

Think Hebrew

The Bible is God's revelation to humanity. His revelation comes within a context, not a vacuum, and we must understand that context in order for us to better understand what it is he is saying.

Every people group has a particular set of "glasses" through which they see the world, which influence the way they understand the world and their place in it. One's worldview is usually unconscious, and "is the blueprint of beliefs, behaviors and identities, which shape the perceptions of a person or a group of persons. It is an inheritance of ideas, practices and attitudes, which are conveyed and reinforced from generation to generation through institutions of society like governance, family, religion and community. Culture defines right and wrong, delineates assumptions and expectations, and ultimately colors our dreams and what we see as the meaning of life." (Marco Blankenburgh, "Knowledgeworkxs")

As we begin our study of the Bible, let's first explore the particular culture in which the Scriptures were given. God revealed himself to a small Jewish tribe somewhere around 3,000BC. As we understand the unique characteristics of Hebrew thought, we will better understand what God is saying to us. We need to think as Jews. Western cultures, such as Europe and North America have been influenced by Greek rationalism. This is radically different from Eastern thinking.

To illustrate: Asians think in lifetimes, generations, not just "my life." When the USA invaded Vietnam in the 1960's their rationale was, "In 2-3 yrs. we'll win this with bombs, and a massive invasion of troops." The Vietnamese way of viewing the conflict was, "If I don't win, my children will, or grandchildren, or...."

Hawaiians have little concern for time - "Hang loose." In some regions of Africa people don't perceive angles or other geometric realities - everything in their environment is round or curved.

We must learn to "think Hebrew", the mind to which, and through which, God revealed himself in the Bible. (Most of the English speaking world today "thinks Greek.")

A. Hebrew/Greek Differences:

1. **Hebrew: Corporate** - The group is most important. Think families, generations, rather than individuals.

An example of how this plays out can be seen in the Japanese work ethic. There is a company mentality that takes precedence over the individual, resulting in little absenteeism, willingness to work long hours with short breaks. "We want the company to do well." It helps a Westerner understand how a Kamakazi pilot could willingly sacrifice his life for the good of the whole.

A biblical application is found in 1 Corinthians 12 – each individual has been given gifts that are to be used to edify the Body of Christ, the Church. Worship is to build up the Body, to glorify God, not for what the individual may get out of it.

Corporate thinking helps us understand God's dealing with the sin of Achan in Joshua 7. The nation is defeated by the army of Ai. When Joshua questions God about it, God responds: Israel

has sinned and broken my covenant! They have stolen some of the things that I commanded must be set apart for me...For now Israel itself has been set apart for destruction.” (7:11) Even though only one man had sinned, the whole nation was suffering. When Achan confesses his sin, his whole family is stoned along with him. Guilt is corporate.

Greek: Individualistic - The individual person is most important. In the West, company unions exist in order to secure the rights of the individual. They strike for better benefits or wages without concern for how their gains will impact the company.

- Church experience is valued according to “what I get out of it.”
- Guilt is individual. It seems grossly unfair to a Greek thinker that a whole nation or family should be punished because of one person’s sin. In the same way, sin is rationalized by saying, “It shouldn’t matter to you what I do; I am only hurting myself.”

2. **Hebrew: Concrete** - There are only 10,000 words in the Hebrew language. Virtually every word is a noun or verb, expressing being and action. So if a young man goes out, gets drunk, and smashes up the car, the assessment is blunt: "The child is a fool, wicked."

Greek: Abstract - Greek has 200,000 words, English, 1,000,000, allowing for long, circuitous discussions and descriptions; so "the child has a weak father image" or "is poorly socialized."

3. **Hebrew: Religious** - Assumes God, and accepts things as they are. "Why" is more important than "How". The Hebrew mind is concerned with ultimate meanings and purposes. Scripture speaks ‘meaning statements:’ "We are sinful," "We are in relationship with God."

The assumption is that God speaks to us, we are to just listen, we are not to come to Scripture with an agenda, or list of questions. Therefore, when discussing Creation the issue to the Hebrew mind is “**Why** did God create?” rather than “**How** did He do it?”

Greek: Scientific - Reality is what we can know with our five senses, what can be empirically determined; therefore we can't really “know” if God exists. The Greek mind is seeking the "How," through logic, trying to figure out how things work. The question of Creation therefore is "How did God do it?" rather than “**Why** did God create?” Consuming issues are: “Did he really do it all in seven days, or did it take millions of years?” If millions of years, then the Bible must be a myth or wrong, leading Liberals to throw out the Bible as an inaccurate science textbook, and Fundamentalists insisting the Bible is “right,” throwing out science.

The Greek mind asks questions of Scripture like "Was the tree that Adam and Eve ate from a peach tree or a plum tree? Was the snake a boa or a rattler?" These are the wrong questions to ask of Scripture – it wasn't written to deal with these.

4. **Hebrew: Non-systematic** - The Bible seems to be a string of stories, with no particular order. Paradox is acceptable. "God is all loving *and* all powerful". To the Hebrew, the question of the innocent suffering is not a logical one, but rather the presence or absence of God in our suffering.

Greek: Systematic – The pre-supposition is that reality has to be logical, orderly, so we impose order on reality. Systematic Theology is a creation of the Western mind, biblical theology of the Eastern mind.

5. **Hebrew: Open universe** – God can and does break into our world. There is room for miracles, and the expectation of God's intervention in human affairs. It is okay to have questions unanswered, because God is who he is, and we are not him.

Greek: Closed universe – There is little room for God “breaking in.” Life is predictable, governed by principles of cause and effect. Life should be standardized, conclusions are the end goal.

6. **Hebrew: Numbers are symbols of ideas, can have two meanings.** E.g.:

Four: The number 4 or 4 corners of the earth, global significance

Six: The number 6 or number of man, human, less than perfect

Seven: The number 7 or Perfection

Eight: The number 8 or Start over again, we're going to do something *new*

Ten: The number 10 or Completion

1000: The number 1000 or "umpteen," more than can be counted

One example of this is the 144,000 in Revelation chapters 7 and 14, carrying the mark of belonging to God. This can be interpreted as being the 12 tribes of Israel (all the saints of the Old Testament), times the 12 apostles (all the people of the Church built on the foundation of the apostles), meaning everybody was there!

Greek: Numbers are literal - Revelation says there were 144,000 in heaven. Once that number of saved people is reached the Greek thinker is in crisis – what happens to those believers who come after? The Jehovah's Witnesses hold to the literal numbers, and have had to develop another theology once 144,000 was reached.

7. **Hebrew: Historical** – Life is rooted in history, not just principles or a philosophy floating in your mind, as in Confucianism, the New Age movement, etc. The events of Scripture are researchable, confirmable, and temporal, “of this world.” There is a unity of life and faith.

For example: The commandment "Thou shall not covet" is specifically applied: your neighbour's wife, house, oxen.

Greek: Philosophical – Life is abstract, there is a shadow world, reality could be timeless, much takes place in one's head.

So the commandment “Thou shall not covet” is read as "Thou shall not be selfish" - A principle,

ideal to live by.

8. **Hebrew: Subjective** – Life is involvement, commitment. *We* are involved in the Fall, redemption, covenant relationship. It is not about someone else, it is about us. Belief leads to action. Experience is the way I know. "I *know* my heart is evil" because I live with my heart and battle it all the time.

Greek: Objective – I can live detached from, rather than being engaged in experience. An individual sits back and observes, evaluates, judges, and casts his vote without ever engaging. To believe is to accept propositionally, and so discussions on the origin of evil can take place without ever dealing with the condition of *my* heart.

9. **Hebrew: Vivid picture images** – parables, proverbs, story-telling.

Symbols are given that are historical and concrete, e.g. The Tabernacle is a picture of God dwelling with us; the scapegoat for sins is a picture of our sin being laid on another and carried away.

Observations about life are embodied in proverbs, pictures: "Better to eat soup with a friend, than a feast with an enemy."

Jesus gave us pictures to help us understand who he is: "I am the bread of life" – the source and sustainer of life.

To describe the love of God the Father towards us, his wayward children Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Greek: More didactic, lecture – mystical; lots of words and ideas.

This is not to say that one way of thinking is "right" and the other "wrong," but to help us understand how we must approach Scripture if we are to understand its message. It is not written in a vacuum, but to a specific people with a particular approach to life and faith.

B. Introduction to our study of the Bible:

1. Come to the scriptures prepared to take them at face value, not with preconceived ideas. Let God's Word speak for itself.
 - It was written over a period of 1300 yrs.
 - It was written in many sections, by many authors
 - It contains many literary forms, e.g. poetry, wisdom, narrative, parables, etc.
2. It is primarily and throughout a "love and rescue" story
 - God is in a battle against an arch enemy, who seeks to overthrow him, and seize the

sovereignty of the universe

- Humanity is caught in the crossfire
 - God becomes a man in Jesus Christ, and enters the most dangerous part of the battle, confronts His (and our) enemy, and snatches us away to safety
3. The Bible begins with the Pentateuch, the first 5 books, written by Moses. It is like 1 book with 5 sections.
- a) “Genesis” means "beginnings". **Genesis** is the first word of the Bible, Ch. 1:1.

Beginning of:

- creation
 - man
 - covenant relationship
 - sin
 - the people of God
- b) Chapters 1-11 are actually a prologue, in which the author explains why he's writing the book, and what the book is about. It spans a long, undefined period of time.
- c) Ch. 12 is the beginning of traceable History.

Now to get into the book:

(I will sometimes use “man” to refer to humanity, inclusive of men and women, when to write both seems awkward)

Genesis 1:

There are two perspectives of creation presented:

Ch. 1:1-2:3 God's perspective

Ch. 2:4-25 Our perspective

Both perspectives introduce a covenant (agreement) between God and humanity, initiated by God and binding upon us.

Relationships of creation (not explicit, but within the structure of Ch. 1) between Kingdoms (Days 1-3) and the Kings responsible for each (Days 4-6)

Day 1: Light

Day 2: Firmament - Sky above, Sea below

Day 3: Dry land, vegetation

Day 4: Luminaries: Sun, moon to rule day and night

Day 5: Birds and fish to rule sky above, sea below

Day 6: Animals and man to rule the earth; man to rule the animals, God to rule humanity

See all the relationships, all the responsibilities?

Each object of creation has its place. Each has someone to be over and under it. There is in creation itself an implicit covenant of responsibilities and expectations.

Next session we will begin with **Creation and its Concepts**