

Appendix 2: Hebrew versus Greek Thinking

A study of the history of philosophy quickly shows that the Greeks, the creators of Western philosophy, were concerned with what does not change.¹ They believed that change is a defect, that whatever is ultimate must be static and immobile. What changes, including the world that we experience, is of a lesser order than what does not change. In Greek terms, what changes is less real.

The orthodox, traditional Christian concept of God falls within this philosophical tradition that the fixed is superior. In other words, traditional Christian ideas about God are based on Greek models of what it means to be. This is true not only of Christian theology; our culture has also modeled its vision of reality on Greek ideas, probably because Greek and the languages of Western philosophy are all Indo-European languages. In other words, the Western understanding of reality and the Western understanding of God are manifestations of the same thing: the Greek belief that whatever is ultimate must be absolutely unchanging. From this unchangeableness follow all the attributes of the traditional God (that he is static, unembodied, and atemporal) and all the attributes of whatever we take to be ultimate, whether God or not (law, for example, or reason).

Nevertheless, there are other ways to understand the world and its reality. For Christians and Jews, foremost among those other ways is the Hebrew way, which is expressed in a Semitic rather than an Indo-European language. Though Indo-European (hereafter referred to as Greek) languages focus on the static when concerned with what ultimately is, Semitic (hereafter referred to as Hebrew) languages focus on the temporal (but they mean something different by time) and dynamic.

I believe that this difference between the Hebrew way of thinking about the world and our own has had profound consequences for religious traditions in European cultures, and ours is a predominately European culture. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, a contemporary French thinker, has suggested that the God of Israel may have always escaped capture by Greek and Roman models of what it means to be.² He has also suggested that the Greek and Roman models have often proven quite disastrous, resulting, for example, in the holocaust of World War II. I take his suggestion that God is not found in Greek and Roman models of thought quite seriously. I am less sure of the truth of his suggestion that the Greek and Roman models are the basis for the holocaust, though I think his case is provocative and though another French thinker, Emmanuel Lévinas, has persuasively argued a similar case.³ In any case, I think Lacoue-Labarthe's suggestion that the Greek and Roman models of thought cannot do justice to the true and living God is not merely a possibility, it is a probability. I believe that most of what passes for talk about God, whether positive or negative, is talk about a god who is not the God of Israel.

To see briefly some of what the difference between Hebrew and Greek thought implies, consider the following ideas.

Form and Matter

In Western thought, form and matter (or an analogous distinction, genus and species) are separate. We use both concepts to describe an object, and form (genus) is more important because it is less changeable. In contrast, Hebrews do not make this distinction. If we were to make it for them, we would have to say that for Hebrews the material, not the form, is most important. In Hebrew, to change the material is to change the object. In other

words, the form/matter distinction is Greek (Indo-European) rather than Hebrew (Semitic). Unlike Greek, Hebrew does not conceive of anything immaterial or unembodied, even in thought. That concept is required, however, to make the form/matter distinction, and perhaps it is required to believe that ultimate reality is absolutely static.

Perhaps an example will clarify this difference. Suppose someone says, “All the Lord’s ways are grace and truth.” If the person is Greek, he or she assumes a genus, or form (ways), under which exist various species. The species, or matter, are the particular kinds of ways. To use Aristotelian language, they are the particular enactments of the form. For example, we assume that one species, one materialization of ways is a group of ways called the Lord’s ways and is either identical to or a subset of another species of ways, namely, the ways of grace and truth. A traditional logical diagram illustrates these relations:

[Diagram could not be included here. See the original version.]

In our language and its logic, sentences establish relationships between things. Things—material entities or analogues of material entities—are the basic units of what there is, and the sentences tell us the relations between those things. On the basis of that logic and language, we can conclude from the clause *all the Lord’s ways are grace and truth* that each category is more refined or narrow than the previous one. The sentence describes the relations among these categories, thus describing the way the various groups of things in the world are related to one another.

This kind of thinking has been and continues to be very useful. Without it, we would probably not have the scientific and technological achievements we have had. Nevertheless, it is not the only way to think about the world. For example, the Hebrew approach does not focus on things as primary, nor does it use the same method of division and hierarchy of genus and species. As a result, Hebrew sentences do not fit into this kind of diagram. The feeling that we should be able to draw a diagram, that visualization is a primary means of understanding, is another significant difference between the Greek and Hebrew ways of thinking (see the discussion of picture thinking that follows).

Because Hebrew focuses on verbs, on activities of things rather than on these things apart from their activities, Hebrew thinks of the Lord’s ways as inseparable from the characteristics of those ways. Perhaps *all the Lord’s gracious-and-true-ways* illustrates the Hebrew way of understanding this sentence. The point is that while Greek thinking is in terms of divisions between categories (each category being a different materialization of the immaterial principle that rules in the matters in question), divisions that we can apply to particular things, Hebrew thinking is in terms of the activity—the coming together and acting together—of things.

In sum, unlike the noun in English or Greek, “the action of the Hebrew noun is active, dynamic, visible, and palpable.”⁴ Because nouns represent things (whether material things or emotional or conceptual ones, such as feelings), this is also true of the difference between how Hebrews and Greeks perceive things. In Hebrew thinking, things are always visible and palpable. For us, perhaps the most important category of things are the abstract things—such as ideas and concepts—that we use to manipulate the particular entities we deal with every day. But such things are not only not active, they are also neither visible nor palpable. For us the world is the enactment of something static, pre-given, and abstract (whether a Platonic realm or the formulae of physicists), but for the Hebrew mind the world is itself physical activity. Activity in a physical body is the most fundamental category of Hebrew thought.

The Hebrew verb translated “to be” is quite different from our “to be” verb. Because of the influence of Greek thought on our own and because our language is within the same language family as Greek, for us, being is objective rather than personal, and it is ultimately static, “a datum at rest in itself.”⁵ For Hebrews, “the ‘being’ of things and of the world as the totality of things was . . . something living, active, effective. . . . In the full Old Testament sense ‘being’ is preeminently *personal being*.”⁶ As latter-day Greeks, we think of the being of persons on analogy with the being of static, inanimate objects. However, in Hebrew thinking, the being of objects is in analogy to the being of living, animate persons. Because of this different sense of what it means to be, Hebrew and Greek thinking differ on the relative importance and ontological status of changing and remaining the same. We usually think of stasis as originary and movement as a change from that originary state. In Hebrew thinking, however, remaining the same—stasis—is a particular kind of movement. For example, *to rise up* and *to stand* are the same verb, standing being a particular instance (the completed event) of rising up. “Motionless and fixed being [the being that Greek thinking always presumes is most important] is for the Hebrews a nonentity; it does not exist for them. Only ‘being’ which stands in inner relation with something active and moving is a reality to them.”⁷

The Hebrew concept of being means that to be a person is to do what persons do. The person is because he or she is alive, and life—an activity, not a state—is, for Hebrew thought, the essence of what it means to be. Thus the way something is defines what it is.

In contrast, Greek thought separates the way of being from the being. In the Greek way of thinking, I am a human being because I have the essence of being human as part of what I am, and how I live my life is irrelevant to whether I am human. In Hebrew thought, however, how something is and what it is are inseparable: “The *hayah* [being] of God is to act as God, to deal as God, and to carry into effect as God.”⁸ Though God has a particular form, for Hebrew, to be God is not necessarily to have that particular form. To be God is not to fit under a particular logical, biological, or ontological category but to live and act in a particular way, namely, the godly way. Exodus 3:14 illustrates this: “And God said unto Moses, I am that I am.”

The Word

In Hebrew, what can be said, or the word, is the truth. This word is the spoken word, the command, and includes, inseparably, the deed (thus the creative voice of God in Genesis 1). In Hebrew thinking, language is doing, an activity. The word is what is brought about in speaking; it is not what stands behind the spoken word as an abstract concept. In contrast, in Greek thinking, what can be conceived and spoken is the antecedent truth. Truth is sometimes said to be the word, but *word* in Greek means something quite different from what it means in Hebrew. The Greek word *logos* is from *legein*, “to gather.” For Greeks, the word is the gathered, ordered, reasonable content of speaking, not what is brought about in the speaking.

In short, though *word* describes the truth in both Greek and Hebrew cultures, the two languages do not mean the same by that term. An overview of the etymologies refutes the apparent sameness of the two uses of *word*. We can think of the etymologies of the Greek and Hebrew words that we can translate as “word” as each having four stages. The chart below illustrates those stages, showing how the words begin with different meanings—“to drive forward” for Hebrew and “to gather or arrange” for Greek—and end with different meanings, “deed” and “reason,” respectively. During part of the histories of these words, they seem to have had the same meanings and can thus sometimes be translated as the same word. However, the trajectory of their etymologies suggests that the similarity is misleading.⁹

Hebrew	Greek
to drive forward	to gather, arrange
to speak	to speak, reckon, think
word	word
deed	reason

The overlap of the two words at the second and third stages of these etymologies is a matter of equivocation, and this equivocation says much about what each culture thinks it means to speak. (It is interesting to consider to what degree these concepts of *word* come together in John 1:1.)

Picture Thinking and Nonpicture Thinking

As heirs of the Greeks, we believe that we think of objects by picturing them to ourselves. (Whether we do so is irrelevant. Most authorities on the question now believe that we do not, but our language, our common sense, and much everyday philosophy and psychology is built around the idea that we do.) However, as noted previously, Hebrews concentrate not on the appearance, the picturing of the thing, but on its “how.” Thinking of something, therefore, demands an understanding of how it is, not of what it looks like.

For example, the scriptures tell us how Aaron’s garments are made (see Exodus 28:1–42), not how they appear to the eye. Likewise, they describe Solomon’s temple in terms of its workmanship (see 1 Kings 6:1–30), not in terms of a picture. In each of the examples, note the emphasis on the frequent use of verbs of making rather than verbs of seeing or appearance. For example, 1 Kings 6 speaks consistently of what Solomon did. It tells us that Solomon “built” (verses 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 36), “finished” (14, 22), “covered” (15), “prepared” (19), “overlaid” (20, 21, 22, 28, 30, 32), “made” (23, 31, 33), “set” (27), and “carved” (29, 32, 35). Compare that way of thinking about objects with, for example, Homer’s description of Achilles’s armor in *The Iliad*,¹⁰ where the emphasis is clearly on visual description. Thus Boman says, “The edifice is thus not a restful harmonious unity in the beauty of whose lines the eyes find joy [as it would be for a Greek], but it is something dynamic and living, a human accomplishment.”¹¹ Similarly, “the Greeks (and we) think in the concept *face* of the person who is seen: **πρόσωπον**—face, what is looked at; but Hebrews by using *panîm* [the side turned toward one] think of the acting subject: I turn toward someone.”¹² In Hebrew, the face is not what I see but what another person turns toward me. It is what sees and speaks to me. The face belongs to a person; it is not merely an object to be seen.

The Song of Solomon gives an excellent example of how Hebrew does not think in terms of pictures and of the consequent oddities that result from this difference in thinking. Many images in the Song of Solomon seem odd. Speaking of his lover, a young man says, “Your neck is like a tower of David, built for a fortress” (4:4). He compares the lover’s neck with a fortress tower covered with shields, a thought that is hardly complimentary when understood in the Greek way (visually). It seems comparable to a serious English poem in which a young man says to a young woman he loves, “Your neck is like an oak tree.” In contrast, if the simile is conveying what the lover’s neck represents rather than its appearance, then it denotes strength of character or perhaps pride and inaccessibility. In the Hebrew understanding, the tower is dynamic—it rises, it towers, it protects. The tower is a tower because it towers, just as any object is what it is by doing what it does. Thus the tower in Hebrew poetry can designate something that does the same thing that it does, such as a young girl’s neck, even if the visual similarity is vague or incongruous. Hebrew poetry is commonly based on what an object does, not what it looks like.

This difference in the way Greeks and Hebrews understand thinking, along with the difference in the Greek and Hebrew concepts of *word*, may account for the Greek focus on seeing as the epitome of knowing and the Hebrew focus on hearing as knowing. Hebrews hear how the thing is made; they hear the voice of the living speaker. What is most important to a Hebrew is not seeing God or his works, but hearing his voice. Hearing thus becomes synonymous with obeying: “And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them” (Deuteronomy 5:1; see 6:4; 9:1; 20:3; Mark 12:29).

Space and Things

In Hebrew thought, space is different than it is in Greek thought. For Greeks and their European intellectual descendants, space is geometric. It is the open, abstract field in which boundaries occur. For Greeks, objects have boundaries just as nations have boundaries. These boundaries are the infinitely small divisions between one thing and another; in other words, a boundary is a split that severs one thing from another. A boundary, therefore, defines the thing but is not really part of it. Boundaries are *between* things, not part of them.

In contrast, Hebrew boundaries are always physical, such as mountain ranges and stone fences, and are all set by human beings. In Hebrew, boundaries are never mathematical. They do not occur between regions but within a region. The boundaries of a region are part of the region; they do not divide one region from another without being part of the region. For example, “All the borders of Egypt” means “the whole land of Egypt.”¹³ *Border* and *boundary* do not carry the same meaning in Hebrew and Greek, and this leads me to believe that space and objects are also conceived differently.

This difference in the notion of boundaries and space affects how these cultures define an object. The most common way for Greek philosophy to define a thing is in terms of its form, in other words, in terms of its outline or boundary. Thus if Hebrews do not conceive of boundaries as do Greeks, then they cannot conceive of things in the same way either. The Hebrew boundary is real and dynamic rather than an unseen limit between two things. That is why, rather than a visible shape, for the Hebrews the thing is a material entity that does something (see the discussion of the Hebrew understanding of the relations of form and matter, pages 137–39).

In addition, as modern Greeks we tend to think that the space a thing occupies is irrelevant to both the nature of space and the nature of the thing. Space and the essence of the things in space are independent of one another. My pen is the same pen no matter where it is, and it does not change space. According to Hebrew thinking, however, the place and the thing are conjoined. The place is identified with the things in it. For Hebrews, space is not an empty container waiting to be filled, as it is for Greeks. Space is identified by what it contains. For example, the space of a home is defined by the things that make a home, not empty space that contains a home. Similarly, the things in the home are at least partly defined by their location, by being within the space of the home. Likewise, the temple and its location are mutually defining.

This idea that space and objects are not independent of each other says a good deal about the significance of the promised land in Hebrew thought. In the Greek thought pattern, we think of the promised land as a land given to the Lord’s people for their possession. For the Hebrews, however, the promised land is so called because of who the people are in that land; the land is promised because of their presence. The promised land is a space that is both defined by its contents and defines its contents. The people belong in the land and must therefore live in it to be the people they are, but their belonging in the land also makes it promised.

Time and History

One result of this difference in the Greek and Hebrew concepts of space is a difference in their concepts of time. For Greeks, space is fundamental to time; in fact, in an Indo-European model of what it means to be, time is traditionally modeled on space, namely, as a series of points that follow one another in a line. For Hebrews, however, time is fundamental, not space. In Indo-European languages, time is a straight line. We can stand on it gazing forward at the future, with the past behind us.¹⁴ These points and that gaze define the tenses of our verbs, as does our attitude toward time, summed up in Aristotle's phrase, "time destroys."¹⁵ In contrast, we might well sum the Hebrew attitude up in the phrase "time gives birth."

As part of their thinking about time, Indo-European (Greek) languages have three tenses describing the three relations possible to points on the time line. In other words, these tenses reflect what we, standing in the present, can see: this moment, before this moment, and after this moment. On the other hand, Hebrew has essentially two tenses, corresponding to the completeness or incompleteness of the events that make up time, not to past, present, and future. Hebrew tenses refer to events: that which has been concluded and that which has not been concluded, or roughly the equivalent of the perfect and the imperfect tenses. Interestingly, when Hebrew does correlate seeing to time, it speaks of the past as before and the future behind.¹⁶

The two tenses in Hebrew exist because, for Hebrew, the time line is not paramount, nor can it be conceived as a circle, as is sometimes done to portray other non-Indo-European concepts of time.¹⁷ Instead, rhythm, ongoing related events rather than something seen, is the model for thinking about time. The rhythms of the seasons are one example, along with the rhythms of life and death and the rhythms of dance.

This difference between the Greek and Hebrew ways of thinking about time is illustrated by the different approaches to the New Year. For us it is the death of the old and the beginning of the new. However, for Hebrews it is the return of the beginning in a promise of what is coming. If we conceive time as a rhythm rather than a line, any one moment contains all previous moments and any coming moments, in much the same way that a rhythm consists of what has come before any point in the rhythm and what comes after it. We can conceive of spatial and, therefore, Indo-European temporal moments as discrete and independent. The existence of one particular moment of time can be considered apart from any other moment, just as any one point on a line can be separated from every other point on it. The moments of rhythm, however, are not discrete and remain part of the rhythm. They require (in fact, already include) the past and future in order to exist.

To illustrate, one beat of a drum is not part of a rhythm; a drum beat is part of a rhythm only in its relation to other beats. Moments in a rhythm are meaningful only in relation to what has come before and what will come after. Consequently, while for us space is what contains us, our lives, and everything about us, for Hebrews the "container" is time. For us, things and their qualities are metaphysically paramount; for Hebrews, events and their meanings are paramount.¹⁸

When considering the past, this difference between Greek and Hebrew ways of thinking is telling. As latter-day Greeks, we think of the past as gone forever, and as we see in Augustine's *Confessions*, the passing of time becomes a difficult problem for Western thinkers.¹⁹ The problem is especially acute for Christians, for if the past is gone once and for all, redemption and atonement are incomprehensible. The Greek Christian may think, "I have sinned. Nothing can change that, and any recompense, whether by me or by God himself, is a poor substitute for what

should have happened in the first place.” In the Western mind, history is a series of nows that disappear forever, and, once gone, they cannot be changed or redone. The form of events is fixed forever by the passing of time.

In contrast, if we conceive time rhythmically, as the Hebrews do, then the past can change. The previous moment of the rhythm still occurred, but the past exists and has its meaning only in relation to the continuation of the rhythm, only in relation to the present and future of the rhythm. As I noted earlier, the relation of one drum beat to the previous and subsequent beats determine the rhythmic meaning of any beat of a drum. Thus a present beat determines the rhythmic meaning of a past beat as much as the beats that came before determine the rhythmic meaning of a present beat. In rhythm, causation runs backward as well as forward. Similarly, a rhythmic concept of time means that something that happens now can affect the being of something that occurred previously.

The biblical concept of time is rhythmic and is shared by the writers of the Book of Mormon. In fact, the Book of Mormon writers seem to even more clearly conceive of time as rhythmic. The Book of Mormon speaks of types and shadows and rhythms of time that repeat themselves in new ways but also remain the same. Our understanding of dispensations is another example of this rhythm.

This difference between the Greek and Hebrew understandings of time may also explain the visual/aural difference between Greek and Hebrew thinking, or perhaps the visual/aural difference explains the time one. Seeing occurs in space and immediately. Whatever I see, I see all at once, as a whole. Thus it is not surprising that Indo-European languages, which understand the world and its contents in terms of abstract space, understand time in terms of abstract points, the smallest unit of abstract space. It thus follows that this thinking understands what is ultimate as static. In contrast, hearing is essentially temporal. It is an event and is necessarily sequential. Consequently, Semitic languages, in which the continuing event is essential to time, understand space and things in terms of events rather than in visual terms.

Given these differences, it is reasonable to conclude that Hebrew thought does not make the universal/particular distinction as Greek thought does. For example, in Hebrew, *Adam* is both the individual person and humanity, *ish* is both man and men, *rekhebh* is both one chariot and many chariots. The individual is neither an isolated particular excerpted from the class nor an instance of the general form of the class. Though it is contrary to how we normally think, for Hebrew, the individual is the class as a whole. (This idea has some reflection in the various “-ites” in the Book of Mormon.)

Because we make the distinction between universal and particular, we cannot see how Adam can be both one person and all people. We resort to the distinction between the literal and the figurative as one way to account for such uses, but that distinction is merely something we apply to the text to help us make sense of it. What is really at work in Hebrew texts is a different way of seeing things, one that we cannot conform to our own, one that challenges the ways of understanding the world that we take to be perfectly obvious. In Hebrew, Adam, the individual, is adam, all of humanity. He is a type of all, just as each person is a type of Adam (as well as Eve; see Genesis 5:2). According to such a way of thinking, the division between universal and particular or genus and species or form and matter is not necessary or useful. In fact, it is not only useless, it also gets in the way of other understandings, preventing us from making connections and understanding things we could otherwise understand.

Conclusion

When Greek thinking is untempered, when confident (or perhaps overconfident) of its own approach and insistent that it is the only approach, Greek thinking confuses Hebrew thought, making it mysterious at best and irrational

at worst. That overconfidence locks us out of an experience of the world that is quite different from that which we take to be ordinary, but an experience that is at least as rich. When it comes to thinking about divine things, I think it not too much to say that, by itself, Greek thinking locks us out of an understanding of God as a living and acting being, handing us over to the theology of a static and immutable, in other words, dead, god.

To the extent that we continue to recognize the prophets and latter-day revelation and to the extent that we are taught by scripture rather than merely by the thinking inherent in our language and culture, we can escape the fate of Greek thought. But we must be on guard, for our language will often deliver us over to that fate unawares. I believe that we most often mingle the philosophies of men with scripture when we try to understand scripture from the understanding of the world given to us in what we call common sense. Common sense is much more dangerous than any specific philosophical doctrine because it combines philosophical positions that have become commonplace and taken for granted with the effects of language, such as the effect that Indo-European languages, which focus on nouns, have on Indo-European thinking, which takes the material thing to be metaphysically fundamental.²⁰ Common sense is more dangerous because it seems natural, as if there were no alternative. We seldom think about what common sense tells us is true or how it determines the way we think about the world. Prophets and revelation provide us with a considerable safeguard against common sense and the concepts built into our language. Careful attention to scripture and the way that those who wrote scripture thought provides another safeguard.

Notes

1. The discussion that follows depends heavily on Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961). I do not agree with Boman on every point. In particular, I think he is wrong to believe that Greek thought is equally as helpful as Hebrew for understanding biblical ideas. In fact, as will be apparent, I think Greek thinking misleads us seriously. Nevertheless, I find much of what Boman says insightful and, so, follow his thinking on many points.

2. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 37, 100.

3. See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Nijhoff Publishers, 1979); *Otherwise than Being; Or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Nijhoff Publishers, 1981).

4. Boman, *Hebrew Thought*, 72.

5. *Ibid.*, 45.

6. *Ibid.*, 45–46.

7. *Ibid.*, 31.

8. *Ibid.*, 47.

9. See *ibid.*, 68.

10. Homer, *The Iliad* 19.369–86.

11. Boman, *Hebrew Thought*, 76.

12. Ibid., 107.

13. Ibid., 157.

14. See *ibid.*, 145.

15. Aristotle, *The Physics* 221a.30.

16. This may explain the odd wording of Alma 13:1: "I would cite your minds forward to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children."

17. Mircea Eliade, for example, uses the analogy of the circle (*The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask [New York: Harper and Row, 1961], 70) to discuss other conceptions of time, as does Joseph Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [New York: Pantheon, 1949], 30ff.).

18. Some contemporary philosophers, for example, Martin Heidegger, have argued that to make space and objects paramount is the essence of metaphysics. This would seem to mean that Hebrew thought is nonmetaphysical. Other contemporary philosophers, for example, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, have argued that metaphysics is inescapable. For now, we will ignore that problem.

19. See Augustine, *Confessions* 10.

20. Commonplace philosophical positions and the understanding of things given in our language are intertwined, each strengthening the effects of the other.