My Big Fat Greek Mindset

Part 1

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One night, a captain of a U.S. Navy warship saw the light of an oncoming vessel heading straight at him. He signaled ahead: "Change course 20 degrees." Back came the reply: "Advisable you change course 20 degrees." The captain didn't accept this response and sent the message, "I'm a captain. Change course 20 degrees." Back came the reply: "I'm a seaman second class, change course 20 degrees." By this time the captain was furious. "I'm a battleship!," he signaled, "Change course 20 degrees!" To which came the response: "I'm a lighthouse!"[1] Clearly, our presuppositions govern how we view reality and the decisions we make in life.

All of us have a set of presuppositions or what we might call our "worldview." More often than not, we have this worldview from our earliest days, instilled within us from our society and culture. We go through life often unaware that we are seeing everything through the colored lenses of our presuppositions. Only when the revealed truth of God enlightens our hearts and minds are we able to see things from God's perspective—to see things as they truly are.

In our western culture, the worldview "glasses" we wear derive primarily from the Greek philosophies of ancient times. Even if we are entirely unaware of the Greek thinkers, such as Plato and Aristotle, their philosophical presuppositions have shaped and molded the way we interpret reality and particularly how we think about God and His activity within the scope of human history. When we read the Bible with our Greek mindset, we inevitably misinterpret it because the human authors of the Scriptures were Hebrews, not Greeks. The eternal, inspired words of the Almighty are clothed in a Semitic worldview, not the garb of the Greek philosophers. Granted, there are areas of commonality between the two, but there are also stark contrasts. In many ways, the two worldviews are worlds apart.

The Material World vs. the World of Ideas

Plato, who was born in 428 BCE (roughly 60 years after the story of Esther), lived in Athens where he founded an Academy. There he taught the fundamentals of his idealistic philosophy, which was, in large measure, to captivate the minds of his world and ours. Plato believed that reality existed in the realm of ideas, not in the material world. In order to illustrate this central tenet of his philosophy, he offered the analogy of a cave. Consider a cave, dug deep into the side of a mountain. As the shaft of the cave descends, it opens into a large cavern in which slaves, sitting on the floor, are imprisoned with chains. Above them on a ledge are puppeteers warming themselves by a fire. As the light of the fire shines, it casts shadows of the puppets on the back wall of the cavern. Those who are chained see the shadows on the wall and believe them to be real. But of course, they are not. They are only shadows. Only by freeing themselves of their chains, turning about, and climbing up out of the cave, are the people able to see the light and realize that what they first thought was reality, were in fact only shadows.

In Plato's parable, the cave represents the physical world. Those chained in its dark cavern are the uneducated masses of humanity. The puppeteers represent the world of ideas, concepts, and forms while the light of the fire is Plato's concept of an impersonal force (the Demiurge) that projects the ideas, concepts, and forms upon the created world.

For Plato, then, the realm of reality and truth exists in the form or idea of a thing rather than in the thing itself. For him, what we experience through our senses in the physical world are only shadows of reality. Thus, truth is obtained through the intellectual exercise of philosophy by which additional

ideas and concepts are discovered. In this way, the world of our existence is dualistic. The material world has no essential meaning in and of itself. Only the form or idea gives meaning. If a person is to have true knowledge, then, he must find it in his mind, not in the world in which he lives.

Such Platonic dualism entered the theology of the emerging Christian Church in a number of ways. First, as the Christian Church divided away from the synagogue, she naturally looked for leaders among her educated men, most of whom had been educated in the Greek academies. The early Greek Church Fathers brought with them the Greek worldview in which they had been trained. Perhaps this is seen most in the allegorical hermeneutic with which most of them read the Scriptures. Moreover, the rise of Gnosticism in the early Christian Church is directly linked to a Platonic worldview. Secondly, Augustine (354–430 CE), who became one of the most prominent theologians in the 4th Century Church, was a student and renowned proponent of Plato's philosophy before coming to faith. After his conversion to Christianity, he sought to show how Platonic philosophy was essentially correct, and how it grasped the essence of biblical truth. Speaking of how the father of Ambrose had affirmed this early in his theological career, Augustine wrote:

> …he congratulated me because I had not fallen in with the writings of other philosophers, full of fallacies and deceits according to the elements of this world, whereas in the works of the Platonists God and His word are introduced in all manners.[2]

Augustine is considered one of the primary pillars of Christian thought, "standing between Paul and Luther."[3] As such, his influence over Christian thought and particularly his interpretation of Paul's epistles through the grid of Platonic philosophy remain well entrenched in Christianity today.

In contrast to the Greek worldview, the Hebrew perspective was unified rather than dualistic. The created universe, which consists of both visible and invisible realms, is a unified whole. Reality exists in both realms, and one is not better than the other. When God created the world in which we live, He declared that it was good, and so the physical world is not innately evil or somehow inferior to the immaterial world. Ideas or ideals have no value unless they are actually lived out in the physical world. While Platonic thought teaches "it's the thought that counts," God tell us "it's the *mitzvah* that counts." Surely proper motivation is important in obeying God, but good intentions are not enough.

It is not difficult to see how the dualistic Greek worldview has become the norm in much of western Christianity. Foremost in this regard is the notion that true faith exists in the realm of ideas—in agreeing intellectually with a list of doctrines or a Church creed. Faith is viewed as a private matter that takes place in one's heart or mind and therefore cannot be judged. Some might argue that Paul affirms such a definition of faith when he writes:

> if you confess with your mouth Yeshua as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:9).

But Paul is not writing from a dualistic perspective, as though one's confession and belief could be divorced from one's actions. To confess Yeshua as *Lord* means that one is willing and determined to *obey* Him as Lord. Moreover, verse ten explains that such a confession and belief results in righteousness, which in the context surely means righteous living as well as right-standing in God's court of justice. For a person to think that he or she could obey God "in my heart" without an outward life of conformity to God's commandments is entirely to miss Paul's point. Indeed, chapters six and seven of Romans deal primarily with how genuine faith results in a radical change in one's actions. And earlier in Romans Paul wrote:

> for it is not the hearers of the Torah who are just before God, but the doers of the Torah will be justified

(Romans 2:13).

By this Paul is not suggesting that one gains justification before God through good works. What he is teaching is that those who are justified (righteous) in God's eyes will inevitably demonstrate this righteousness in the way they obey God. Paul clearly agrees with James: "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). In fact, "dead faith" isn't faith at all.

The Greek worldview that dominated early Christianity and remains entrenched in the Church today is likewise responsible for the allegorical method of Bible interpretation. One of the big sticking points for the early Greek Church was the manner in which the Torah seemed always to deal with the "mundane" aspects of earthly living. "Surely," they reasoned, "God could not be that concerned with food, clothing, skin diseases, the way we treat animals, latrines, and the like!" Since for them, the realm of ideas was what really counted, they reasoned that the laws and instructions of the Torah dealing with everyday physical matters must hold a deeper, "spiritual" meaning. And since by "spiritual" they meant "non-physical," they sought to interpret the Torah and other Scriptures allegorically to uncover the "true spiritual meaning" for the soul. Thus, the food laws related to the company one keeps, clothing had to do with being "clothed with the righteousness of Christ," the laws regarding skin diseases had their true meaning in combating sin, the laws regarding animals really were meant to teach how we are to treat each other, and digging a latrine outside of the camp was given to teach that we should separate from the world and its filth. In this way, one could feel confident that they were obeying God while at the same time disregarding the "literal" meaning of the text. After all, the real import of the text was the deeper, "spiritual" sense, which had relevance to one's inner self, not one's physical, mundane existence.

It is likewise easy to understand, once we realize the worldview from which this theology and hermeneutic arose, how the Church could often point a demeaning finger at the Jewish community, reasoning that they were chained to their inferior obedience to the letter of the Torah. Reading Paul with a Greek mindset, "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life" (2Corinthians 3:6) reinforced their Platonic views. As far as the Church was concerned, the Jews were like the chained captives of Plato's cave, thinking they saw reality when in fact they were only seeing shadows on the wall.

This allegorical hermeneutic gave rise to yet another significant and devastating theology in the Christian Church. Reasoning that God could not be all that concerned about a physical nation like Israel, the Church taught the replacement of Israel with the spiritual kingdom of believers. God's dealings with the physical descendants of Jacob were therefore considered as only a precursor to the more important reality—His eternal covenant with a "spiritual" people, the Church. At its core, Replacement Theology or Supersessionism is built upon a Greek worldview that deprecates the physical world by elevating the non-physical realm of ideas. Theological maturity is marked by moving away from the mundane world of everyday events to the ethereal world of theological truisms. Such a perspective gave rise to the belief that Israel's prophets did not promise the millennial reign of Messiah in a restored Jerusalem Temple. Understanding the prophets allegorically, the future Temple is reinterpreted to be the Church with the Messiah reigning from heaven. Even today, Amillennialism is a well established teaching of many mainline Christian denominations.

The Hebrew worldview, however, never considered the physical world as inferior to the non-physical realm, nor did it elevate ideas above actions. The physical world was endowed with God's blessings at creation, and such blessing remains even though because of the entrance of sin, the creation groans for redemption (Romans 8:22). Enjoying what God has created is therefore a spiritual endeavor, and should be done with a heart of blessing and thanksgiving to Him. He gave us all good things to enjoy (1Timothy 6:17) which is why, from a rabbinic perspective, there is a blessing for everything. "In everything give thanks" (1Thessalonians 5:18). Moreover, there is nothing "neutral" in our world, a kind of "secular" part of our lives that is neither sacred nor profane. Rather, everything in our world is either

good (and can therefore be sanctified to God) or evil: "Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9). In this way, our work, our recreation, our hobbies, as well as our times of corporate and individual prayer and worship—all aspects of our lives are to be sanctified unto God as the means by which we glorify Him (1Corinthians 10:31). As the Torah teaches us: "Cling to God and obey His commandments" (Deuteronomy 13:4).

Linear vs. Box Logic

In the Platonic philosophy of ancient Greece, truth existed as brute facts, meaning that facts were considered self-existent, independent of any source. In contrast to the Scriptures that clearly define God as the source of all truth and the fear of the Lord as the beginning of man's wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10), for the Greeks, knowledge of the truth was available to any one who would pursue it intellectually. Moreover, since truth was considered to be self-existent, it was viewed as a body of coherent facts bound perfectly together in a logical sequence.

Such a logical integration of all truth produced "Linear Logic." This might be illustrated by what we call the domino effect. Consider a row of dominos set up so that when one is knocked over, it causes the whole row to fall. In Greek logic, all true facts are connected. Thus, if one asserts fact A, this inevitably leads to fact B, which leads to fact C, and so on. The whole system fails, however, if what appears as a fact does not connect in the string of facts, or to say it another way, when what appears as a fact offers a clear contradiction to other facts. In such a case, either the out-of-place fact is deemed unreal or untrue, or else the out-of-place fact shows the system itself to be flawed.

Let me illustrate this with several theological examples. The Scriptures teach that God has ordained all things (Romans 8:28; 11:36; etc.). The Scriptures also teach that prayer changes things (Matthew 7:7; James 4:2). In Greek linear logic, these two apparently contradictory facts cannot exist in the unified system of truth. One of them must be false. It is this kind of linear logic that gave rise to competing theological systems, one in which people believe God ordains all things and which therefore attempts to diminish the efficacy of prayer, and the other, where God's sovereign ordination of events is denied and prayer is emphasized as the means for change in our world.

A further example may be seen in the revelation of God to man. The Scriptures teach that God is an invisible spirit and that no one has seen Him (John 1:18; 4:24; 1Timothy 1:17). Yet in Exodus 24:9–10 the text clearly states that Moses, Aaron, Nadav, Avihu, and 70 elders of Israel "saw the God of Israel." Moreover, Genesis 18:1 states that Adonai appeared to Abraham. And Yeshua taught, "Blessed are the pure in spirit, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Once again, with a Greek mindset, such dispersant facts must be reconciled—they cannot exist together in the unified system of theology. Thus, various explanations have been offered to explain away one side or the other.

Many more examples like these could be offered. But the most obvious fact to observe is that though the biblical authors surely must have been aware of such apparent contradictions, *they never offer an explanation that would reconcile such differences.* Surely John knew the Torah and was familiar with the story of God appearing to Abraham (Genesis 18:1). He must have read Exodus 24:9–10 many times, yet he writes that "no man has seen God at any time" (John 1:18) and gives no further explanation for how his words could be reconciled with those of the Torah. The reason that the biblical authors give no explanation for what appears to us as contradictions is because *they felt no need to make such explanations*. They were not operating within the Greek mindset of linear logic. Rather, starting from the premise that all truth is revealed by God, they readily accepted the fact that in God's mind, all truth was coherent and unified, yet in the finite understanding of man, truth would inevitable contain mystery beyond our understanding. Moses wrote:

> The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this Torah. (Deuteronomy 29:29)

Likewise, Solomon teaches us:

> He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

What this means is that man, created in God's image, has an innate sense of eternity, that everything somehow "fits." Yet in trying to assemble all the pieces, he inevitably comes to the end of himself without being able to complete the entire puzzle. This being the case, only two valid options present themselves: resignation to the despair of one's own inadequacies, or faith in the God of Israel Who alone knows all things. Solomon clearly opts for the latter, for he ends Ecclesiastes by admonishing all to "fear God and keep His commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). He affirms the kingship of God in spite of the many apparent contradictions about which he has written. We understand, then, what he means by "The fear of Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). The pursuit of knowledge will be futile if one is not willing, from the very beginning, to acknowledge his own limitations and a willingness to trust God for what he cannot explain.

The Hebrew epistemology, then, begins by admitting that man's knowledge will always fall short of producing an entirely coherent system of truth. Rather than forcing all facts into a linear sequence of logic, the biblical writers affirm the tension of living with truths that appear contradictory. Marvin Wilson calls this "block logic," by which he means that concepts were expressed in self-contained units or blocks of thought.[4] Rather than linear logic which must proceed along a single line from premises to conclusion (the domino illustration), the Hebrews recognized that reality perceived from God's point of view (and revealed in the Scriptures) might appear as contradictory to that same reality viewed from mankind's limited perspective. All the facts in a given block are coherent, but one block of facts might present paradoxes and apparent contradictions with another block. In fact, recognizing and affirming the infinite wisdom and knowledge of God (cf. Romans 11:33; Isaiah 40:13) presupposes and affirms the finite knowledge of man.

This does not mean that we give up trying to offer a logical explanation to apparent contradictions that may appear in the Bible, nor that we shun the hard work of scholarship by simply labeling all the difficulties as unexplainable mysteries. Rather, we should do all in our power to show how the revealed truth of God fits together harmoniously, all the while recognizing that in some cases no satisfying explanation will be found and that our ability to receive what the Scriptures say will flow from our faith, not from our intellectual abilities to derive a coherent logic.[5]

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the mystery of the incarnation. Unable to rest in the unexplainable mystery of Immanuel (God with us), the Greek and Latin Church fathers formulated linear logical systems to explain the incarnation while their opponents used the same kind of logic to prove them in error. The same theological battle over the incarnation rages today, and often both sides of the debate resort to linear logic to prove their position. In contrast, John affirms the incarnation without the need to provide a coherent system of logic to prove it. He simply says that "the Word was God," and that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). And clearly for John, "the Word" is Yeshua. He states the absolute truth of "God with us" but leaves it as a mystery explainable only in the mind of God. And Paul concurs:

> By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

(1Timothy 3:16)

What This Means for Us

Unwrapping ourselves from the Greek mindset which characterizes our western culture is a difficult task but a necessary one if we hope to understand the Scriptures on their own terms. As Wilson notes:

> It is particularly difficult for Westerners—those whose thought-patterns have been influenced more by the Greeks and Romans than by the Hebrews—to piece together the block logic of Scripture. When we open the Bible, therefore, since we are not Orientals, we are invited, as Robert Martin-Achard states, to "undergo a kind of intellectual conversion" to the Hebraic world of the East.[6]

Indeed, if we fail to read the Scriptures from the Hebraic perspective in which they were written, we will inevitably misinterpret them by importing a Greek dualism and contorting the sacred text into a system of linear logic. In so doing, we not only miss the message itself, but we change it into something God never intended. Our systematic theologies, neatly packaged in linear logic, predetermine how we interpret Scripture when just the opposite should be the case: the sacred text should determine our theology. It is easy to see, then, that as we strive to return to a Torah perspective, it is necessary that we jettison our Greek worldview and seek to read and understand the Bible from the Hebrew mindset in which it was written.

In part two of this article, we will explore how the Greek worldview affected the Church's understanding of the Gospel, the process of sanctification, and the world to come.

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[1] Quoted from Christian Overman, *Assumptions that Affect Our Lives* (Ablaze Pub., 1989), p. 15.

[2] *Confessions*, 8.2.

[3] B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield,* 10 vols.: *Studies in Turtullian and Augustine* (Oxford, 1932 [reprinted by Hendrickson Pub, 2003]), 4.265.

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

[5] This is not to suggest that our faith is devoid of intellect, but it is to suggest that trusting the Scriptures to be the true revelation of God is a superior epistemology to that of empiricism or rationalism. Hebrews 11:1 teaches that faith grasps reality (*hupostasis*) and presents evidence (*elegxos*) for what is unseen. Accepting as true the mysteries of God which neither empiricism nor rationalism can explain is not an unintelligent leap into the dark. It is a reliance upon revelatory truth that faith alone can grasp.

[6] Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham,* p. 150.