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Hebrew vs. Greek Thought

Throughout the world, past and present, there are two major forms of philosophy, Western and Eastern and these two forms of philosophy are very different from each other.

The Bible was written by Hebrews in a culture that was predominately Eastern in its philosophy, while we, the readers of the Bible, live in a culture that is predominately Western in its philosophy.

Eastern philosophy is the form of philosophy of all ancient cultures (as well as all primitive cultures that still exist today).

Western philosophy was developed in the Greek culture by its ancient philosophers about 3,000 years ago.

When we read the Bible, which was written from an ancient Eastern Hebrew perspective, we will frequently misinterpret the text because we are reading it from a Western Greek perspective.

When it comes to reading the Bible in its proper perspective, the four major differences between Hebrew and Greek thought must be kept in mind; concrete vs. abstract thinking, passive vs. active descriptions, impersonal vs. personal relationships and linear vs. block logic.

Abstract vs. Concrete Thinking

A concrete word is a word which brings to mind something that you can see, hear, feel, taste or touch. Let's take Exodus 17:12 as an example of concrete thinking.

Exodus 17:12

But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

In this passage we can see many concrete words including hands, stone, sat, side, steady and sun. In addition, the entire sentence creates a visual scene that we can easily picture in our mind.

An abstract word is a word that does not bring to mind something that you can see, hear, feel, taste or touch.

Psalm 92:2

to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night.

In the this passage we do see some concrete words, including morning and night, but we also have the words “*steadfast*” and “*faithfulness*,” which are abstract words.

The Hebrews were not incapable of abstract thought, but every abstract word was rooted in something concrete, which will be related to the meaning of the word.

The Hebrew word for “*steadfast*” is חֶסֶד (*chesed*, Strong’s #2617), which concretely means “*to bow the head*” and abstractly means to show another “*kindness*” in the sense of bowing the head to another as a sign of respect.

Also in Psalm 92:2 is the word “*faithfulness*,” another abstract word.

The Hebrew word translated as “*faithfulness*” is the word אֱמוּנָה (*emunah*, Strong’s #530) and concretely means something that is steady, unwavering, firm or stable. Incidentally, the Hebrew word אֱמוּנָה (*emunah*) in this verse, is the same word translated as “*steady*” in Exodus 17:12, which we looked at above.

Passive vs. Active Descriptions

In our modern Western Greek culture, when we describe something we do it according to its physical appearance. For instance, we may describe a person by their height, skin color, hair color and length, size, etc.

But if you will notice, nowhere in the Bible is a person ever given such a description, unless it is being provided for a specific purpose. As an example, Esau is described as “*hairy*,” but this description is provided because we are later told that Jacob disguised himself as Esau by wearing hairy coverings on his arm to trick his father.

In Greek thought objects are described in relation to itself, while in Hebrew thought they are described in relation to the user. For example, we would describe a pencil as wooden, long and pointed, but the Hebrew would describe it by saying “*I write with it*”. In our modern language, we frequently use adjectives to describe someone or something.

For instance, we may describe a tree as “*tall*” or “*large*”. But Hebrew uses verbs to describe someone or something, such as we see in Psalm 1:1 which describes a tree as being “*planted*”, by streams of water.

Impersonal vs. Personal Relationships

We previously mentioned that a Hebrew would describe a pencil with “*I write with it*.” Besides demonstrating the active nature of the language, it also demonstrates the personal relationship a Hebrew has with his environment.

In our Modern Greek culture we have an impersonal relationship with the objects and environment around us. We may say something like, "God is good," which describes God in relation to himself, but a Hebrew would say, "*My God is good to me*," which describes God in relation to the writer.

Linear vs. Block Logic

The Greek thinker uses a linear logic that flows in steps from a beginning to an end. Each step is linked closely to the next in a coherent and rational fashion.

In contrast to this, the Hebrew thinker uses block logic, which groups things together according to their similarities.

Because of these differences, Western readers of the Bible, who are reading the Bible from only a linear perspective, read the creation account in Genesis as if it was only written in chronological order, but this was not how the narrative was only written; the different events of the creation account are also recorded in blocks of related events.

The first three days of creation are related to separation.

- Day 1 – Separating light from darkness
- Day 2 – Separating the water from the sky
- Day 3 – Separating the land from the water

The next three days of creation are related to the filling of the creation.

- Day 4 – Filling the light with the sun and the dark with the moon
- Day 5 – Filling the water fish and the sky with birds
- Day 6 – Filling the land with animals and man

The record of events for the first six days of creation, are written in blocks of parallels, a form of Hebrew poetry, and can be written like this;

- 1 – Separating light from darkness
- 2 – Separating the water from the sky
- 3 – Separating the land from the water
- 4 – Filling the light with the sun and the dark with the moon
- 5 – Filling up the water with fish and the sky with birds
- 6 – Filling up the land with animals

In the way this is graphically shown, you can see the relationship between the first 3 days of creation to the last 3 days of creation. This is an example of Hebraic Block logic.

To explain further, days 1 and 4 are paralleled with each as we can see from the following verses.

Genesis 1:4

[And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.](#)

Genesis 1:14a, 18b

[And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night...and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good."](#)

Verse 4 occurs on the first day and is describing the action of God separating light and darkness, but in verse 14, which is day four, we have God again separating light and darkness.

It is hard for our Western minds to grasp these very different perspectives of thought, but if we do not accept the fact that the Bible was written from a perspective that is very different from our own, we will continue to either misinterpret it or miss valuable insight.

We hope that you have been blessed by this teaching, and remember, continue to test everything. Shalom.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

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