

The Hebrew Mind

vs

The Western Mind

"Hebraism and Hellenism – between these two points of influence moves our world."

William Barrett, *Irrational Man*

By Brian Knowles

The Bible, in its original languages, is, humanly speaking, a product of the Hebrew mind. The first and original manifestation of what we now call "The Church" was also an expression of the Hebrew mind. At some point in ecclesiastical history, someone snatched away the inceptive Hebraic blueprint by which Jesus' movement was being constructed and replaced it with a non-Hebraic one. (replacement theology) As a result, what has been built since is at best a caricature of what was intended. In many respects, it is downright contrary and antagonistic to the spirit of the original believing community.

The Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, appears, in our time, to be returning his people to the original blueprint. The Hebrew Roots movement, led I believe by the Holy Spirit, is doing much to restore to the Body a sense of its first foundations.

In this research paper, we will analyze some of the fundamental differences in the mindset of the Hebrews of Biblical times, and the Western, Hellenistic way of thinking, out of which has emerged the bulk of Christian theology.

Doing vs. Knowing

William Barrett, quoted above, explains that one of the most fundamental differences between the Western, Hellenistic mind and the Hebrew mind is found in the area of knowing vs doing. Says Barrett, "The distinction...arises from the difference between doing and knowing. The Hebrew is concerned with practice, the Greek with knowledge. Right conduct is the ultimate concern of the Hebrew, right thinking that of the Greek. Duty and strictness of conscience are the paramount things in life for the Hebrew; for the Greek, the spontaneous and luminous play of the intelligence. The Hebrew thus extols the moral virtues as the substance and meaning of life; the Greek subordinates them to the intellectual virtues...the contrast is between practice and theory, between the moral man and the theoretical or intellectual man."

This helps explain why so many Christian churches are focused on the issues of doctrinal orthodoxy (however they may define it) -- often at the expense of godly living. In many Christian circles, what one believes or espouses is treated as more important than how one lives – i.e. how one treats his or her neighbor.

In Biblical Judaism, it is precisely the opposite. Christians are inclined to subject each other to litmus tests of orthodoxy, while Jews are concerned mainly with behavior. As Dennis Prager writes, "...belief in God and acting ethically must be inextricably

linked...God demands right behavior more than anything else, including right ritual and right belief."

It was gentile Christians, influenced by Greek philosophy, who both intellectualized and systematized Christian doctrine. Worse, they radically changed much of it. The Biblical Hebrews, and the Apostolic Era of the Church, had no formal theology as such. Nothing was systematized. The believing community had no entrenched hierarchy or magisterium through which all doctrine had to be filtered and approved. As with the unbelieving Jews, opinions varied from sage to sage.

What the apostles taught about any given subject was either learned directly from Jesus, then passed on, or determined situationally -- on an "as you go" basis. They determined Halakha for believers in much the same way the sages of Israel did -- as circumstances changed they rendered decisions about the application of Torah (cf. Matthew 18:18). Acts 15 provides an account of how at least one teaching concerning requirements for gentile believers was formed around 50 AD. Note the participatory nature of the discussion. The whole of the Church (Acts 15:4,12,22), not just an elite hierarchy, was involved.

In fundamentalist Christian circles, it is often more important to believe and espouse "the right thing," than to live the right way. This is why we are so obsessed with creeds, doctrinal statements, Systematic Theologies, orthodoxy vs. heresy, and creating "Evangelical" or "Sabbatarian" or "Trinitarian" theologies. This mode of thinking is thoroughly Western, utterly Greek.

For many of us Westerners, the Hebrew mindset is so strange, so alien, so impossible to fathom, that we quickly snap back into the comfort zone of the Hellenistic mold when studying the Hebrew Scriptures. We then impose this distorting grid over the Hebrew text -- or for that matter, over the Greek text of the New Testament.

We think, for example, in terms of "prophetic timetables." Here again is the Western concept of time -- points on a line. The Hebrew mind thinks of "the day of the Lord" -- that is, the day or time when the Lord acts. The sequential order in which God will do things is of no concern to the Hebrew -- only that he will act. The Western mind wants to have the "prophetic timetable" neatly arranged in time and space. We want to "tick off" events as they occur according to the pre-ordained schedule. This mentality is foreign to the Hebrew mind.

In Western theology, we have sometimes abandoned the literal interpretation of Scripture in favor of allegorical interpretations. This too is very Greek. It opens the door to a myriad of "creative" expositions that leave the student of Scripture confused and disoriented.

In the table that follows, we compare the Hebraic mode of thinking with the Western, Hellenistic mode in a variety of categories.

Hebraic vs Western Thinking

– A Comparison

Western Approach

Hebraic Approach

Life analyzed in precise categories.

Everything blurs into everything else.

A split between natural & supernatural

Supernatural affects everything.

Linear logic

Contextual or "block" logic

"Rugged Individualism"

Importance of being part of group

Equality of persons

Value comes from place in hierarchies

Freedom orientation

Security orientation

Competition is good

Competition is evil (cooperation better)

Man-centered universe

God/tribe/family-centered universe

Worth of person based on money/material possessions/power

Worth derived from family relationships

Biological life sacred

Social life supremely important

Chance + cause & effect limit what can happen

God causes everything in his universe

Man rules nature through understanding and applying laws of science

God rules everything, so relationship with God determines how things turn out.

Power over others achieved through business, politics and human organizations.

Power over others is structured by social patterns ordained by God.

All that exists is the material

The universe is filled with powerful spirit beings

Linear time divided into neat segments. Each event is new.

Cyclical or spiraling time. Similar events constantly reoccur.

History is recording facts objectively and chronologically.

History is an attempt to preserve significant truths in meaningful or memorable ways whether or not details are objective facts.

Oriented to the near future

Oriented to lessons of history

Change is good = progress

Change is bad = destruction of traditions

Universe evolved by chance

Universe created by God

Universe dominated and controlled by science and technology

God gave man stewardship over his earthly creation. Accountability to God.

Material goods = measure of personal achievement

Material goods = measure of God's blessing

Blind faith

Knowledge-based faith

Time as points on straight line ("at this point in time...")

Time determined by content ("In the day that the Lord did...")

Sources: Irrational Man, by William Barrett; Christianity With Power by Charles Kraft; Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek by Thorleif Boman; Judaism and Christianity – The Differences by Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, Our Father Abraham, by Marvin Wilson, God in Search of Man by Abraham Heschel.

When we bring our Western "scientific" approach to the study of Scripture, without due consideration for the mentality behind it, we may find ourselves producing exegetical distortions. To understand the Hebrew cultures of Biblical times, as did those who lived through those times, is to experience culture shock. Their worldview was very different than ours. Their patterns of thought were often quite distinct from our own. Their values and perceptions were also radically unlike ours. The whole Bible was written in a pre-Scientific age. The Hebrew language itself is quite unlike our own in many respects. Much has been lost in translation.

When we study Scripture, or when we consider the nature of the early New Testament Messianic community, we must take into account the myriad differences between Hebrew and Greek thought. Intellectually, we are Greeks, not Hebrews. We apply Aristotelian and Socratic thought patterns to practically everything. It is surprisingly difficult to escape these patterns and enter into the Hebraic mindset. We insist on rendering everything into logically consistent patterns, on systematizing it, on organizing it into tight, carefully reasoned theologies. We cannot live with inconsistency or contradiction. We feel compelled to think antithetically. The Godhead must be tightly defined and structured. We cannot live with the Hebraic idea that God is simply ineffable, and that God's Book doesn't lend itself to systematization. As Abraham Heschel wrote, "To try to distill the Bible, which is bursting with life, drama, and tension, to a series of principles would be like trying to reduce a living person to a diagram" – God in Search of Man by Abraham Heschel, p. 20.

The Western mind, when seeking to understand Scripture or what it means to be a "Christian," creates its own exegetical and theological dilemmas. ("If God is all-powerful, could he build a rock too heavy for himself to lift?" or "If God is love then why does he

allow...?") We relentlessly attempt to organize everything into manageable intellectual blocks and structures. We want all questions answered, all problems solved, and all contradictions resolved.

In our relentless quest to turn Scripture into a systematized textbook of theological answers about God, we have ended up distorting its meaning time after time. We have turned it into something that it is not.

We have sought to understand the incomprehensible God in concrete, yet abstract, terms. But, "To the Jewish mind, the understanding of God is not achieved by referring to a Greek way to timeless qualities of Supreme Being, to ideas of goodness and perfection, but rather by sensing the living acts of His concern, to His dynamic attentiveness to man. We speak not of His goodness in general but of His compassion for the individual man in a particular situation" (Heschel, p. 21). In other words, God is not "known" in the abstract, but in the specific situations into which He has asserted Himself. God is what He has revealed Himself to be, not what we have theorized Him to be.

Heschel points to the reason for Western confusion about God, "The categories within which philosophical reflection about religion has been operating are derived from Athens rather than from Jerusalem" (ibid. p. 25).

If we are to understand the Bible, and what it means to be a follower of Yeshua ha Mashiach (Jesus the Messiah), then we will have to understand it Hebraically, not Hellenistically. This will require a philosophical and intellectual paradigm shift on our part. It will mean coming at Scripture from an entirely different angle. It will mean learning to think like the Hebrew who thought more like God.

Heschel also writes, "The Greeks learned in order to comprehend. The Hebrews learned in order to revere. The modern man learns in order to use" (ibid. p. 34). We want a religion of utility. We want techniques we can apply situationally to get into, or out of, some situation. We see much "technique-oriented" Christianity these days. We want techniques for understanding, systematizing and structuring the "prophetic timetable" so that we can know "what's going to happen next" or so that we can know when to stock food and flee into the mountains to await the Lord's return. Some people want to know so they can have something to market to other Christians who want to know. These are they who seek to gain from "godliness" or religion (cf. I Timothy 6:5). We seek "Christian" techniques for inner healing, outer healing, exorcism, financial prosperity, or for receiving spiritual power. This way of thinking is alien to the Hebrew mind.

In our culture, we have commercialized everything, including Christianity. We no longer preach the Gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons and make disciples – we market tapes, booklets and trinkets. We make music, not to worship God, but to sell CDs. Evangelists are selected because they "know how to get the dollars in the door" or

"attract the crowds" or "get the numbers up." Ministerial power has been commercialized and politicized as much as that of regular politicians. Christian publishing houses publish celebrity Christian books – not because they are well written, or because they say something important – but because they will sell and make money for the company.

In the days when Jesus' Kingdom movement was known as the "Sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5,14), being a "Christian" was about relationship with God and with fellow man (Matthew 22:36-38; John 13:34-35). In the centuries since, we have de-emphasized relationship, and at the same time have intellectualized, politicized and commercialized the "faith once for all delivered." These three deleterious influences have radically changed the nature of the Church. The spirit of anti-Judaism and later anti-Semitism has done much to destroy the original personality of the believing community. This explains why it is so difficult for many to understand either Testament.

To truly grasp what it means to be a follower of Yeshua, one must return to the Hebrew roots of his movement, and of the documents we now refer to as "The New Testament."