

BIBLICAL HEBREW, HEBRAIC THOUGHT, AND THE STAINS OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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Hebrew was always a God-centred language, spoken by a God-centred people. Greek, on the other hand, has always been a humanistic language, the language of science, of facts and reason. Whereas Greek is a cold clinical language filled with abstract concepts, always wanting to know how something was possible in scientific terms, Hebrew thought patterns were vibrant, rich and colourful. Abstract thought was always expressed through concrete ideas - in Hebrew, for example, the mountains could break forth into shouts of joy, and all the trees of the field could clap their hands. It is no wonder then that Martin Luther, struggling to translate the Hebrew Bible into German, realised that it was impossible to convey so much so briefly in any other language.

As I study the Scriptures, weighing what I discover against all my past traditions, I understand more and more that the revelation of God by God came within a context and not a vacuum. Western thought patterns are built on the ancient Greek cultural legacy and we try to understand the Scriptures from this point of view, and in the process we have become 'destroyed for lack of knowledge'. Our worldview, our beliefs, behaviours and identity, our ideas, practices and attitudes have all been shaped by a Western-minded perspective.

Since I began to understand that I needed to gain a far better understanding of Hebraic thought and culture in order to apply sound, basic principles of interpretation to what I read, I have found a similar approach in the works of writers of long ago. In his Commentary of the New Testament, Bishop John Lightfoot, for example, wrote back in 1658:

- *“ For, first, when all the books of the New Testament were written by Jews, and among Jews, and unto them; and when all the discourses made there, were made in like manner by Jews, and to Jews, and among them; I was always fully persuaded, as of a thing past all doubting, that that Testament could not but everywhere taste of and retain the Jews’ style and idiom, form, and rule of speaking.”*
- *”And hence, in the second place, I concluded as assuredly that, in the obscurer places of that testament (which are many), the best and most natural method of searching out the sense is, to inquire how, and in what sense, those phrases and manners of speech were understood, according to the vulgar and common dialect and opinion of that nation; and how they took them, by whom they were spoken, and by whom they were heard. For it is no matter what we can beat out concerning those manners of speech on the anvil of our own conceit, but what they signified among them, in their ordinary sense and speech.”ⁱⁱ*

In Hebraic thought the group is the most important and they value and think families and generations rather than individuals. When Achan sinned (Joshua 7), his whole family was stoned - guilt was corporate. For the Greek the individual is most important. They will therefore strike for better benefits without any regard to the impact on the company. Guilt is individual. They value church life according to what the individual gets out of it.

The Hebrew language consists of only 10 000 words. Greek has 200 000 words, and English 1 000 000. 'Why' is more important to the Hebrew than 'how'. The Greek focuses on the 'how'.ⁱⁱ

You, dear reader, would certainly have heard preachers stating the ‘Biblical view’ that to God a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day. Then they would preach all kinds messages - including calculations of the end times on the foundation of the six days of creation. So they would show where it all started and that 6 000 years have already passed! Therefore, we are in the last days! The basic error is already in their first point of departure, because in ancient Hebraic thought, 1000 designated more than could be counted and not the clinical Greek idea of a precise measurable number.

There is much academic debate on which language the original writings of the New Testament were created. The majority seemingly favours the Greek language, while others insist it was done in Hebrew. Whichever one it may have been, however, it remains historical reality that, except for Luke, the authors were all Hebrews, and the background and literary roots of their writings had mostly been the Hebraic culture. (As a matter of interest, consider the detailed, chronological approach of Luke, as against the others. Bear in mind that Luke also wrote the book of Acts. In fact, some scholars regard the two books as one legal document for Paul’s defence in the court of Caesar).

We cannot escape the fact that Jesus of Nazareth rooted His teaching and methods firmly in the known culture of His time. It is, after all, through His people, the Hebrew nation, that God’s name (and therefore His very being) has been revealed throughout all the earth (Exod 9:16). If we consider the characteristics of the Hebrew language and mind, it should be clear that plain ‘Western-minded’ explanations are often in danger of error. Context, in all its cultural, historical, geographical and literary facets stands out as a sound point of departure, after which other principles may be considered (for example, the principles of first mention and single meaning).

Another factor that has left a destructive trail on Joe Church’s understanding of the Bible (and I include myself), is the application of the techniques of Greek philosophy. Today I watch and listen to preachers and I shudder at the way in which they string verses together to present a “truth”. Another technique is to use only part of a verse, let alone putting it into its original contextual reality. In this way a whole new context is created. Even worse, in this way new ‘revelation’ is created.

I cannot deal here with this topic in extensive detail, but I wish to underline the fact that, if we are searching to rightly divide the Word of Truth, we can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the damage these techniques have done and are still doing.

Consider the example of one of the early church fathers, Origen, who was a Gentile Christian from Alexandria. He is noted for writing Bible commentaries for other Christians in the Greek speaking world. Origen regarded the Hebrew text and Hebraic themes as raw data which was to be interpreted using the tools of Greek understanding. Steve Malz writes of him:

- *“A favourite theme of his was to re-interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, using techniques from Greek philosophy, married with insights from early Christian tradition and other writings. His driving principle was that the Bible contained three levels of meaning, corresponding to the body, soul and spirit. You can see the influence of Plato here, particularly when he adds that the ‘body’ level of meaning, the literal meaning of the text, is for the more simple minded whereas the ‘soul’ and more particularly the ‘spirit’ levels of meaning are for the more enlightened readers.”ⁱⁱⁱ*

Augustine of Hippo followed later, and, building on the Bible interpretation techniques of Origen and others, he stated that readers were to look at the “spirit behind the literal texts”, to grasp the mind of

God through ‘spiritual understandings’. The average church member is therefore regarded as ‘simple-minded’. (In bygone centuries the word ‘laity’ was also understood to mean ‘idiots’).

All the hype and fiction of modern end-times doctrines (and even the not so modern ones) can be traced back to the application of the techniques of Greek philosophy and culture. They promote reading into everything not only double and ongoing prophecies, but even multiple layers of prophecy. In other words, take one layer off and it exposes another, and so forth. This constitutes a complete denial of the biblical principle of clarity - a principle found throughout the Bible. God gave His Word through humans that His chosen people (initially) and later all peoples could understand it. See the following, for example: Matthew 24:15-16 (in which the words “*whoso readeth, let him understand*” is in brackets and might be the Gospel writer’s accentuation); 1 Corinthians 4:6; 1 John 2:21; and Revelation 1:3.

If we are serious about truth and knowledge in the Biblical context, we have to get back to basics. If we do not, we will continue to be deceived by what we regard as the light. And we will continue to fall for unbiblical doctrines simply because they are dressed up in Biblical terminology. Martie and I have been there for far too long, and we have been robbed for most of our life of the fullness of the truth of kingdom living. And we suspect, so has most of our readers. We cannot blame our pastors and teachers and televangelists and authors of many books - we need to take the responsibility ourselves. That we have been able to enjoy so much of the presence of God in our lives is testimony to His Grace, for it has been not because of our great body of knowledge, but despite our lack of knowledge.

ⁱ Lightfoot, John (Bishop). 1658. *A Commentary Of The New Testament From The Talmud And Hebraica*. www.preteristarchive.com/Books/1658_lightfoot_talmud-hebraica.html.

ⁱⁱ N’Tan Lawrence. 2010. *Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek (Western) Thought: A key to understanding Scripture through the eyes of the authors*. Hoshana Rabbinic Messianic Congregation. <http://home.earthlink.net/~hoshanarabbah>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maltz, S. 2009. *The Stubborn Stains Of Greece*. www.hebrewroots.com/node/290. 6 September.