Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek (Western) Thought

A key to understanding scripture through the eyes of the Authors

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Why Have An Understanding of Hebrew Thought to Understand the Difficult Writings of Paul...or the Entire Bible For That Matter?

Probably anyone who has received a degree from a Bible college or seminary has had to take a course in Biblical hermeneutics. It is one of the essentials that Bible students are taught so that they can properly understand the Bible. "Hermeneutics is the study of the methodological principles of interpretation...To interpret the Bible means to understand the Bible" (*Hermeneutics: How to Understand the Scriptures*, by James Scott Trimm, p. 4).

There are several basic principles that must be applied for correctly understanding the Bible (or any written material, for that matter): who is the author, when did he live, what is his point of view, what was the cultural and historical setting of the time in which he wrote, to whom was he writing, and in which language was we writing? This is called the context. The dictionary defines the word *context* as follows: (a) the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning; (b) the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs. Understanding the proper context of something written has everything to do with understanding the meaning of the message the author was trying to convey to his audience. If, for example, a biblically illiterate person were to read Paul's epistle to the Romans failing to realize that it was written nearly 2000 years ago, but instead assumed that Paul was a 21st-century, English-speaking Jew living in Brooklyn, New York City writing to a group of Christian believers in modern-day Rome, what would be his chances of correctly understanding what Paul was really saying? The answer is obvious. So understanding *context* has much to do with correctly understanding an author's intent.

In theological circles there is much debate as to what Paul really taught, believed and practiced. Some say that he came to "do way with the law of Moses" while others claim that he was a Torah-obedient, orthodox Messianic Jew who came to uphold the laws of the Torah. Who is right? One thing that we can all agree on is that Paul is at the center of much controversy and some of his writings are very hard to understand. The Apostle Peter warns us in Scripture that regarding Paul's writings that there are "**some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction**" (2 Pet. 3:16). As Trimm points out (SANJ--email update: Digest Number 89): Paul knew that his teachings were being twisted, for he mentions this in Romans: **"...(as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just"** (3:8). Paul elaborates on this slanderous twist of his teachings, saying: **"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"** (Rom. 6:1-2) and again, **"What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid"** (v. 15). Furthermore, upon visiting Jerusalem in Acts 21 Paul was again confronted with this same slanderous twist on his teachings. He was told:

> **And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother,
> how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law:
> And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles**

to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. (Acts 21:20-21)

So if we are to have any chance of correctly interpreting the difficult writings of Paul, it is imperative that we understand the context in which he operated: who he was, where he lived, the culture in which he lived, the language he spoke and how he thought. The focus of this study will be how he thought as a Hebrew and this is directly related to the Hebrew language he spoke. As we shall see, Hebrew-thinking is very different than Greek (Hellenistic)-thinking which is the foundation of our western mind-set.

ATHENS OR JERUSALEM?

Scholar Marvin Wilson asks the folllowing question, "What is the inner world of biblical thought? What is the cultural mind-set of the authors of Holy Writ? Are we to understand the Bible chiefly through the eyes of Hellenism (Greek thought and culture) or through the eyes of Judaism (Hebrew thought and culture)? Obviously, the last question focuses on the New Testament. Most scholars affirm an essentially strong Jewish background to Gospel studies and to the life and teachings of Jesus [Hebrew: Yeshua]. But scholars debate widely the background of the writings of Paul, 'apostle to the Gentiles' (Rom. 11:13)" (*Our Father Abraham—Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith,* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1989, p. 5).

Wilson continues, "Indeed, today convincing evidence challenges the earlier widespread belief that Paul's writings bear the distinctive mark of Platonism. In sum, contemporary Christians have strong reasons to question any approach to Paul which finds the primary roots of his theology in Hellenism, Gnosticism, or mystery religion.

"Paul upheld the goodness of the Jewish tradition of Torah. Indeed, Paul 'came to understand the Christian life as patterned after that of Judaism: it was for him not the antithesis but the full flowering of that Faith.' This meant for Paul, Diaspora Jew that he was, a deep rooting in the Hebrew Scriptures and rabbinic thought. Paul was proud of being a Jew (2 Cor. 11:22), in his words, 'a Hebrew of Hebrews...a Pharisee' (Phil. 3:5). As in the case of ancient Israel, so with Paul, God channeled 'His word thought by Hebrew minds...'"

"If one is to interpret the teaching of Paul—and, indeed, all of Scripture—correctly, one must understand his background and the context in which he wrote. Krister Stendahl has wisely observed that 'the task of biblical studies, even of biblical theology is to describe, to relive and relate, in terms of presuppositions of the period of the texts, what they meant to their authors and their contemporaries.'...[Paul's] inner world of the spirit reflects primarily his Hebrew heritage, fed from sources which originally flowed from Jerusalem. So at the core, Paul's theology was essentially Hebraic..." (Wilson, p. 8).

As Wilson states, we can establish that "the authors in both the Old and New Testaments, find their primary orientation in the Semitic culture of the East," and that Christianity does not derive from pagan, Hellenistic sources, or from speculative world-views, and neither is it a syncretistic religion deeply rooted in mystery cults, Gnostic sects, naturalistic philosophies, or polytheistic thought. Rather, the Christian faith is divinely revealed and is securely anchored in the Hebrew Bible —the [Torah], Prophets, and Writings. God breathed his word into the minds of the biblical authors within a Jewish cultural environment. Consequently, for us, in the most succinct terms, 'to ignore Hebraic ways of thinks is to subvert [a proper biblical] understanding.' We must, therefore, focus on the language and thought-patterns found in the Scripture so that we are able to penetrate the mind of the Hebrew people. When we enter their civilization and view it through their eyes, we find that the contour of their thought is vibrant, rich, and colorful. It has its own nuances and features" (Wilson, p. 135).

Thorlief Boman affirms Wilson's assertions above and adds, "As the New Testament writings show, [Yeshua and the Apostles] were firmly rooted in the Old Testament and lived in its world of images. Shortly after the death of the Founder, however, the new religious community's centre of gravity shifted into the Greek-speaking Hellenistic world, and after the year 70 [when the Temple was destroyed], the community was severed finally from its motherland: Christianity has been the religion of Europeans ever since. It is significant, however, that despite their absolute authority the words of [Yeshua] were preserved by the Church only in the Greek language. Not only are these two languages essentially different, but so too are the kinds of images and thinking involved in them. This distinction goes very deeply into the psychic life; the Jews themselves defined their spiritual predisposition as anti-Hellenic. Once this point is properly understood, it must be granted completely" (*Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1960, p. 17).

Hebrew Thinking Is Dynamic; Greek Is Static

"If Hebrew thinking it is to be characterized, it is obvious first to call it dynamic, vigorous, passionate, and sometimes quite explosive in kind; correspondingly Greek thinking is static [harmonic or resting], peaceful, moderate..." (Boman, p. 27).

This is evidenced in the syntax of the Hebrew sentence compared with that of the Greek (and other western languages). "The action-centered life-style of the Hebrews (which we will address more fully later) is often reflected in Hebrew sentence structure. The English language usually places the noun or subject firs in the clause, the verb or action-word: for example, *The king judged.* In the narrative of biblical Hebrew, however, the order is normally the reverse. That is, the verb most often comes first in the clause, then the noun; thus, *He judged, the king*" (Wilson, 137). Boman says, "The verbs especially, whose basic meaning always expresses a movement or an activity, reveal the dynamic variety of the Hebrew's thinking" (Boman, p. 28). He goes on to explain that even Hebrew verbs which express a position like sitting or lying is done by a verb which expresses movement (ibid.). Therefore the verb, the *action* word forms the basis of Hebrew thinking and even those verbs which Westerners might consider to be stationary or positional in nature, to the Jewish mind, or not. As we shall understand more fully as we progress, for the Hebrew everything is in transition, moving toward something and is in process. "[M]otion and standing are not opposites as they are for us, but they are so closely related to on another that together they can form a unity. Movement is carried through to a standstill, or seen from the other side, standing is viewed as the result of rising or a placing" (Boman, p. 29).

"It is characteristic of Hebrew and the other Semitic languages that all of these verbs designate first of all the 'becoming' of the conditions and qualities in question. It is really more correct to say that we are dealing here with neither a 'being' nor a 'becoming' but with a dynamic third possibility, therefore more an 'effecting' as in the case of the verb *lighten* which means not only *to be bright* or *become bright* but also *to make light effective*, i.e. *illuminate*"

Boman concludes a study of various Hebrew verbs by saying, "Our analysis of the Hebrew verbs that express standing, sitting, lying,, etc., teaches us that motionless and fixed being is for the Hebrews a nonentity; it does not exist for them. Only *being* which stands in inner relations with something active and moving is reality to them...only movement (motion) has reality. To the extent that is concerned Hebrew thinking at all, static being as a predicate is a motion that has passed over into repose" (Boman, p. 31).

The Dynamic Character of the Hebrew World

In the Hebrew world, according to Boman, things do not have the immovable fixity and inflexibility that they have for us, but they are changeable and in motion. He then cites some examples of this in Scripture:

> **Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff.** (Isa. 41:15)

Even stones and rock are movable and externally alterable:

> Job. 14:18—**And surely the mountain falling cometh to nought, and the rock is removed out of his place.**

In comparison with [YHWH's] immovability, even the fixity of the earth is nothing at all:

> Ps. 18:7—**Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations also of the hills moved and were shaken, because he was wroth.**

> Ps. 114:4—**The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs.**

> Nah. 1:5—**The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein.**

Such hyperbolic images cannot be explained by natural phenomona…This hyperbole has two familiar roots, the Hebrews' distinctly-personal kind of thinking and their faith in the omnipotent God:

> Ps. 46:2ff—**Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the moun-**

tains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof…The LORD of hosts is with us; the

Isa. 54:10—**God of Jacob is our refuge. For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee.**

We shall see as we progress with this study that the Hebrews' dynamic view of life, including those aspects of it which the Western mindset tends to view as static, stationary or at rest overlaps into their view of the God Himself. Suffice it to say here, the Hebrews' view of the Creator is less parochial and boxed into a limited human scope of things. Their view of the Divine is more open and expansive. Instead of trying to confine Him to limited human definitions and descriptions they focus their efforts on pursuing Him and the character and qualities that determine His makeup. The understanding of the world around them, including God, is to pursue life and God to the fullest, rather than spending time passively trying to define Him. In the pursuit comes the understanding and comes the relationship between the Divine and humanity.

WESTERN PASSIVITY COMPARED WITH THE ENERGETIC AND DESCRIPTIVE HEBREW PEOPLE

"Through modern invention and outright apathy, our present Western world has grown more and more passive. We have developed a TV-obsessed, entertainment-prone, and spectator-minded generation which seems to be largely content to watch life rather than live it" (Wilson, p. 136). This is not only an apt description of American cultural life, but of the American Christian church, as well, which, sadly, has, to a large degree, become a mirror image of the surrounding secular culture. The typical church service in the First American Church, in Anytown, America has become a spectator sport with chairs (or pews) arranged theater-style facing a stage where often paid professional performers titillate emotions and the tickle ears of their fans for an hour or two on Sunday morning. The churchgoers, on having received their weekly dose or fix of religio-entertainment return afterwards to their secular prayerless, biblically illiterate and evangelizingless lives to exist, by in large, as spiritual "couch potatoes."

Wilson continues, "By contrast, the Hebrew were largely an energetic, robust, and, at times, even turbulent people. They were primarily outdoor folk,—farmers, fishermen, tradesmen —who lived life to the full. For them, truth was not so much an idea to be contemplated as an experience to be lived, a deed to be done. The biblical writers often use vocabulary which is highly colorful, dynamic, and action-centered. They tell the story of a people on the move, a people who approached living with boldness, drive, and expectation…Israel followed a 'God-on-the-move,' and they were 'his movable treasure' (Ex. 19:5)" Wilson quoting Martin Luther goes one to say that Luther saw within the Hebrew Bible a "special energy" in its vocabulary. "In his struggle to translate the Hebrew Bible into German, Luther discovered in the sixteenth century what many Hebraists of the twentieth century have recently come to affirm with him: it is impossible to convey so much so briefly in any other language." Luther said, "In it [the Hebrew language] we hear God speak…" (Wilson, p. 136).

"Laziness, inertia, or passivity were hardly marks of the Hebrews' lifestyle. Rather, the Hebrews were mainly a doing and feeling people…'Hebrew may be called primarily a language of senses. The words originally expressed concrete or material things and movements or actions which struck the senses or started the emotions. Only secondarily and in metaphor could they be used to denote abstract or metaphysical ideas.' The Bible contains many Hebraisms in which abstract thoughts or immaterial conceptions are conveyed through material or physical terminology" (Wilson, p. 137). Wilson then cites a number of such examples:

— *look* is to *lift up the eyes* (Gen. 22:4)

— *be angry* is to *burn in one's nostrils* (Ex. 4:14)

— *disclose something* or *reveal something* is to *unstop one's ears* (Ruth 4:4)

— *have no compassion* is *hard heartedness* (1 Sam. 6:6)

— *stubborn* is *stiff-necked* (2 Chr. 30:8; Acts 7:51)

— *get ready* or *brace yourself* is *gird up your loins* (Jer. 1:17)

— *to be determined to go* is *set one's face to go* (Jer. 42:15, 17; Lk. 9:51)

In addition, the Hebrews often refer to God by the use of anthropomorphisms (i.e., representations of God with human attributes). The 'living' and 'active' God of the Hebrews is thus never reduced to mere impersonal abstraction. For instance, the Ten Commandments are said to be 'inscribed by the finger of God' (Ex. 31:18). The prophet Isaiah states, 'Surely the arm of [YHWH] is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull too hear' (Isa. 59:1). And again, a well-known proverb states, 'The eyes of [YHWH] are everywhere' (Prov. 15:3)" (Wilson, pp. 136-138)

Non-Being In Hebrew Thought

"True being for the Hebrews is the word *dabhar*, which comprises all Hebraic realities: word, deed, and concrete object. Non-being, nothing (no-thing), is signified correspondingly by 'not-word', *lo-debhar*. For the Hebrews, non-being, nothingness (no-thingness) also has a certain existence which in practical life is tangible and unsavoury. 'Mere words' (*Heb.:* words of the lip) are empty and vain and, therefore, pernicious and dangerous (2 Ki. 18:20; Prov. 14:23). The lying words of the false prophets are negative quantity in content, yet have a disastrously seductive strength. The prophet Mecaiah ben Imlah had heard how the soothsaying spirit offered himself in [YHWH's] council to be a lying spirit in the mouth of Ahab's prophets so that they prophesied a pure negativity (1 Ki. 22:21ff). A lie for the Hebrew is not as it is for us, a nonagreement with the truth; for example, he would not impute lying to the midwives (Ex. 1:19), something that the text abundantly confirms. For him the lie is the internal decay and destruction of the word: *sheqer* is the opposite of *tsedheq* (Ps. 52:5). That which is powerless, empty, and vain is a lie: a spring which gives no water lies (Isa. 58:11). For this reason, it is just as clear that the God of Israel does not lie (1 Sam/ 15:29) as it is that idols are lies (Jer. 10:14). Lies and falsehood are also called *shaw* whose basic meaning is that which is empty, or which has no content and is futile, a mirage, a nullity" (Boman, p. 56) Boman goes on to explain that Hebrew has many expressions for nullity such as a puff of win, a breath, a phantom, a deception and a false opinion (ibid.). Examples of this in Scripture are:

> Ps. 62:9—**Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie: to be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity.**

> Ec. 5:16— **And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?**

"The Greeks and the Hebrews are united in the idea that non-being is something dreadful; being, however, is a genuine reality and true good, regardless of whether being is thought of as eternally resting conforming to the Greek kind or in eternal motion conforming to the Hebrew kind" (Boman, p. 57-58).

In addition, the word of God was not only nor even primarily an expression of thought; it was a mighty and dynamic force (Boman, p. 58). Examples of this in Holy Scripture are:
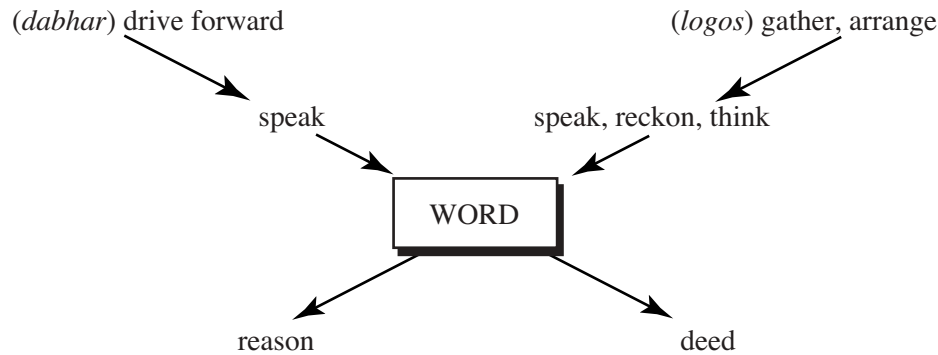
> Jer. 23:2—**Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?**

> Isa. 55:10ff—**For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.**

> Ps. 33:6,9—**By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth…For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.**

"*Dabhar* is dynamic both objectively and linguistically; it comes from the verb *dabhar*…and simply means *to speak.* The basic meaning is *to be behind and drive forward*, hence *to let words follow one another,* or even better *to drive forward that which is behind*; the verb thus portrays somehow the functions of speaking. *Dabhar* means not only *word* but also *deed.* Abraham's servant recounted to Isaac all the *words* that he had done (Gen. 24:66); the rest of Solomon's *words*, and everything that he did, and his wisdom are recorded in the book of the *words* of Solomon (1 Ki. 11:41). The *word* is the highest and noblest function of man and is, for that reason

identical with his action. *Word* and *deed* are thus not two different meaning of *dabhar*, but the *deed* is the conse-quence of the basic meaning inhering *dabhar*" (Boman, p. 66). For the Israelite, if deeds did not follow a man's word then his word was considered a false, lying empty, counterfeit or a lying word, for it did not possess the inner strength and truth for accomplishment, but it accomplished instead something evil…Since the word is connected with its accomplishment, *dabhar* could be translated *effective word*" (Boman, pp. 65-66).

(*dabhar*) drive forward   (*logos*) gather, arrange

        speak   speak, reckon, think

                                WORD

            reason   deed

As we can see from this discussion of the Hebrew word *dabhar* the Israelite mind was more concerned with the substance or quality of something, rather than the appearance or, in the case of words, simply the sound issuing forth from one's mouth. Similar to this concept is the Hebrew word for faith (*emunah*), which not only means *belief* as in mental ascent, but also means *faithfulness, or* the actions following the mouth's confession to belief in something. For example, there are far too many nominal Christians who have at some time in their life pronounced the words, "I believe in Jesus Christ and accept him as my Lord and Savior" (as per Rom. 10:9-10) as if these words were merely some magical mantra or formula which when pronounced guarantee one's eternal security regardless of subsequent lifestyle and actions. Hebraically, such a concept of pronouncing a word without following it up with actions makes the word null, void and meaningless. This is the concept that the writers of Scripture had when they penned such popular Christian salvation passages as Romans 10:9-10. To not understand the proper meaning of the words of Holy Scripture Hebraically can result in false teachings going forth leading to false conversions leading to many people thinking they are spiritually saved when in reality they are the walking damned!

By comparison to the Hebrew word *dabhar* (to speak), the Greek word *logos* (to speak) means *to gather* or *arrange in an orderly manner.* It means *to speak, reckon, think.* The deepest meaning and focus of *logos* is neither the function, articulateness nor the dynamics of the speaking , but rather the ordered and reasonableness of the content, according to Boman. Therefore, *logos* expresses the mental function that is highest according to Greek understanding. "As we have seen, *dabhar* performs the same service for the Israelites; therefore, these two words teach us what the two peoples considered primary and essential in mental life: on the one side the dynamic, masterful, energetic—on the other side the ordered, moderate, thought out, calculated, meaningful, rational" (Boman, pp. 67-68).

We see, therefore, that the word *word* is, so to speak, the point of intersection between two entirely different ways of conceiving the highest mental life, a fact that can be pointed up by means to the following diagram:

"When therefore, the Fourth Evangelist [John, in chapter one] pronounces the word *logos* at the beginning of his Gospel, the many different profound meanings of *dabhar* as well as *logos* harmonize into a beautiful and mysterious unity for him as well as for is Greek-speaking readers familiar with the Old Testament in the same way as the sound of several church bells rung simultaneously [W]hen the Evangelist [John] speaks three times of the eternal being of the *logos* (v. 1f.), undoubtedly it is the Greek spirit which is breathing upon us, for it is character-istic of the Hebrews that their words *effect* and of the Greeks that the word *is*" (Boman, pp. 68-69).

I would, at this point, add into this discussion some observations that I hope the reader will find cogent and interesting. Hebraically, the land of Israel is considered to be at the center of the earth. Geographically it lies at the intersection and crossroads of the three main continents of the ancient world. YHWH placed Israel there so that it would be a light and an example of righteousness to the nations. Prior to and during the time of Yeshua the Hebrew and Greek cultures were vying (and at times warring) with each other for supremacy over the hearts,

minds and land of the Jews. When the long awaited Messiah arrived on the scene, it was not only his mission for his disciples to evangelize Jerusalem and Judea, but also Samaria and the rest of the world, which at that time was Greek in culture and language. Yeshua came not only to establish the mechanics by which this evangelism could be accomplished (via a body of followers or believers in him and in his mission), but it was his purpose to reconcile through himself both the Jews and the (Greek) Gentiles. This was done through his Person at the cross, and his followers subsequently took the message of the cross everywhere.

Hebrew as we are seeing and will see proven more fully below was a language whose primary purpose was to aid a people in approaching their Creator. It was a God-centered language spoken by a God-centered and God-intoxicated Hebrew people. Its core and essence was vertical in nature and could be represented by a vertical line extending from earth to heaven. Conversely, Greek was a language of science, of describing the world, of facts and reason. It was primarily humanistic in nature and can be characterized by a horizontal line parallel to the surface of the earth. Put these two lines—the Hebrew vertical line and the Greek horizontal line—together and you have constructed a cross, which is, in essence, a construct of the diagram above at the center of which is THE WORD, which is exactly what Yeshua the Messiah was (the Word of Elohim made flesh, the Word of Life). Yeshua,the WORD of Elohim came to reconcile both the Hebrew and the Greek worlds in Himself. This was accomplished as Yeshua hung on the cross suspended between heaven and earth—between the horizontal and vertical planes of earthly and heavenly dimensions of existance. Prior to His crucifiction He talked about being lifted up (crucified)(Jn. 3:14; 8:28) and that through Him the reconciliation of heaven and earth would occur (Jn. 12:32). Through the vertical post (which represents the salvation of the Jews that Yeshua talked about in Jn. 4:22) of the cross which points heavenward the rest of the world—the Gentile Greeks—(representing the earthly or horizontal plane of humanity) would be reconciled to the Father—all this through the person of Yeshua the Messiah who hung at the focal point of nexus of the both planes.

This relates to the last letter of the Hebrew alephbet which is the letter *tav* which in its original paleo-Hebrew pictographic form is in the shape of a cross and pictographically and anciently signified *a sign*, *a seal* or *a covenant*. The letter *tav* in the shape of a c ross going back to the creation of man and to the first spoken language that YHWH gave to man at the Garden of Eden, namely Hebrew, was a prophetic picture way back then (long before the pagan sun-worshippers misappropriated the cross and perverted it into a pagan symbol of idolatry) of the reconciliation of the world through the Jewish people, the Jewish Scriptures and the Jewish Messiah, Yeshua.

Now let's us follow this analogy one step further. The vertical post (representing the Hebrew part) can exist without the horizontal cross arm (representing the Greek part), but the horizontal cannot exist without the supporting vertical post without falling to the ground. Similarly, the branches need the tree trunk to support it. The tree trunk can live without the branches, but not vice versa. Speaking of this very fact, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles states this in Romans 11:18. Speaking to the Gentiles he says, **"Thou bearest not the root, but the root bearest thee."** As the Jewish vertical part of the cross points the way to YHWH Elohim, the Jews will lead the way to God for they have the true concept of God and as Yeshua said in John 4:22 to the Gentile Samaritan woman, **"Salvation is of the Jews."** This was born out by the fact that not only was the Savior himself a Jew, but all the original believers in the first century were Jewish and they formed the foundation for the Body of Messiah to which non-Jewish believers were subsequently added. And who did Yeshua choose to carry this message of the cross, the reconciling of the vertical and the horizontal, the Hebrew and the Greek? Who carried the Word of God outward from Jerusalem—the center of the earth? It was Paul, a Greek-speaking, Roman citizen, diaspora, orthodox, pharisaical Jewish rabbi. Who better to understand both the Greek and the Hebrew sides and to bring them together? To help make one new man in Messiah.

HOW DID THE HEBREWS VIEW YHWH?

"The biblical authors never argue the existence of God; they only assume it. God is not understood philosophically, but functionally. He acts. The Hebrew primarily thought of him pictorially, in terms of personality and activity, not in terms of pure being or in any static sense. That is, to express the divine attribute of love, the Hebrews would normally think in terms of a "loving God" (i.e., a God who loves), rather than "God is love." Certainly, therefore, the Hebrew mind-set of Bible times would find little or no interest in many of the issues the Church has debated over the centuries. These issues include theoretical arguments for the existences of God, the nature of the Godhead, free will and predestination, the specifics of the life to come, the word-for-word accuracy

and use of quotations, and the precise way in which the divine and human mesh in the inspiration of Scripture" (Wilson, p. 146).

A CIRCULAR VERSUS A LINEAR VIEW OF GOD

"The Hebrew mind viewed God quite differently from the systematic theological thinking of the West, which defines God and his work with creation in linear manner. The Western-style treatment of the divine character attempts to explain inconsistencies and harmonize contradictions systematically. The Hebrew mind was filled with wonder at the mystery of God. The vastness of God and his inscrutable [uninvestigatible] ways left them awestruck. Inconsistencies and contradictions are intimately related to human, finite understanding of the infinite God. He is beyond human comprehension. First-century Jews approached God through an interactive associative mentality. The fact that God is incomprehensible is very much a part of Jewish thought processes. The Western mind, however, explains everything but understands so little of the divine nature. The Hebrew mind, on the other hand, is overpowered by a sense of wonder and amazement. It thrives on the inconsistencies and contradictions of the one awe-inspiring God" (Brad Young, *Paul the Jewish Theologian,* Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997, p. 25).

Young continues, "Paul has a conceptual approach to theology. It is not linear. His theological worldview is circular and interactive. A systematic [or Western] approach to Paul draws a straight line and follows his reasoning from creation and the fall all the way along to the redemptive suffering of [Yeshua] and the second coming. But Paul is much more complex and far less linear and systematic. On the one hand, Paul views history as moving toward the goal of
God's redemptive plan, which will culminate in the Parousia and the eschatological judgment; on the other, he views God through the prism of perplexing curiosity, which inspires wonder. He does not preach a cycle of salvation history, but the apostle does conceive of the divine in a circular dynamic process. In his contemplation of the mystery of God, like other Jewish theologians of his day, the apostle is content to leave questions unanswered and inconsistencies unresolved. He views theology as a conceptual whole" (ibid.).

"As a Jewish theologian, Paul pursues a conceptual approach to his teachings. His thought processes are not linear but circular. His theological concepts are interactive. Indeed, they are connected one with another in continuous motion. Paul's keen intellect works quickly. The apostle understands God and his great love for all humanity as a vibrant whole. One concept belongs to a complex of interactive ideas. Each term he uses to communicate his thought is clustered with other interactive concepts concerning God's relationship to people" (Young, p. 41).

For Paul and the Jewish mind, the Torah encompasses so much of what can be known about God in the conceptual worldview. Paul focuses on the sum of the whole instead of dissecting the individual parts (Young, pp. 25-26).

"When the contours of Pauline thought are considered in a cycle of interactive concepts rather than in a straight line where each new idea supersedes and eliminates the previous one, the apostle's approach to God is given fresh vigor. It is a Jewish way of thinking. Paul, for instance, does not annul Torah by the preaching of grace. Was not the giving of Torah a powerful manifestation of divine grace? In reality, grace and Torah are interrelated (Young, p. 42).

HEBREW BLOCK LOGIC VERSUS GREEK STEP LOGIC

"The use of what may be termed *block logic* is another important contour of Hebrew thought. Greek logic, which has to a large extent influenced the Western world was different. The Greeks often used a tightly contained step logic whereby one would argue from premises to a conclusion, each step linked tightly to the next in coherent, rational, logical fashion. The conclusion, however, was usually limited to one point of view—the human being's perception of reality" (Wilson, p. 150).

"By contrast, the Hebrews often made use of block logic. That is, concepts were expressed in self-contained units or blocks of thought. These blocks did not necessarily fit together in any obviously rational or harmonious pattern, particularly when one block represented the human perspective on truth and the other represented the

divine. This way of thinking created a propensity for paradox, antinomy, or apparent contradiction, as one block stood in tension—often illogical relation—to the other. Hence, polarity of thought or dialectic often characterized block logic."

"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…to 'undergo a kind of intellectual conversion' to the Hebraic world of the East.

"Let us turn, then to some of the many examples of block logic found throughout Scripture. The book of Exodus says that Pharaoh hardened his heart, but it also says that God hardened it (Ex. 8:15; cf. 7:3). The prophets teach that God is both wrathful and merciful (Isa. 45:7; Hab. 3:2). The New Testament refers to [Yeshua] as the 'Lamb of God' and the 'Lion of the tribe of Judah' (Jn. 1:29, 36; Rev. 5:5). Hell is described as both 'blackest darkness' and the firey lake' (Jude 13; Rev. 19:20). In terms of salvation, [Yeshua] said, 'whoever comes to me I will never drive away,' yet no one can come 'unless the Father draws him' (Jn. 6:37, 44). To find life you must lose it (Mt. 10:39). When you are weak, then you are strong (2 Cor. 12:10). The way up (exhaltation) is the way down (humility) (Lk. 14:11). 'Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated' (Rom. 9:13; Mal. 1:3).

"Consideration of certain forms of block logic may give one the impression that divine sovereignty and human responsibility were incompatible. The Hebrews, however, sense no violation of their freedom as they accomplish God's purposes. Upon a more careful reading of the biblical text one can often observe that the Bible views one block from the perspective of divine transcendence—God says, 'I will harden Pharaoh's heart'—and the other from a human point of view—'Pharoah hardened his heart' (Ex. 4:21; 7:3,13; 8:15). The same is often true of Scriptures which deal with themes of predestination/election and free will/human freedom.

"In sum, the Hebrew mind could handle this dynamic tension of the language of paradox, confident that 'all is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven'…Divine sovereignty and human responsibility were not incompatible.

"The Hebrew knew he did not know all the answers. His position was 'under the sun' (Ecc. 8:17), so his words were few (5:2). He refused to over-systematize or forced harmonization on the enigmas of God's truth or the puzzles of the universe. He realized that no one could straighten what God has made crooked (7:13). All things, therefore, did not need to be fully rational. The Hebrew mind was willing to accept the truths taught on both sides of the paradox; it recognized that mystery and apparent contradictions are often signs of the divine. Stated succinctly, the Hebrews knew the wisdom of learning to trust in matters that they could not fully understand.

"While philosophical and structural divisions of learning obviously have an important role to play in contemporary education, our Western culture—especially on most levels of secular and Christian instruction—has provided little understanding concerning the nature of Hebrew thought. Thus we have the natural tendency to impose more rational and systematic categories of thought on the Bible. The Bible, however, tends to reject most carefully worked-out charts and thoroughgoing attempts at schematization. Neither God nor his Word may be easily contained in a box for logical or scientific analysis. Both God and his Word have a sovereign unpredictability that defies rational, human explanation" (Wilson, pp. 150-152).

In conclusion, Wilson summarizes the concept of Hebrew block logic when he states, "The Semites of Bible times did not simply *think* truth—they *experienced* truth…[T]ruth is as much an encounter as it is propositions…To the Jew, the deed was always more important than the creed. He was not stymied by language that appeared contradictory from a human point of view. Neither did he feel compelled to reconcile what seemed irreconcilable. He believed that God ultimately was greater than any human attempt at systematizing truth. "Walking in truth' (2 Jn. 4) and 'living the truth' (1 Jn. 1:6) were a higher priority than rationally analyzing the truth. In the words of the renowned biblical scholar Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchikk, "we [Jews] are practical. We are more interested in discovering what God wants man to do than we are in describing God's essence…as a teacher, I never try to solve questions because most questions are unsolvable.' He concludes, 'Judaism is never afraid of contradictions…it acknowledges that full reconciliation of the two is possible only in God. He is the coincidence of opposites'" (Wilson, p. 153).

Impression Versus Appearance

"When we observe and study a thing, we involuntarily make for ourselves an image of it somewhat analogous to a photograph. When we mean to speak about the thing and describe it, we try to develop by means of words the same image in our hearers. The Greeks did the same thing. The Israelites, on the other hand, had no interest in the 'photographic' appearance of things or persons. In the entire Old Testament we do not find a single description of an objective 'photographic' appearance. The Israelites give us their impressions of the thing that is perceived. We shall further elucidate this first of all by some examples.

"Noah's ark is discussed in detail in Gen. 6:14f it is striking in this description that it is not the appearance of the ark that is described but its construction."What interests the Israelites, therefore, is how the ark was built and made. He talks of this the whole time, and the appearance is not directly alluded to by a single word; it is impossible for us to form an intelligible image of the ark. Yet as building specifications, the description is natural and consistent" (Boman, pp. 74-75).

"Boman goes on to shows how the same things applies to the Tabernacle in the wilderness. We know that YHWH showed Moses a model of the Tabernacle, yet its appearance is nowhere described, only its construction in the most minute of details and in a most systematic manner" (ibid.)

Additionally, Scripture accurately describes how Solomon had the Temple and the palace in Jerusalem built (1 Ki. 6:7), but Scripture is silent about the actual appearance of the famous temple and its furnishings (ibid.).

Boman continues, "The silence of the sources with regard to the appearance of famous edifices and furniture can be explained in the following way: when an Israelite sees an edifice, his consciousness is at once concerned with the idea of how it was erected, somewhat like the housewife who cannot be satisfied with the taste of a cake but is particularly interested in what its ingredients are and how it was made. The edifice is thus not a restful harmonious unity in the beauty of whose lines the eyes find joy, but it is something dynamic and living, a human accomplishment" (Boman, p. 76).

When considering man, the Israelite first seeks his qualities, Boman goes on to say. He recounts to us his impression of him and it is never reported how a person looked. There may be a brief description that a person is handsome, but the beauty is not expatiated so that we are unable to guess the Israelite ideal of beauty (ibid.).

Similarly, the question can be asked: How did the Israelites view their God? All the theophanies (i.e., a visible manifestation of deity) in the Old Testament are anthropomorphic (i.e., ascribing human characteristics to describing something, in this case deity). For example, YHWH is called a man of war (Ex. 15:3), or Lord, king, father, etc. There are theriomorphic (i.e., having the form of an animal) descriptions of YHWH in the Old Testament, as well (Boman, p. 101). In one place YHWH is described as having wings and feathers (Ps. 91:4).

Obviously, this anthrpo- and theriomorphic descriptions of YHWH are not to be construed as actual descriptions of YHWH but as figurative expressions which describe his qualities with poetic licence (Boman, p. 103).

The Power of Poetry to the Hebrew Mind

One third of the Bible is poetry, notes Wilson (Wilson, p. 141). Did you realize this? Now that you know this perhaps you are asking yourself the question, why did YHWH use poetry to convey so much of His word? Couldn't He have simply used the plain and direct language of prose instead?

There are probably many reasons why YHWH chose poetry as a means to convey His instructions to humanity. Poetry is the language of the heart, and of love. It engages the mind and heart of the reader in a way that prose cannot. Poetry requires the reader to ponder and meditate on the meaning of what it is that the author is trying to convey and thereby the reader enters into a linguistic and artistic relationship with the author. This being the case, poetry is a means for YHWH Elohim to engage and connect intellectually, emotionally and spiritually with His chosen people, his children, and with his bride Israel. Let us now examine the nature of the love language of Holy Scripture.

"Poetry was a welcome aid to memory, for it employed parallel lines that had a certain rhythm of thought, though no set meter. Furthermore, an abundant use of various figures of speech enhanced its liveliness, creativity, and depth of meaning" (Wilson, p. 141).

"The poetry of the prophets reveals a wide range of effective wordplays: for example:

— *mishpat* (justice) and *mispah* (bloodshed)

— *tzedaqah* (righteousness) and *tze'aqah* (a cry) in Isa. 5:7

— *shaqed* (almond tree) and *shoqed* (watching) in Jer. 1:11-12

— *qayitz* (ripe fruit) and *qetz* (time is ripe, end) in Amos 8:1-2

— *heletikhah* (I have burdened you) and *he'eletikhah* (I brought you up) in Micah 6:3-4" (ibid.).

"Other figures of speech lend further variety and creative power to biblical poetry. For instance, Ps. 21:3 uses a simile to describe a righteous man: 'He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yield its fruit in season and whose leaf does not whither.' Joy is expressed through metaphor 'All the trees of the field will clap their hands' (Isa. 55:12), and "the mountains sing" (Ps. 98:8). God's protective care is shown through zoomorphism (the attributing of animallike features to God): 'Hide me in the shadow of your wings' (Ps. 17:8). Nature is personified, but not deified. Stars fight (Jud. 5:20), mountains skip (Ps. 114:6), and the heavens declare God's glory (Ps. 19:1).

"Sometimes the emotional excitement and rapid heartbeat of the poetry is conveyed by the quickness of the meter and the shortness of the vowels. At other times, the lengthening of lines and the use of long vowels my have the opposite effect. In addition, Hebrew poets sometimes repeated key words in order to achieve a climactic effect. Unfortunately, however, when read in translation, the full impact and immediacy of poetry is usually lost" (ibid. pp. 141-142).

Wilson goes on to describe that the writers and poets of Israel skillfully used opportunities for assonance and onomatopoeia. "Assonance is the resemblance or imitation of sound between two words or syllables, or the repetition of vowels without of consonants in two words for example, *peloni almoni*, 'a certain one' (Ruth 4:1) and *tohu va-bohu*, 'ormless and void' (Gen. 1:2). Onomatopoeia is the formation of words that resemble those associated with the object or action to be named: for example, *tzeltzel*, 'cymbal' (Ps. 150:5)., and *zebub*, 'fly' (Isa. 7:18)" (ibid. p. 143).

HEBREW IS A COLORFUL LANGUAGE REFLECTING A COLORFUL PEOPLE

"Hebrew is a very colorful language, and the biblical writers knew how to use it to great advantage. But Hebrew is not a precise analytical language prone to conveying subtle nuances of meaning [like Greek or English]. For example, Hebrew has but two verbal tenses. It normally uses the imperfect tense for incomplete action and the perfect tense for completed action. In general, the syntax and grammar of Hebrew are far less complex then the inflectional languages of Latin and Greek.

"The nature of Hebrew is to paint verbal pictures with broad strokes of the brush. The Hebrew authors of Scripture were not so much interested in the fine details and harmonious patter of what is painted was they were in the picture as a whole. Theirs was primarily a description of what the eye sees rather than what the mind speculates. In brief, the whole world is a mystery which the Hebrew neither comprehends nor thoroughly investigates. 'He takes things as they are, as he himself sees them. He accepts them, and marvels.'

"To gain additional perspective on the nature of Hebrew thought, the analogy of an orchestra might be helpful. When viewed collectively, the Hebrew authors of Scripture are not primarily concerned to function like an orchestra which has each instrument finely tuned, each fully audible, and each playing in precise harmony and coordination with each other instrument. Rather, the inspired Hebrew sages are like the full impact and rich blended sounded of an orchestra as a whole, though—and it is nothing to cause any great concern—some instruments sometimes may appear to be playing out of tune" (Wilson, p. 145).

"The verbal pictures painted by the Hebrew writers in the Bible are at times earthy, pungent and direct…Indeed the *earth* (Hebrew *aretz*) is used in the Old Testament five times more frequently than *heaven* (Hebrew *shamayim*). For the Hebrews, the daily events in the lives of people are second only to God in significance. In the Hebrew Bible one encounters a down-to-earth humanness and openness—at time even bluntness and sensuousness—in some of the verbal pictures. Western taste may be offended at this earthiness. Nevertheless,

much of the theology in the Bible comes from terminology rooted in the experiences of everyday life. This was the world of the Hebrew, and underscores again how much God cared to bring the divine word of Scriptures fully down to our human level, where we can grasp it" (ibid. p. 146).

"Such vivid biblical imagery reminds us that the Hebrew people lived close to nature; they were not afraid to face head-on those areas of life that people in the Western world normally either mention euphemistically or avoid discussion altogether. It should not seem strange, therefore, that circumcision is still performed in the Jewish community today in the presence of a group of people, sometimes before the entire synagogue. In this vein, we may well ask how Western Christians today would respond if a circumcision were held before the church body— not even to suggest mentioning from the pulpit the…themes of menstruation, animals in heat, or simply reading selection from the Song of Songs. Likely, many Christians would be somewhat ill at ease. Such a response may again underline the fact that the cultural perspective of the modern Church in the Western world is different from the Eastern, Semitic world of the Hebrews that gave the Church birth. But more importantly, it is also fitting reminder of the ongoing need for Christian study of Hebrew thought" (Wilson, p. 147).

"One of the methods by which verbal pictures are painted in biblical literature is through the art of storytelling. The Hebrew narrator made his story come alive by usually letting the characters speak for themselves. In addition, he could enhance the vividness of his story by using the Hebrew participle, which normally conveyed the idea of an action in progress…Thus a whole series of actions could be dramatically portrayed, like the moving of the frames of a film, as they passed before the eyes of the storyteller.

"[Yeshua] provides a striking example of one skilled in the art of stroytelling. Like most of his Jewish forebears and contemporaries, when [Yeshua] was asked questions he did not respond by reasoning from a starting point to a conclusion. Rather, he usually replied by telling a story, often in the form of a parable. By this method he engaged his audience, that is, he got them involved in arriving at the answer in a vivid and person way. At the same time, this was how he made his point. The point, however, was usually made subtly, imaginatively, and indirectly. [Yeshua] does not always spell out the truth he is communicating. He allows the one listening to the story to draw his own conclusions. The truth thus comes across in an allusive rather than a direct way; it is implicit rather than explicit. By means of this creative approach, the listener usually ends up convicting himself. This common rabbinical teaching technique was effective, for it veiled the truth from frontal view" (Wilson, pp.149- 150).

FOR THE HEBREW MIND EVERYTHING IS THEOLOGICAL

"To the Hebrew mind, everything is theological. That is, the Hebrews make no distinction between the sacred and the secular areas of life. They see all of life as a unity. It is all God's domain. He has a stake in all that comes to pass—whether trials or joys. And human beings have an awareness of God in all that they do. The psalmist states clearly this aspect of Hebrew thought: 'I have set YHWH always before me' (Ps. 16:8). It is also taught in the proverb, 'In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make our paths straight' (Prov. 3:6)…Thus to the Hebrew mind, all circumstances of life—the good times and the hard times—come not by chance but under sovereign control of Almighty God" (ibid., p. 156).

"Prayer is the means by which Jews—both ancient and modern—have stayed attuned to the concept that all of life is sacred. Jewish prayers tend to be short because the entire working day of an observant Jew is punctuated with sentence prayers. More than one hundred of these *berakhot*, "blessings,' are recited throughout the day…God's presence is acknowledged at all times in every sphere of activity within his world." According to the Talmud "it is forbidden to a man to enjoy anything of this world without a benediction, and if anyone enjoys anything of this world without a benediction, he commits sacrilege." This is the way one stays in touch with the Almighty and keeps a divine perspective on life. It means constantly praising God for all things, with sentence prayers, throughout the day. "Saintliness was not thought to consist in specific acts, such as excessive prayer…but was an attitude bound up with all actions, concomitant with all doings, accompanying and shaping all life's activities. Indeed, today's Christians will fail to grasp Paul's admonition to 'Pray without ceasing,' that is, 'pray continually' (1 Thess. 5:17), unless they understand that a main feature of Jewish prayer is its pervasiveness" (ibid., pp. 157-158).

Religion Is a Way of Life For the Hebrews

"Some would define religion as a system of ethics, a code of conduct, an ideology, or a creed. To a Hebrew it is none of these; such definitions are misleading, deficient, or inaccurate. Rather, a Hebrew understood his daily life of faith in terms of a journey or pilgrimage. His religion was tantamount to the way in which he chose to walk. Even before the Flood, people such as Enoch and Noah 'walked with God' (Gen. 5:245; 6:9). If a person knows God, he is daily at God's disposal and walks in close relationship with him, along the road of life. Ceremonialism and ritualism alone do not meet Gods's requirement for the good life (Isa. 1:11-14; Amos 5:21-23). But those who act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with God do please him (Mic. 6:8). Thus, we return to the fact that the essence of religion is relationship; it is walking with God in his path of wisdom and righteousness and in his way of service to others. (Wilson, p. 159).

"During the period of Rabbinic Judaism, the Hebrew term *halakhah* (literally "walking, proceeding, going") took on special significance. It designated the religious laws and regulations to follow so one might keep straight on the road of life. It provided a map from the start to the end of one's journey. When one errs from God's path [called in Hebrew literature the Way of Life as opposed to the Way of Death] into crooked and perverse ways, one violates God's Torah and must 'return.' The Hebrew word for repentance is *teshubah*, suggesting the idea 'turn around,' 'go back.' The way back is the way of Torah; it gives the direction and guidance needed to remain on the way" (Wilson, p. 160).