

My Big Fat Greek Mindset

Part 2

Tim Hegg • TorahResource

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In Part 1 of this article, I outlined several of the major differences between the Greek and Hebrew worldviews. We noted two fundamentals of the Greek worldview: (1) that the world of ideas reigns supreme over the physical world, and (2) that truth exists in the realm of linear logic in which the law of non-contradiction exists as a universal reality. In contrast, the Hebrew worldview does not consider the physical world to be inferior to the world of ideas or beliefs, but views both as necessarily integrated. Moreover, for the Hebrew, block logic rather than linear logic modeled the obvious tensions expressed in the Scriptures between the infinite wisdom of God and the finite wisdom of man. While the law of non-contradiction exists within the confines of each block of logic, it cannot function universally since mankind's intellectual capabilities are insufficient to comprehend the full, complete, and integrated wisdom of God.

In this second part of the article, I want to show how the Greek worldview, which was foundational for the early emerging Christian Church, helped to shape and form a theological paradigm for Christianity, a paradigm that that was at odds with the Torah and its thorough-going Hebrew worldview.

The Creedal Nature of Christianity

The development of doctrinal creeds is a well attested phenomenon in the early Christian Church. These creeds were doctrinal confessions of faith formulated to give self-identity to the Church and especially to distinguish orthodoxy from heresy. It seems very likely that baptismal confessions as well as liturgical elements (particularly in the ceremony of the eucharist) represent the earliest stages in the evolution of the later ecumenical creeds.¹ One of the earliest is the "Apostles' Creed," which though found in various forms, had become standardized by the 4th Century. Other well known creeds from the early centuries are the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Chalcedon, and the Athanasian Creed.

What makes the appearance of creeds in the emerging Christian Church important for our study is the obvious fact that they constituted the accepted "confession of faith" necessary to be received into the Church. In other words, the creed listed the ideas or theological axioms that formed the boundary markers distinguishing Christians from non-Christians. Or to put it another way, one gained the status of being "saved" by agreeing with a particular doctrinal statement. In practice, therefore, faith was understood as an intellectual agreement with a set of formulated

¹ See D. F. Wright, "Creeds, Confessional Forms" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament* (IVP, 1997), p. 259–60; Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Harper & Row, 1931), 1.16.

doctrines. We find that the same is essentially true in our day. In most Churches membership is dependent primarily upon agreement to a particular “statement of faith” or doctrinal creed.

In contrast, we find no such doctrinal creeds in the Judaisms of the early centuries. It was not until the middle ages when Rambam, wanting to provide the Jewish community with an answer for Christian apologists, composed the Thirteen Principles as a Jewish “confession of faith.” But Judaism never considered mental agreement with a set of doctrinal principles to constitute a *bona fide* entrance into the chosen people nor as a guarantee of covenant membership. While such a perspective was at home in the Greek world of idealism, it was foreign to the Hebrew worldview of actions. In this regard, the difference between the Greek worldview of the Church and the Hebrew worldview of the Synagogue is best seen in the requirements for outsiders to join: the Church required that a person *confess* certain things to be true; the Synagogue required that a person be willing to accept a specific way of *living*.

The fact that creeds played such a central role in the self-definition of formative Christianity greatly influenced the Church’s understanding and definition of faith. Even though the word groups for “faith/believe” in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures mean both “to believe” as well as “to be faithful,”² the Christian concept of “faith” is heavily weighted on the side of “agreeing to the truth.” Many contemporary evangelism methods seek to persuade people to “believe in Jesus,” indicated by raising one’s hand or walking forward to the front of the auditorium or signing a confessional statement on a pamphlet or gospel tract. Once the person has agreed that they “believe in Jesus,” they are pronounced “saved.” As a result, salvation is viewed as granted to those who agree with a given theological statement or confession of faith. It is no wonder, then, that in the Christian Church salvation is understood primarily as justification, leaving sanctification as optional. Salvation is primarily forensic rather than practical, and thus one can be “saved” even if one is never “sanctified.” What one *believes* is more important than what one *does*. Such a perspective is the logical outcome of a Greek worldview.

The Scriptures, however, written by Hebrews from a Hebrew perspective, speak differently. Yeshua does not say “you will know them by their *creeds*” but rather “you will know them by their *fruit*” (Matthew 7:16, 20). When Yeshua speaks of “fruit,” He is talking about how one lives—one’s actions. In other words, what one does is the fruit of what one truly believes, and therefore *deeds* not *creeds* are the true measure of faith.

This is not to suggest that confessing the truth is unimportant. On the contrary, our confession of Yeshua as the risen Lord (for instance) is extremely important (Rom 10:9). But our confession of Yeshua rings hollow and false if our lives do not conform to His teaching. The problem with the Greek worldview is that ideas (confession) can be easily separated from the world in which we live (actions) because truth exists in the realm of the intellect rather than in the everyday world of our lives. Thus one can genuinely believe the truth while living contrary to it. Not so from the Hebrew worldview: believing the truth always results in living out the truth.

Many examples from our Master’s teaching could illustrate this, but one will suffice. In Matthew 25:34–46 Yeshua speaks of His future reign when He will judge between the righteous

² See my comments in *The Letter Writer*, pp. 17–22.

and the wicked. To the righteous He says, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v. 34). Then He explains why they are righteous: they gave the Master food when He was hungry, something to drink when He was thirsty, clothed Him when He was naked, visited Him when He was sick, and came to Him when in prison. Not one word is said about what they “believed” or what they had “confessed.” In contrast, the King turns to the wicked and says “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41). Their wickedness is seen by the fact that they did not give Him food when He was hungry, something to drink when He was thirsty, nor did they cloth Him when He was naked. They did not visit Him when He was sick nor come to Him in prison. Again, nothing at all is said about what they “believed.” The message of Yeshua’s words is that when one does deeds of kindness to any of Yeshua’s brethren, it is as though they were doing them to Him. And the same is true for those who neglect deeds of kindness to the brethren of Yeshua: in so doing the neglect to honor the Master.

If we fail to understand our Master’s words from a Hebrew perspective, we might think that our eternal salvation is based upon doing good works and has nothing to do with what we believe in our hearts to be true. But that is not what Yeshua is teaching. Rather, He is saying that if one truly confesses Him to be the Messiah and the Son of Man Who will return in His glory (Matthew 25:21), then one will do deeds of kindness to any of His brothers who are in need, as though it were Yeshua Himself. “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.” He will say “well *done* good and faithful servant,” not “well *confessed* good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21, 23). Or to put it another way, loving our neighbor is one genuine characteristic of loving God. As John puts it, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1John 4:20).

Theology as Systematics

The linear logic of the Greek worldview became the natural impetus for a thorough-going systematic theology among the various branches of the Christian Church. Systematic theology refers to a comprehensive theological system that seeks to present the doctrines of the Bible in such a way as to avoid any inconsistencies or contradictions. In other words, it is theology fit into the scheme of linear logic. The early creeds of the Christian Church formed the first and most basic system of Christian theology, and from these evolved more sophisticated theological systems developed by the various factions that arose within Christianity. The goal of each theological system was to present a comprehensive and coherent statement of beliefs, for only a theological system devoid of contradictions could be received as true.

Such a penchant for systematics finds no parallel in the rabbinic literature. We find no ancient Jewish creeds nor did the rabbis ever develop a systematic theology, for the very framework in which the rabbis worked was one in which differing viewpoints were encouraged rather than dismissed. For the rabbis, contradictions provided the necessary “push/pull” energy required for seeing any given subject from every vantage point. This is why in a work such as the Babylonian Talmud, the discussions often include contradictory viewpoints of various rabbis, without

having to decide who was “right” and who was “wrong.” From a rabbinic perspective, the circle of truth was large enough to include contradictory viewpoints.

This is not to deny that both in ancient Judaism and Christianity competing factions existed. But the tendency among the various Judaisms of the early centuries was to see all Israel as having a place in the world to come while competing Christianities each viewed themselves as having an exclusive ownership of the truth. Each faction of the Christian Church required confession of their particular system of theology, and refusal to do so put one outside the circle of true faith and therefore of salvation.

The Cathedral Mentality

Another by-product of the Greek worldview was the desire to escape this world for a celestial paradise. After all, reality was not to be found in the “hoe-hum” world of earthly existence, but in the high and lofty realm of thoughts and intellectual ideals. Having accepted the Platonic dualism in which the material world is considered evil, the Church focused its attention on the hope of escaping the world for a heavenly existence. This dream of rising above the mundane and evil world was encouraged by building “out of this world” cathedrals. When Christians came to church, it was as though they left the commonness of their lives and stepped into the celestial beauty of the world to come. The architecture, the music, the magnificent art and sculptures, the furniture, and the religious ceremonies all combined to offer the Christian an experience that was not remotely connected to the world in which they lived. In short, the cathedral offered a taste of heaven, a momentary escape into the celestial joys which salvation ultimately promised.

But though the cathedral offered the worshipper a brief respite from the mundane world of normal life, it likewise reinforced the idea that the primary goal of religion was to escape this world, not to live in it. And when the Scriptures were read with this idea in mind, they seemed to substantiate this viewpoint. Yeshua said that He was leaving “to prepare a place” for all of His followers (John 14:23), and that His kingdom was “not of this world” (John 18:36). Paul says that God will bring him to His “heavenly kingdom” (2Tim 4:18). With a dualistic theology already well in place, verses such as these were naturally interpreted to mean that the goal of one’s religion was to escape this world and go to heaven.

From the Hebrew perspective, however, all of this is foreign. From the earliest history of the Israelite nation, God revealed His intention to make His dwelling among His people. He instructed the Israelites through Moses: “Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). Rather than transporting His chosen people to His heavenly abode, God’s plan was to dwell with them upon the earth. Likewise, Solomon built the first Temple as a place for God’s presence and glory to reside within the nation of Israel. At the completion of the Temple, the glory of God filled the Temple and He promised to put His eyes, heart and Name there forever (1Kings 8:11; 9:3). It was the responsibility of Israel to prepare a place for God to dwell with her on this earth, not to escape from this world to dwell with Him in some heavenly abode. Indeed, the incarnation itself is the greatest expression of God’s purpose to dwell with His

people in this world.

Moreover, the promise of the prophets is that God will dwell among His people forever. “And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.” (Ezekiel 37:28, see also 43:7, 9). This is the same picture given by John in the book of Revelation. In chapter 11 the seventh angel sounds his trumpet and the proclamation is made in heaven: “Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah; and He will reign forever and ever’” (Revelation 11:15). At the conclusion of John’s visions he notes the formation of the new heavens and earth and then describes the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem:

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them....’” (Revelation 21:2–3)

Rather than describing God’s purpose in salvation as providing a way to escape an earthly, material existence, John’s vision describes the tabernacling of God among His people upon a renewed earth in which sorrow, pain, death, and mourning are unknown.

But if this is the destination to which God’s redeemed people are heading, how are we to understand those verses that seem to indicate a celestial dwelling? First of all, when Yeshua’s disciples heard Him speak of “My Father’s house,” they would have naturally understood Him to be referring to the Temple. For instance, when as a lad He remained in the Temple dialoging with the scholars there, Mary and Joseph left the city without Him. Realizing that He was not among their group, they returned to Jerusalem to find Him. After Mary scolded Him for remaining behind, Yeshua responded: “Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s *house*?” (Luke 2:49).³ Later, when Yeshua clears the Temple courts of the money changers, He declares: “Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a place of business” (John 2:16). Thus, when Yeshua tells His disciples that “in My Father’s house are many dwelling places” (John 14:2), He is referring to the eschatological dwelling of God among His people with the Temple as central focus of that dwelling. In the final victory of God, there will be a place for all of His people to dwell securely with Him, and it is with this purpose in view that Yeshua performs His role as the heavenly High Priest.

Secondly, the common phrase “kingdom of heaven” as well as Paul’s term “heavenly kingdom” do not use “heaven” to describe the *location* of the kingdom but its *nature*. In this case, “heaven” is another way of saying “God,” so that “kingdom of heaven” is equivalent to the “kingdom of God.” In its final sense, the “kingdom of heaven” describes the uncontested rule of

³ The Greek does not actually contain the word “house” here, but the meaning of the phrase is most likely best understood to refer to the Temple. See John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20 in The Word Bible Commentary*, vol. 35A (Nelson, 2006), pp. 131–32.

God where everyone willingly submits to His kingship with joy. In the same way that the rule of God in the heavenlies is absolute and without rival, so when the “kingdom of this world” becomes the “kingdom of our Lord and His Messiah,” it means that all rebellion against God has been vanquished and God’s Name is finally sanctified upon the earth as it is in heaven. Moreover, when Yeshua taught that His kingdom was “not of this world,” He was speaking of the means by which His kingdom would be established. Rather than gaining victory through military might as do earthly kings, His kingdom would be established by the triumph of the truth in the hearts of those who believe. This is why Yeshua could speak of the “kingdom of Heaven/God” as having already come (Matthew 12:28; 16:19) while at the same time teaching that the full realization of the kingdom was yet future (Matthew 6:9–10; 26:29). The “kingdom of Heaven/God” is like a tree that begins as a sapling and eventually grows into its fulness (Matthew 13:31–32). It is therefore present as it grows but awaits the last days for its full expression.

When it comes to the goal of salvation, then, the difference between a Greek and Hebrew worldview is very significant. Rather than anticipating being transported to a celestial dwelling place for eternity, the Hebrew perspective envisions a return to a “garden of Eden” existence upon a renewed earth where there is no sin and all is as God originally created it, that is, “good” and even “very good.” With that in mind, a true foretaste of eternity is not found in escaping our common daily routine, nor in imagining a celestial existence. Rather, we experience a foreshadowing of eternity when God’s Name is sanctified in our daily, earthly existence through obeying Him, glorifying Him, and finding our full satisfaction in Him.

The following table summarizes the differences between a Greek and Hebrew perspective as it pertains to the goal of salvation:

Cathedral Mentality	Tabernacle/Temple Mentality
The goal of salvation is to escape this world and go to God’s dwelling place in heaven	The goal of salvation is to prepare a place fit for God’s dwelling here, among His people
The kingdom of Heaven exists in heaven, not upon the earth	The kingdom of Heaven is God’s reign among people here upon the earth
The Messiah is coming in order to take us away from this world	The Messiah is coming in order to reign over us in this world
Message: “Get your ticket now or you might miss the train”	Message: the Kingdom of Heaven is coming! Get ready to receive and serve the King.

Summary

We have touched on just a few important areas that highlight the difference between a Greek and Hebrew worldview as it pertains to our life in Messiah. We have seen that a Hebrew perspective expected certain tensions and even apparent contradictions within the revealed truth

about God and His purpose for mankind, as well as a willingness to live in the face of such tensions. Rather than constructing a philosophical theology that attempted to explain away all conflicts, the Hebrew worldview allowed differing viewpoints to exist within the larger circle of truth. The systematic theologies and theological creeds constructed by the Christian Church were the product of an underlying linear logic derived from Greek philosophy. For the Hebrews, block logic provided for coherent systems of thought within confined realms but likewise allowed for the existence of unexplainable mysteries within the overall scope of divine revelation. For those who have been schooled in a Greek worldview (whether by formal schooling or simply by living within Western culture), to view life from a Hebrew perspective is a significant change. It requires undergoing “a kind of intellectual conversion to the Hebraic world of the East.”⁴

Viewing the Scriptures from a Hebrew perspective is significant, for it allows the Scriptures to speak on their own terms without the need to fit them neatly into a preconceived system of theology. While certainly we believe that there are no contradiction within the mind of God, and thus ultimately no contradictions in the divinely inspired word that He has revealed to us, the Hebrew worldview allows for the existence of apparent contradictions since our finite understanding is unable fully to grasp the breadth of His infinite wisdom. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! (Romans 11:33)

We also noted the Cathedral mentality that pervades Christianity via the Greek worldview. Despising the physical world and our earthly existence, many historical Christianities teach that the hope and final goal of salvation is to escape from life in this fallen world to eternal life in a celestial realm. In contradistinction to this, the Hebrew perspective anticipates the eternal reign of God within our physical world and accepts the divinely ordained mission of preparing for His ultimate reign by expanding His kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel. Rather than despising the created world in which we live, we seek to repair it in anticipation of the King’s coming. In spite of the fallen condition of our world, we find in it moments of joy and goodness which are small foretastes of the final, eternal kingdom of God upon a renewed earth in the world to come.

⁴ Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 150.