

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 deceptions 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 main-line 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 (1 Corinthians 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; 1 Timothy 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 dispensant 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.

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.

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 Tertullian 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.

My Big Fat Greek Mindset

Part 2

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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.