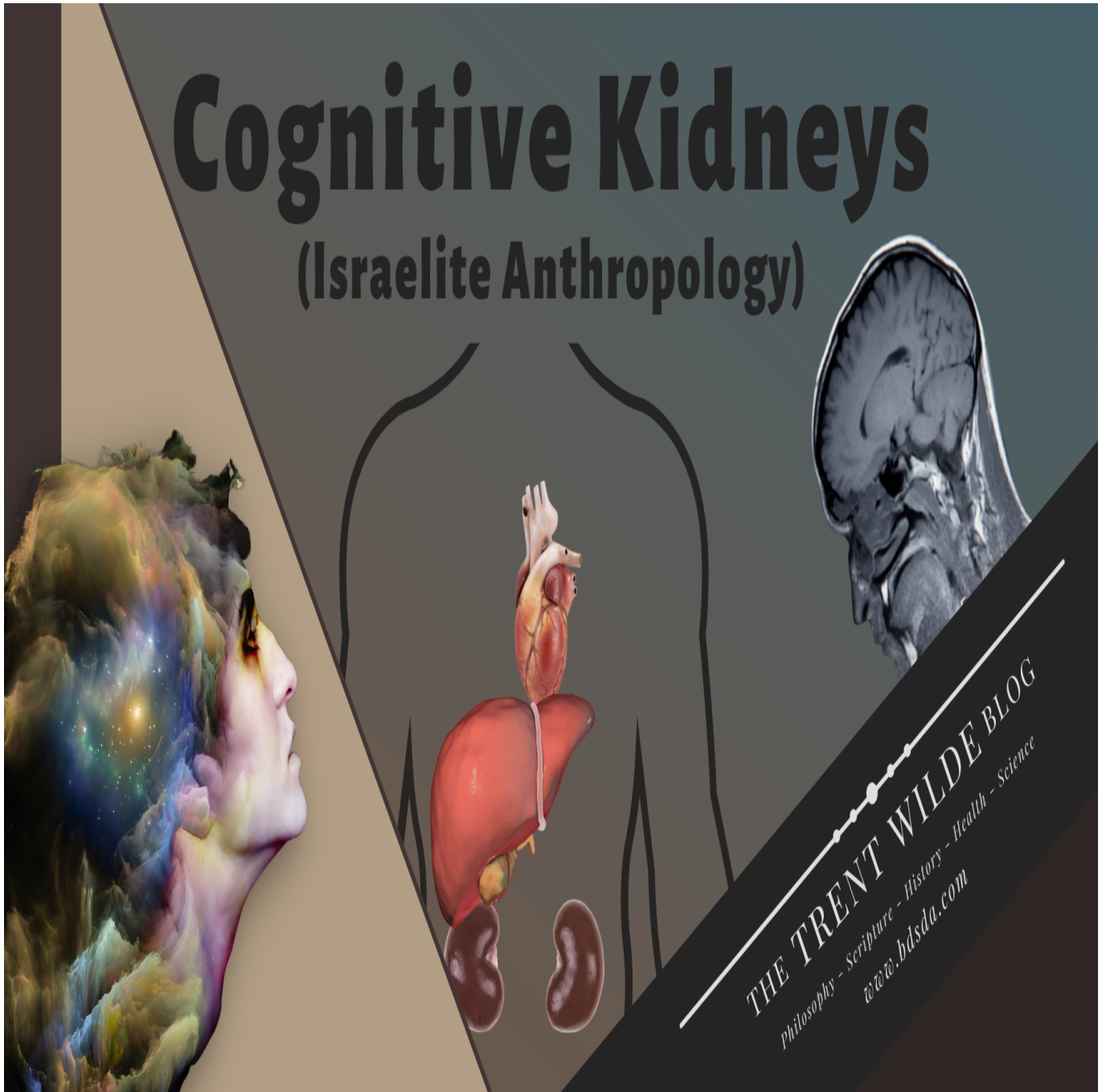


## Cognitive Kidneys (Israelite Anthropology)

### Description



[\(Podcast Version – Follow/Subscribe\)](#)

Have you ever had a hard time wrapping your brain around a new idea? You just keep racking your brain, but get nowhere! Then someone comes along with a completely different background

and a different education, and to them, it's a no-brainer. You can see that they understand it so much better than you do, but you have no clue how they got there. So, you wish you could just pick their brain.

Okay, so I just used four brain-related idioms: "wrap your brain around something," "rack your brain," "no-brainer," and "pick someone's brain." All of these idioms presuppose an understanding of the brain that attributes to it cognition. In other words, it assumes that the brain is what does the thinking. But the functions of the brain haven't always been understood. [Ancient Egyptians removed the brain in the process of mummification, regarding it as unessential. Aristotle thought it was just for cooling the blood.](#)

But you know, the role of the brain as the organ of thought is much less recognized even today than you might suppose. Sure, pretty much everyone acknowledges that the brain is the organ most closely associated with thinking, but a whole lot of people, even the vast majority, still think the *actual* source of thought is something else – at a minimum, they have inconsistent thinking on the issue. Everyone who has a dualistic understanding of human nature, which is most people, ultimately place consciousness and thought beyond the brain.

To analyse your own thinking on the matter, consider this: Do you think it's possible to experience any kind of existence without a body? If so, whatever you would include in that existence – perhaps thoughts, feelings, awareness, etc. are things you must be thinking of as ultimately independent of the brain.

Another way to reveal your own thinking on this is to imagine someone physically just like every other human; they have all their bodily organs in functioning order, including the brain. However, they have no soul, no spirit, nothing beyond the matter that makes them up – they are an exclusively physical organism. If you think an entity like this would have no self-awareness, no inner mental life, then it shows that you're attributing mental activity not to a brain, but to a soul or spirit.

And tons of people think this. I've heard sermons preached against the idea that brains think and have conscious experiences. And even among philosophers and other educated people, you can find those who deny that the brain really thinks. They might say that the brain is the organ through which the non-physical thinking agent controls the body, but ultimately, they say the thinking and conscious experience is beyond the body.

So, what did ancient Israelites think? Well, they didn't think we think with our brains. At least as far as surviving evidence goes, they seem to have had no understanding of the function of the brain whatsoever. There isn't even a word for "brain" in ancient Hebrew! Some might be tempted to ridicule them over this and regard them as primitive barbarians. But really, the function of the brain simply wasn't yet known when Hebrew authors started writing, not by *anybody* so far as we know. Plus, we're probably ignorant of a whole lot right now that people 3000 years from now will think of as basic knowledge.

Okay, ancient Israelites didn't attribute thinking to the brain, but even more importantly, they didn't attribute thoughts, feelings, and self-awareness to a soul or spirit, or anything at all like a non-physical essence. As we've seen in the past couple of posts, they weren't dualists; they had a materialistic view of human nature.

What we're going to cover right now is the fact that this materialist view of human nature, is also manifested in the fact that they attributed different mental activities to bodily organs – particularly, the kidneys, the liver, and the heart. This is often obscured in translation since the words for kidneys and liver are simply not translated as “kidneys” and “liver” when mental activity is attributed to them. They are instead translated as “mind” or “conscience” or something else open to spiritualistic interpretations. But the fact is, we know from Israelite sacrificial texts that these words really do mean “liver” and “kidney.” If you want to look into that more, a good starting place is Exodus 29:13. You can look it up using a resources that enables you to get at the Hebrew text (like [Logos](#) or [BlueLetterBible](#)) and then do word studies on the words for liver and kidneys.

The Hebrew word for “heart” is usually translated as “heart,” but people very often mistakenly interpret the texts as though they are using the heart as a metaphor for emotions and deep feelings like we do today. But the fact that the heart is spoken of alongside the liver and kidneys as being responsible for cognitive abilities shows that they really were referring to the actual organ – the literal heart. Furthermore, they attribute to the heart things that really don't match our modern metaphorical usage. But we'll get to that. First, let's consider their understanding of

### The Kidneys

First,

I bless you, Yahweh, who have counselled me.

Also *in the* nights my kidneys have corrected me.

– Psalm 16:7 (NABT)<sup>1</sup>NABT stands for *Not A Bible Translation* – my own translation.

Notice, the author of the Psalm understands the kidneys as correcting him. This clearly attributes to the kidneys thought, and conviction, and a sense of right and wrong. And this is typical of functions attributed to the kidneys in ancient Hebrew texts. They (the kidneys) were viewed as capable of moral reasoning. Consider these two texts from Jeremiah:

I Yahweh am examining heart and testing kidneys

to give to a man according to his way

and according to the fruit of his works.

– Jeremiah 17:10 (NABT)

And Yahweh of armies tests a rightdoer,

seeing kidneys and heart.

– Jeremiah 20:12 (NABT)

Both of these texts speak of kidneys in the context of testing the moral worth of people's thoughts and actions. You probably noticed the heart was also mentioned. For now, just note that it must be referring to the literal heart since it's mentioned alongside the kidneys. But we'll get to the function

of the heart in a minute.

There are other texts on kidneys, but for sake of time we'll have to move on to

### The Liver

I'll quote three verses in a row. Read them carefully and pay attention to what the texts attribute to the liver.

Thus my heart gladdened  
and my liver rejoiced.  
Also my flesh was dwelling in confidence.  
– Psalm 16:9 (NABT)

You have turned my wailing into dancing.  
For me you opened my sackcloth  
And you girded me with gladness  
So that my liver would make music for you and not be still.  
Yahweh my deities  
for ineffable time I will give you thanks.  
– Psalm 30:12-13 (NABT)

Awake my liver!  
Awake bass lyre and lyre!<sup>2</sup>In case you don't know, the "bass lyre" and "lyre" are two stringed instruments that were common in ancient Israel. Let me wake up at dawn.  
Psalm 57:8 (NABT)

Okay, so the first verse describes the liver as rejoicing, and the other two describe it as making music. Clearly, this attributes to the liver emotional capacity, at least joyful emotion, and also the capacity for creativity at least in the musical domain.

Let's now go to

### The Heart

There are more references to the heart than to the liver and kidneys, so there are tons of examples that could be given, but here are a few to illustrate the point. And remember, while reading these, you'll probably be tempted to interpret them according to our modern metaphor of the heart, but that simply isn't what the ancient writers meant, as will be apparent in some of the verses.

And Yahweh saw that the evil of the humans had increased in the land.  
And every form of the thoughts of their heart was only bad all the day.  
– Genesis 6:5 (NABT)

The key phrase here is "thoughts of their heart." This is just the first (in the order of the Hebrew Bible) among many references that attribute cognition to the heart.

And Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and he said in his heart,

“To a son of a hundred years can *one* be born? Or can Sarah, a daughter of ninety years, give birth?”

– Genesis 17:17 (NABT)

Notice, this says that Abraham said this in his heart. This attributes to the heart linguistic thinking. While today we understand that we form sentences using our brain, ancient Israelites thought we form sentences using our heart – again, the bodily organ, not our feelings or emotions.

*The lips of the wise disperse knowledge,  
But the heart of fools, not so.*

– Proverbs 15:7 (NABT)

To rebuke someone for their heart not dispersing knowledge implies that hearts *should* disperse knowledge, which entails hearts having the capacity for knowledge. A somewhat more specific instance of the heart having knowledge is found in our next example:

And you, you must speak to all who are wise of heart,  
who I have filled with a breath of wisdom,  
And they will do the garments of Aaron  
To consecrate him to do priestly work for me.

– Exodus 28:3 (NABT)

Here, to be “wise of heart” is to have knowledge and skill in garment production. I hope you can see how this simply isn’t the modern metaphorical usage of “heart.” Instead, the heart is here the organ of knowledge and of the sort cognitive function necessary for technical tasks. On to our last verse:

*The heart of a human will think about his way,  
And Yahweh will establish his step.*

– Proverbs 16:9 (NABT)

Okay, so the heart thinks, the liver rejoices and creates music, and the kidneys engage in moral reasoning and self-correction. While modern science has established that these organs do not in fact do these things and that these functions are instead performed by the brain, it’s clear that these ancient Hebrew authors had a materialistic understanding of mental activity.

Now, this raises the question of what happens when these organs stop functioning. What happens when the body dies? For that, you’ll have to wait for our next post. ?

- 1

NABT stands for *Not A Bible Translation* – my own translation.

- 2

In case you don’t know, the “bass lyre” and “lyre” are two stringed instruments that were common in ancient Israel.