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Making The Invisible Visible

An Introduction To Distinguishing Characteristics Of Hebraic Thought
And Their Implications For Interpreting The Bible

By Roderick Graciano
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The Data

Hebraic thought and language is known for its emphasis upon the active function and inherent character of things, its vividness of metaphor and symbol, and its holistic perspective of events and their chronology. While any one of these attributes of Hebrew may not be unique among Semitic tongues, the bundling of all these attributes together into one language provides a unique approach to communication — one that is significantly different from the way we communicate in the west.

The Theory

I propose that the unique combination of attributes attached to Hebraic thought and language developed under the guidance of God's providence for the unique purpose of *communicating about invisible spiritual realities.*

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The media accommodates our society and it has spoiled us. Therefore, as Americans, we tend to read the Holy Bible as though *it also* were scripted for our western culture and ready for our easy assimilation. As a result, we miss the subtle nuances and connotations of the biblical text that were obvious to the Bible's original Semitic authors and audience. Sometimes, we misinterpret words and phrases that meant something entirely different in Middle Eastern antiquity than they do in our time and place. It behooves us, then, to learn what we can, not only about ancient Israelite culture in general, but also about Hebraic thought patterns in particular, since they — *not* Hellenistic or other western modes of thought — constitute the framework that supports and gives shape to the biblical text. As John Dillenberger has said with regard to the biblical revelation, "to ignore Hebraic ways of thinking is to subvert Christian understanding."[1]

Spiritual Realities In Human Language

I believe that one observation, above all others, will help us understand the distinctives of the Hebrew language and of the Hebraic thought patterns that undergird even the New Testament text. That one observation is that *God uniquely called Israel as the vehicle of His revelation to the other nations of the world.* God gave the Hebrews the task of *proclaiming spiritual realities in human language.* I don't suggest that the Israelites *consciously* shaped their language for this divine purpose, nor that the individual traits of their language are unique to Hebrew. However, it appears to me that the nature of Israel's calling inevitably, if unconsciously, shaped the *combined* characteristics of her thought and expression, so that the Hebrews learned to:

1. Emphasize the active behavior[2] and inherent character of things,
2. Describe invisible things as though they could be seen, and abstract things as though they were concrete,
3. Describe ethereal and incomprehensible things as they were perceived and experienced by human senses, *and*
4. Describe things from both the human and divine perspectives, sometimes simultaneously.

We must take these four principles into account in order to fully appreciate and understand the biblical text, both in the Old Testament and the New.

Active Behavior and Inherent Character

When called upon to describe an invisible entity, the Hebrews could not describe its visual appearance, so they described what that invisible thing *did.* God trained the Israelites in this mode of description, for He was always telling them what He *does.* He is the God who "brought you out of Ur" (Gen. 15.7), who actively exists ("I Am That I Am," Exo. 3.14), who heals (Exo. 15.26), who extends mercy (Exo. 33.19), who brought you out of Egypt (Deu. 5.6), who made all things (Isa. 44.24), who teaches you (Isa. 48.17), who divided the sea (Isa 51.15), who exercises kindness, etc. (Jer. 9.24). Ask a Hebrew of antiquity what his God was like, and he could not give you a visual description, but he could and would say something like, "The LORD is a warrior" (Exo. 15.3), indicating the kind of activity God engages in.

With this inclination to describe the invisible in active terms, it's no wonder that the Hebrews described emotions that way. In contrast, our western culture tends to relegate emotions to the category of the statically abstract. There's nothing wrong with that—until we play *Pictionary.* With pencil and paper in hand, we might get stuck if suddenly called upon to illustrate an emotion. How would we sketch anger, for example? This would not have been a problem for the Israelite of biblical times: he would have drawn a nose in flames or with smoke emerging from the nostrils. Yes, the Hebrew described anger as an *action involving concrete objects:* "the nose of Jacob burned…" according to the Hebrew text of Gen. 30.2. How might we draw obstinacy? The Hebrew of antiquity might have sketched a heart being plastered with mortar, for he saw obstinacy as the *active* hardening of the heart (Exo. 8.15). How would we sketch the silent and invisible occurrence of a divine revelation? David would have drawn a shawl being removed from over his ears (2 Sam. 7.27).

This action-orientation of the Hebrew language is all pervasive, and informs Hebrew words that *to us* seem even more manifestly static. For example, the Hebrew word *yadah* (to know), must not be understood as referring only to a static, mental cognition. Rather, in Hebrew the word *know* conveys the idea of actively *experiencing* something, whether moral evil (Gen. 3.22), sexual intimacy (Gen. 4.1) or close friendship (Deu. 34.10). The same word can mean to *actively* take firsthand cognizance of something (Exo. 3.7, NRS). This active sense of *yadah* will clear up some seemingly awkward passages in our Old Testament. When David says in Psalm 25.14, regarding those who fear the Lord, that the Lord "will make them know[3] His covenant" (NASB), he does not mean that these righteous people are as yet cognitively unaware of God's covenant, but rather that God will cause them to *experience* the covenant, in the sense of reaping its blessings.

The active aspect of *yadah* has often escaped us westerners, even as has the active connotation of the Hebrew phrase, *YHWH sebaoth,* Lord of hosts. Even Bible translators have fumbled this phrase as John Eldredge describes in *Waking the Dead* (p. 160):

I was reading the prophet Jeremiah a few weeks ago when I ran across a passage that referred to God as "the Lord Almighty." To be honest, it didn't resonate. There's something too religious about the phrase; it sounds church, sanctimonious. The *Lawd Almiiiighty.* It sounds like something your grandmother would say when you came into her kitchen covered in mud. I found myself curious about what the *actual* phrase means in Hebrew. Might we have lost something in the translation? So I turned to the front of the version I was using for an explanation. Here is what the editors said:

> Because for most readers today the phrases "the Lord of hosts" and "God of hosts" have little meaning, this version renders them "the Lord Almighty" and "God Almighty." These renderings convey the sense of the Hebrew, namely "he who is sovereign over all the 'hosts' (powers) in heaven and on earth, especially over the 'hosts' (armies) of Israel."

No, they don't. They don't even come close. The Hebrew means "the God of angel armies," "the God of the armies who fight for his people." *The God who is at war.* Does "Lord Almighty" convey "the God who is at war"? Not to me, it doesn't. Not to anyone I've asked. It sounds like "the God who is up there but still in charge." Powerful, in control. The God of angel armies sounds like the one who would roll up his sleeves, take up a sword and shield to break down gates of bronze, and cut through bars of iron to rescue me. Compare "Joe is a good man who is in control" to "Joe is a Navy Seal." It changes the way you think about Joe and what he's up to.

My point in quoting Eldredge at length is to illustrate how easy it is for us Gentiles to bypass and begin to forget the action-orientation of Hebrew thought and language, and thereby lose some of the power of the biblical text.

Overlapping this biblical action-orientation is the Hebraic tendency to describe an entity by its character. Since character is revealed by actions, both visible and invisible persons (angels, for example) can be described by their character. In fact, this truth helped the Hebrews realize that character reveals the essence of a person more than outward appearance does. We need go no further than the book of Proverbs to see that the Hebrew mind, trained by God's law, concerned itself more with the inner character of a person, than with his physical attributes. "Let *love* and *faithfulness* never leave you" (Prov. 3.3). "The man of *integrity* walks securely" (Prov. 10.9). "Kings take pleasure in *honest* lips" (Prov. 16.13). "Whoever is *kind* to the needy honors God" (Prov. 14.31). The LORD Himself "looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16.7), and over time this emphasis became embedded in the Hebrew language.

Vivid Language

Concrete Metaphors for Intangible Things

Still, character qualities are intangible, and can be difficult to fully describe. Therefore, the Hebrew language developed a robust gift for *employing concrete metaphors* to describe character qualities and other intangible attributes, as if those qualities and attributes could be seen. For example, to describe the tender protectiveness of the invisible and incorporeal Almighty, the Hebrew psalmist says, "I will take refuge in *the shadow of your wings* until the disaster has passed" (Psalm 57.1). Thus, the Psalmist communicates the intangible attribute of protectiveness with a pictorial metaphor that speaks powerfully to the mind of anyone who ever saw a hen or a goose gather her chicks or goslings under her wing at the approach of a predator.

We westerners struggle, however, with some of the Bible's character metaphors, because we have trouble looking past the thing pictured (wing) to its function (protection). We must not forget the Hebraic action+function orientation. Take for example the description of the Shulammite's nose in Song of Solomon:
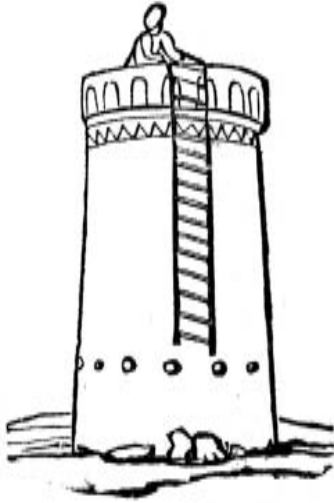
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus. (Song 7.4)

At first glance, we don't even realize that this description speaks of an *inner* quality. To us this line of the poem looks like a straightforward physical description, and frankly, it seems a rude one. Upon reflection we begin to wonder if possibly the Israelites of antiquity thought large noses were beautiful. However, we are barking up the wrong tree. We must think of the *function* of a tower in ancient Israel, to understand what the poet is describing. When we remember the Hebrew emphases on both *character* and *function* we can begin to understand the point of the Shulammite's nose (pun intended). Comparing her nose to a tower, compellingly describes the Shulammite's "insurmountability, inaccessibility, pride, purity, and virginity." Thorlief Boman explains how all of these qualities are expressed in the tower metaphor applied to the maiden's nose (Song 7.4), neck (4.4; 7.4) and breast (8.10).[4] What the poet praised was the Shulammite's inner character and personal discipline, using her external traits and *bearing* as metaphors. If we miss this translation of invisible qualities into concrete and dynamic metaphors, we miss both the meaning and the power of the text.

The Danger of Vivid Language

The dynamic metaphors of Hebrew can bring God's message vividly to life for us, but they also present us westerners with two dangers. First, we can fail to recognize them as metaphors and take them literally. A naïve reading of the Old Testament could mislead us into thinking that God is an avian being with actual (if invisible) wings (Psalm 57.1). A more experienced reader will recognize such descriptions as metaphorical, but may still succumb to the second danger, which is the failure to recognize character metaphors as describing *inner* rather than *outer* qualities. We are apt to stumble over the metaphor of the Shulammite's tower-like nose, discussed above, or the description of the Shulammite's sister as a "wall" or a "door" in Song 8.9. Similarly, when we read Psalm 52.8, "I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God," we probably visualize the Psalmist standing *still* in the temple, experiencing a static, column-like existence. To properly understand these passages, however, we *must* focus on the function of a door, the function of a wall, the function of an olive tree.[5] We will avoid the dangers of Hebraic metaphors if we will keep ever before us the twin Hebraic emphases on *character* and *dynamic function*.

Phenomenological Language

Metaphors can capture character qualities and emotions, but how does one describe things that are incomprehensible? In other words, how do we describe things that can only be understood *in part* by the finite human mind? We don't do it by describing the thing itself. Rather, we describe how we *perceive or experience* that thing. We call such descriptions *phenomenological,* meaning that they are based on sense-data perceptions. We use phenomenological description every time we say "the sun has risen," or "the sun has gone down." The sun has done neither of course, but we have described an astronomical event that was incomprehensible to pre-Copernican man, and we have described it as we have perceived it from our finite vantage point. To thus describe things or events as they appear to the senses, rather than

as they are on the level of reality that is beyond human perception, was a particular skill of the Hebrews. They had to use phenomenological language so constantly that it permeated their thinking and speaking.

Consider the challenge of teaching people about the Holy Spirit. How would you begin to describe the person and work of someone who is invisible, non-material and omnipresent? The biblical writers and speakers, including Jesus, resorted to phenomenological language. In other words, rather than describing the Spirit directly, they described how He was perceived by those who experienced Him. Often, this involved describing the Spirit as though He *were* material and finite. Jesus told the disciples that the Spirit lived "with" them and would be "in" them at a future time (John 14.17). We must either recognize Christ's use of phenomenological language here, or accuse Him of heresy (God forbid!), because if interpreted woodenly, His words deny the omnipresence of the Spirit. Once we acknowledge Christ's phenomenological language, however, we put ourselves on the path to a correct understanding of His words to the apostles, for we recognize that His words must be understood *relationally* rather than *spatially*. In like manner, when we read John the Baptist's or the apostles' words about being filled *(pleróo)* or immersed *(baptizo)* by the Spirit, we must first recognize the phenomenological character of the language, and then interpret its *relational* meaning.

I dare to hope that, if we will but make the effort to sort through the phenomenological language applied to the Holy Spirit in the Bible, we may clear up some of the enduring controversies between today's Charismatics and cessationists. Carefully thinking through the Bible's phenomenological language will guide us to a firmer pneumatology, theology, *and* demonology

Multiple Perspectives

Invisible and intangible things can be described by their behavior or by using metaphor. Incomprehensible things can be described using phenomenological language. However, the task of communicating divine revelation also presented the Hebrews with the challenge of describing reality as viewed through two different windows, the celestial and the earthly. The biblical writers embraced that challenge and now we must decipher the results. We must discern which perspective the authors employed in any given passage. As we read the Bible, we have three choices relating to an author's perspective. The biblical writer may speak from a:

1.   Heavenly perspective. When speaking from this perspective, the writer describes the *spiritual character* of things and/or their *ontological essence.*[7]
2.Human perspective. From this perspective, the writer describes things *practically* and/or *phenomenologically* (i.e., as they are experienced and perceived by humanity).
3.Holistic perspective. When writing or speaking holistically, a biblical author presents a thing or idea in both its spiritual or ontological essence *and* its practical or phenomenological character *simultaneously.*

The Prophetic Split Screen

The Hebrew prophets often perceived aspects of an event as occurring simultaneously in both the heavenly and the human realms. In inverse analogy, it's as though they could see both parts of an iceberg: the part of above the waterline and the part hidden below! We may call this a "holistic perspective" since they saw the whole object or event at once. They saw it in all

its aspects, and sometimes described it that way. We may also refer to this as a "split screen" or "double" perspective, since the prophets often alternated between the heavenly and human perspectives. To our frequent confusion, biblical revelators often chose to describe both the heavenly and human perspectives consecutively, *without telling us when they switched back and forth between them.*

Nowhere is this more powerfully illustrated than in Job, chapter 1. The story begins "in the land of Uz" where "there lived a man whose name was Job." But suddenly, in verse 6 we're told, "one day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them." A naïve reading would imply that the LORD also lived in the land of Uz, for the narrative marks no change of geography nor of perspective. The black preachers of

Old Man Job

the old South sometimes made good use of such "naïve" readings to bring the narratives of Scripture vividly home to a poorly educated congregation. Roark Bradford captured this phenomenon in his book *Ol' Man Adam An' His Chillun.*[8] This book is aptly subtitled: "Being the tales they tell about the time when the Lord walked the Earth like a natural man." When read this way, without reference to the Hebraic double perspective, the story of Job begins:

> One day de Lawd was layin' back in de shade, watchin' his people, to all at once he seed a man name Job comin' down the road, singin':
>
> > "I look down de road and I seed de devil comin'—
> > I know de Lawd done laid his hands on me!
> > So I tuck off my shoes and I beat de devil runnin'—
> > I know de Lawd done laid his hands on me!"
>
> "Hey-ho, Job!" say de Lawd. "You must be mighty happy, wawkin' long, singin' 'bout me like dat."

Notice that there is now only *one* perspective: Job and "de Lawd" live in the same neighborhood.

While ignoring the double perspective of the Hebrew prophet makes for colorful and entertaining story-telling, it also results in contemporary errors of interpretation, particularly when exegeting the book of Revelation. Like the narrator of Job, the apostle John on Patmos described what he saw in two realms, the heavenly and the earthly, and he did not always distinguish for his readers which realm he was describing. John assumed that they, his original audience, would understand his smooth shifts from one perspective to the other and stay abreast of which was which. We're not used to this kind of unmarked perspective toggling, however, so we have tended to confuse the descriptions of the two different realms. For example, John wrote in Revelation 9. 15,16:

> And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number.

Hal Lindsey, interpreting this passage from the earthly perspective, decided that it must describe an invasion from China, since China had boasted that "it could field a 'people's army' of 200 million militiamen."[9] However, a little research reveals that China had made an exaggerated boast. At its modern military *peak,* China could only count an army of *five* million

soldiers, and that included their village militias armed with pitchforks. Demographical and geographical considerations force us to recognize that this is a "top window" passage in the Revelation: it does not describe human troops, but rather the vastly more numerous demonic warriors that will *energize* the human troops at Armageddon!

The following verses in the Revelation passage were misinterpreted in their turn:

> 9.17 The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. 18 A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. 19 The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury.

Since these verses were thought to describe the invasion from China, they were also interpreted from the earthly perspective as prophetically describing high-tech attack helicopters and the like. However, John the apostle was describing what he saw from the heavenly or spiritual perspective at this point, and the passage actually describes the vicious and destructive *character* of (normally) invisible demonic hordes. Overlooking the Hebraic phenomenon of the double perspective again causes us to miss both the correct interpretation *and* the true descriptive power of the text.

Holistic Thinking & Biblical Tensions

Failing to understand the Hebraic double, or holistic, perspective, also leaves us confused over non-prophetic passages. For example, did God harden Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 4.21), or did Pharaoh harden his own heart (Exodus 8.32)? The Hebraic answer is *yes.* Both are true, but each from its own perspective. From the heavenly, divine perspective, God was sovereignly judging Pharaoh by withholding the gift and grace of repentance. From the human perspective, and as far as any one in Pharaoh's court could perceive, Pharaoh consciously, willfully hardened his own heart. The Hebrew writer was able to grasp and accept both perspectives at once without feeling a contradiction, nor the need to explicitly distinguish the perspectives in his narrative.

The Prophetic Aorist

We must especially note one more aspect of the Hebraic double perspective, namely the chronological aspect. Just as the biblical prophets and apostles described events as seen from *heaven,* they also described them as seen from *eternity.* The result is that the visions recorded in Scripture are often told in the past (or aorist) tense, even when they refer to future events, for all things are *already* fulfilled in the eternal present of God's mind. This should not surprise us.

When God downloaded a major vision into a prophet's mental hard drive, the prophet saw a motion picture of events in his mind, and afterwards described what he saw, just as we would describe the content of a film to a friend, *in the past tense:*

> As I **watched** in the night visions,
> I **saw** one like a [son of man]
> coming with the clouds of heaven.
> And he **came** to the Ancient One
> and **was presented** before him.
> To him **was given** dominion

and glory and kingship,
　that all peoples, nations, and languages
　　　should serve him. (NRS of Dan. 7.13,14, emphasis added.)

When we read the record of such a vision, interpreting it in our own time and culture, we must be careful to recognize that the past tense of its narration relates to *God's perspective* and the prophet's *past experience* of the vision, not to the *earthly chronology* of the events. The prophet simply described the events as he saw them in the discrete packet of the vision. For us who stand on the earth, the events prophesied may yet be future.

Additional Priorities In Hebrew Thought

We have seen that the divinely ordained task of communicating spiritual realities can explain the development of some of the best known distinctives of Hebraic thought and language. However, there are two other priorities in the Hebrew mind-set that are not *the means* to conveying spiritual realities, but rather *are* spiritual realities. From the beginning, God taught His people to value relationship between persons and to value the land. The value placed on these two things permeates Hebraic thinking and thereby infuses the Scriptures.

Relationship

The priority placed upon personal relationship in Hebraic thought is revealed in the emphasis upon character described above. All the character qualities praised in the book of Proverbs have meaning only in the context of personal relationship. The book of Proverbs is not the only book of the Bible that underscores this priority, however. The entire canon emphasizes the importance of *relationship, kinship* and *family name.* To read the Bible without this realization is to miss vital meaning. "In Hebrew thought the essence of true godliness is tied primarily to a relationship, not to a creed."[10] Theology for the Hebrew mind was primarily relational rather than theoretical and abstract. "For the Hebrews, personal or individual relationship has always been far more expressive of the heart of religious faith than mere intellectual assent to abstract statements or religious ideas."[11]

Understanding this priority on relationship sheds light on such mysterious passages as the one that describes the covenant ratification in Genesis 15:

> Gen. 15.7 Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.…Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

> Gen. 15.17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

Why did God, in a brief theophany, pass between the bloody pieces

of the ritually butchered animals? To us contemporary Christians, any appearance of blood in the Bible makes us think immediately of Christ's atonement and of all the bloody sacrifices typifying that atonement through the ages, and rightly so. However, the Genesis 15 event describes a covenant rather than an atonement, and we westerners have neither understood that covenant precedes atonement nor why it does. Research into the cultures and customs of the middle east reveal that any ritual of sharing, participating in or passing through the same blood (as in walking through a door with bloodied doorposts), was a symbolic act of creating kinship, i.e., of becoming family, just as in the "blood brother" rituals of Native Americans.[12] The Bible itself reveals that in God's economy of justice, only a kinsman can properly redeem the property or life of another person. In fact, the Hebrew noun *kinsman (goel)* provides the verb *gaál* which is translated in our Bible as both *to redeem* and *to avenge,* for its essential meaning is *to act as a kinsman.* When we grasp this vital importance that is given to relationship and kinship in Hebraic thought, the passing of God through the blood in Genesis 15 — that blood that Abram had been walking back and forth in already — becomes immensely significant: God was signifying to Abram that He, the Almighty, was committing Himself as a kinsman to Abram, and therefore making himself both eligible and obligated to serve as Redeemer for Abram and his offspring.

It is on this early foundation of relational ideas that the more developed doctrines of sacrificial and substitutional atonement are based, as are the eschatological hopes of salvation, inheritance and rule.

This same priority upon relationship informs the Hebraic idea of righteousness and perfection. When God reckoned Abram's faith to him as righteousness (Gen. 15.6), it does not mean that God *pretended* that Abram was righteous, but rather that God saw Abram as really and truly righteous, for righteousness is *relational* rather than attainment based. Abram still had his flaws from an attainment perspective — he had neither attained sinlessness nor even spiritual maturity. Nevertheless, he had entered into right *relationship* with God and was thereby righteous. Likewise, Job was a perfect man (Job 1.1, KJV), not because he had attained to sinlessness or to a level of character that needed no improvement, but rather because he was in *perfect relationship* to God, relative to the revelation of God that he had received thus far.

The Land

Just as God taught His people to value relationship, He taught them to value the land. God places a value on the earth in general, as the place of man's habitation and redemption, and on the land of Israel in particular as the place of His special presence. The Hebrew in turn, valued the land as the region of God's redemptive work (Psa. 75.12) and the sphere of his own future hope (Psa. 37.29,34; Isa. 57.13; 60.21; Ezek. 47.13,14). "The word *earth* (Hebrew *eretz)* is used in the Old Testament five times more frequently than *heaven* (Hebrew *shamayim).*[13]

A proper understanding of the Hebraic perspective of the land will guard us from confusion, particularly in the study of biblical eschatology. In the Hebrew mind, the messianic hope was never divorced from a redemption of the land. Any interpretation of the coming eschatological kingdom without reference to *people on the land* is missing part of the story or allegorizing passages that should be taken literally.

Furthermore, we must not lose sight of the particular priority placed upon the land of Israel, and the city of Jerusalem. When the Hebrew scriptures speak of the earth, *ha aretz,* they rarely mean "the globe." Equating "earth" with the "globe" is something we began to do

after Columbus and more so since the advent of photography from outer space. The Israelites of antiquity knew that their planet was big and round, but when they talked about the earth, they were concerned with that part of it that bounded the land of promise (see Isa. 11.11,12). We err, then, when we interpret biblical references to "the earth" (or even to "all the world," as in Luke 2.1) as speaking of the entire globe. Wherever possible in Scripture, we must interpret *the earth* as referring first to the territory of Israel so beloved by the Hebrews, and only expand that definition when compelled to do so by the context.

Writing Down Hebrew Thoughts In The Greek NT

In this article, I have said that understanding Hebraic thought is important for interpreting the New Testament. This suggestion, made by many others before me, has at times been resisted by New Testament scholars who have preferred to see an exclusively Hellenistic undergirding to the language of the apostolic writers. However, the position that there are inconsequentially few Hebraisms in the New Testament has become increasingly untenable. Granted, the New Testament is written in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the first-century Mediterranean world. Nevertheless, it was written by Hebrews, and their native distinctives of thought saturate their Greek words and phrases. Even the non-scholarly reader can recognize the Hebraic influence in the New Testament text by noting echoes of the Old Testament Scriptures. As Ramsay mentions in regard to certain passages in the book of Acts,

> The language of these chapters suggests a Hebrew origin. Indeed, one familiar with Jewish Scriptures who reads these chapters even in English can tell something of this. "He was added to his fathers"; "it came to pass"; "by the hand of" or "mouth of"; "the feet of…are at the door"; "his face was going"; "on the face of the earth"; "by the mouth of the sword"; and other such phrases obviously in the manner of speech.[14]

(Notice that Ramsay listed many instances of the Hebraic *action-orientation* in his examples.) Ramsay goes on to say, "Some language students have gone a step further and have maintained that the early chapters of Acts show traces of having been written originally in Aramaic, the dialect spoken in Palestine in Jesus' day."[15] Personally, I'm still comfortable with the idea that the New Testament was originally written down in Greek, but I am becoming convinced that much of its content was originally *spoken or dictated* in Hebrew,[16] and then later or concurrently translated into Greek text for publication. This is why I believe we must take Hebraic thought patterns into account as we interpret the New Testament. Let's see what difference it makes by examining some specific passages.

The Action Orientation

Belief: John 3.16

The Gospel tells us that "whoever believes in [Jesus Christ] shall not perish but have eternal life." Clearly, it is vital that we understand what is meant by "believes" in this verse, for our eternal destiny depends upon it! Our culture's problem with this is that we think of *believing* as a static, cognitive exercise of intellectual assent. We are apt to hear John 3.16 in an evangelistic rally and think that salvation comes by mentally agreeing that Jesus existed, or that He is the Son of God.[17] However, for the original speaker and audience of these words of eternal life, *to believe* meant to *actively* trust someone. The *believing* (i.e., the *faith)* in view was of the kind that a person walks out, and demonstrates by his or her actions. In other

words, to savingly believe in Christ is to trust Him, not only for eventual admittance into a heavenly afterlife, but also for the present issues and decisions of life, and to do so in such a way that this trusting of Christ is *visible* to one's contemporaries!

Knowledge: John 17.3

Speaking of eternal life, Jesus said, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." As with John 3.16, it behooves us to understand the verb in this statement upon which eternal life depends. Jesus equates eternal life with *knowing* God and Jesus Christ. Our contemporary, western notion of knowing is such that we tend to do one of two things with this statement of Christ's: we relegate it to the afterlife ("Oh, when we go to heaven, we get to meet God and Jesus"), or we mentally translate the word *know* to *knowing about.* However, the Hebraic idea here is to *know experientially,* that is, *to have a relationship* with God and Jesus Christ. One can know a great deal *about* God and Jesus Christ, and yet not have eternal life. To possess eternal life, one must have a *relationship* with God and Christ.[18]

Truth: John 14.6

"The Semites of Bible times did not simply *think* truth — they *experienced* truth. … To the Jew, the deed was always more important than the creed. … 'Walking in the truth' (2 John 4) and 'living [lit. *doing*] the truth' (1 John 1.6) were a higher priority than rationally analyzing the truth."[19] Therefore, the clearest demonstration and best standard of the truth, is *a living person:* John 14.6! For us as western Christians, then, claiming to *know* the truth or *believe* the truth is a hollow boast if we are not living out the truth relationally.

The Relationship Priority

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 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. 5.24; 6.9). If a person knows god, he is daily at God's disposal and walks in close fellowship with him, along the road of life. Ceremonialism and ritualism alone do not meet God'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.[20]

To Know (Mat. 7.23)

Recognizing this relational priority, and realizing that *knowing* in the Bible generally means to experience or have an active relationship with the subject, clarifies Christ's rebuff of the hypocrites in the judgment. When He says to them, "I never *knew* you," he does not mean "I was unaware of your existence," or "I did not know your identity." Rather, He means, "I *never had a relationship* with you."

To Put A Name Upon (Eph. 3.15)

This ubiquitous emphasis on relationship in Hebraic thought adds meaning to the many passages in both testaments that mention being called by God's name. To be called *by* God's name, as in the well known 2 Chronicles 7.14, is in the Hebrew phrasing actually to have God's name *called upon* — i.e., spoken or proclaimed *over* — His people. Compare the Hebrew of the same phrase in Deu. 28.10: "Then all the people on earth will see that *the name of*

YHWH is called upon you."[21] The vibrant relational idea here is that God assents to have His name *attached* to His people just as a western bridegroom attaches his name to his bride, or adoptive parents attach their name to an orphan. That people can now speak the husband's surname "over" the bride, or "over" the adopted child means that the bride and the orphan now have *every right* that accrues to members of their new family. Likewise, to have God's name "called upon" or spoken over us, means in Hebraic expression that God has given us His family name and with it all the rights of His adopted children!

This Hebrew phrasing seems awkward to us. "If my people, who are called by my name…" is more comfortable to our ears than the Hebrew, "If my people upon whom my name is called…" However, this difference clears up Ephesians 3.15, a passage that has long confused exegetes. In a literal English translation, Paul speaks of the "Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (ESV). We have puzzled much over this statement. Does Paul mean that God gave individual names to all the different people groups on the earth? Does it mean that the word *family*[22] derives its meaning from the fatherhood of God? What does either of these interpretations have to do with the context in Ephesians 3? The answer is *nothing,* for both interpretations miss the underlying Hebraic thought of Paul's statement.

When Salkinson-Ginsburg translated the Greek New Testament *back into Hebrew,* Ephesians 3.14,15 came out, "…the Father from whom His name is *called upon* all the families in the heavens and earth." In other words, the Hebrew New Testament translator recognized the Hebrew phrase that Paul had forced into Greek wording. It is the common Old Testament phrase used to speak of God attaching His name to people. Now we can appreciate the full beauty of Ephesians 3.14,15:

> For this reason I kneel before the Father, Who has bequeathed His family name upon people from every lineage, including people on earth and those already in heaven … (my paraphrase)

Compare this with the sentiment expressed in Rev. 5.9: "And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" This is what Paul is rejoicing about in the Ephesians passage: God is no longer confining His revelation and blessing to Israel, but is adopting individuals from *every people group* into His family. No wonder he follows with:

> And I pray that you … may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

In other words, "You Ephesians are full-fledged members of God's family; open your arms to receive the immense inheritance that comes with your new name!"

To Drink Blood (Matthew 26.27,28; John 6.53-68; 1 Corinthians 11.25-28)

As mentioned above, ancient Semitic rituals that symbolized sharing the same blood, were an act of creating kinship, and kinship was essential for acts of redemption. These facts illuminate the teaching of Jesus about drinking His blood, whether metaphorically (John 6) or in symbolic ritual (Mat. 26; 1 Cor. 11). Among other things, Jesus was calling His disciples

to enter and maintain a kinship relationship with Him by faith, and was thereby offering all the redemptive privileges of His divine family. Some Jews were scandalized by Christ's insistence upon drinking *his* blood (John 6.53-55), but they did not stumble over the idea of drinking blood *per se,* for they would have understood this as a metaphor for becoming kin. The scandal was that Jesus claimed they could not have life without becoming *his* kin! This was a "hard saying," and they walked away murmuring, "who can hear (i.e., give credence to) such a thing?" They must have thought, "Who does this Jesus think he is?"

To Sit At The Right Hand (Mat. 26.64,65; Mark 14.62-64; Luke 22.69-71)

The Jewish religious establishment was even more deeply offended when Jesus claimed that He would sit at the "right hand of Power," i.e., of God. Once again, it was a *relational claim* that caused the offense. William Ramsay explains:

> "'The right hand of God' is not a matter of location but of honor. The Jews did not think of God as confined to a physical body with hands and feet but recognized that He fills all creation. Rather, the phrase is a sign of supreme divine honor bestowed upon Jesus. Jewish rabbis were accustomed to say that God had created the earth with His left hand, but with His right hand He had crated the heavens. He who sits at the right hand of God on the throne is no longer Servant. He is Co-ruler."[23]

To Inherit Eternal Life By Keeping The Commandments (Mark 10.17-22)

> Mark 10.17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
> 18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good — except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"
> 20 "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."
> 21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
> 22 At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

The story of the Rich Young Ruler has often troubled us, for in it, Jesus seems to promote a "works righteousness," or an acquisition of eternal life by keeping the commandments. We know that this cannot be, since the Gospel tells us clearly that eternal life is a gift acquired by believing in Christ (John 3.16). However, we have failed to understand the relational character of this story of the young ruler. As we have already stated in connection with John 3.16 above, saving faith is a *trust* in Christ that is lived out relationally. This is exactly what Christ called the Rich Young Ruler to embrace. The Lord first pointed the young man to the commandments, which as we know can be summed up by "live in *right relationship* with God and with your neighbor." The young man claimed to have mastered this principle. So Jesus said to him, in effect, "Okay, if you understand the call to right relationship with God and man, then get rid of whatever would hinder you and come embark upon a personal relationship with me." How do we inherit eternal life? The Scriptures are consistent: by entering a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Character Emphasis

To Follow Christ (Luke 9.23; John 12.26; 13.15)

To enter a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, as opposed to simply adopting a creedal assent to His claims, involves *following* Him. In our minds, following is something spatial and geographical, and it's easy to read the statements of Jesus that way. Consider the one in John 12.26, for example: "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be." It sounds spatial and geographical, but the call to follow Jesus is *relational,* and the "place" where the servant of Jesus will "be" is not a geographical location but instead a character domain. It is the lifestyle landscape marked out by the priorities of Jesus. Yes, to live in that domain, may involve geographical travel, but it primarily involves *character change.* The "following" that we must do is the following of Christ's example for living: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13.15).

To Have A Good Eye (Mat. 6.22)

Following Christ's example helps transforms our character into His. Just as the Old Testament emphasizes character over outward appearance, the New Testament emphasizes character transformation over temporal comfort. We "rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, [and] perseverance [produces] character" (Rom. 5.3-4). "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Rom. 8.29). That likeness involves all the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5.22,23), as well as other character qualities, including generosity.

The call to generosity provides us with a Hebraism in Christ's teaching that has puzzled translators. The Greek text of Matthew 6.22 reads:

> The lamp of the body is the eye, if then your eye may be **single**, your whole body shall be full of light.

The King James version renders the key adjective correctly though strictly, as *single.* Later translators milked more meaning from the this Greek word *single (aplous),* recognizing that it means *without folds, simple, sincere.* Realizing that this *unfolded simplicity* must point in some way to the integrity of the eye, various versions have described the eye in this verse as "good" (NKJV), "clear" (NASB) and "healthy" (NRS). However, translators also puzzled over the oddity that Jesus only referred to *one* eye, not to "your eyes," plural. The NIV thought it was absurd and translated, "if your eye̲s are good…" But remember how the Hebrews used external traits and bearing (like the slant at which the Shulammite held her nose) as metaphors for inner qualities? That's what Jesus did in this passage *about money.* The expression of the eyes communicates much about the attitude of a man in the midst of financial dealings. Our missing hermeneutical insight has been that "a good eye" is a Hebraism for "generosity"![24] So, *single (aplous)* does mean *sound, healthy and good,* but the message is: If you are *generous* your whole body (life?) will be full of light.

To Attain To The Resurrection… (Phil. 3.10)

The Hebraic emphasis on character may also explain the puzzling Pauline wish to "attain to the resurrection":

> Phil. 3.10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, *to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

Clearly, Paul was not uncertain about whether or not he would be resurrected, for he preached that there would be "a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked" (Acts 24.15). Nor did he endeavor to earn or merit participation in the resurrection of the righteous, for he intended to "be found in [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (Philippians 3.9). No, what Paul sought was the continuing transformation of his character as he deepened his relationship with Christ.

Some have wondered if the resurrection Paul referred to in this verse was something unique since he used a Greek word for it (*exanastasis* "out-resurrection") that occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. The normal New Testament word for resurrection is simply *anastasis*. However, this should not distract us, for the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* gleaning from other Greek literature, considers *anastasis* and *exanastasis* equivalent.

The key for understanding Philippians 3.11 is the phrase *attain to* (Gk. *katantao eis)*. Paul only uses *attain (katantao)* four times in the canon, and he never uses it or any other word to speak of "meriting" or "attaining by effort" such a thing as eternal life or the resurrection. The closest parallel in Paul's writings to the Philippians 3.11 phrasing is in Eph. 4.13:

> … until we all ***attain to*** the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure
> of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. (NASB)

Some versions properly render *attain to* in this Ephesians passage as "reach" (NIV) or "come to" (NKJV). We see from this parallel, that Paul in Philippians 3.11 is not speaking of *attaining* in the sense of getting some reward, but rather in the sense of *arriving at a certain level of maturity.* This is clearly the thrust of *katantao eis* in Eph. 4.13, and it fits the context of Philippians 3. "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been **made perfect**," Paul continues in Philippians 3.12, "but I press on…forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal…. All of us who are **mature** should take such a view of things. …Only let us live up to what we have already attained." In verse 17, Paul concludes "Join with others in **following my example**, brothers, and take note of those who **live according to the pattern** we gave you."

In keeping with Paul's Hebraic background, this passage in Philippians oozes with emphasis on character. Paul wants his own character to continue being transformed, and he wants the Philippians to imitate him in his quest. The goal is not to win *participation* in the coming resurrection; Christ has already purchased that for us. Rather, the goal is to arrive at a *level of character* that is of resurrection quality, i.e., *of the same quality* as that which will be appropriate to and enjoyed by the resurrected righteous! To that end, Paul wanted to press into his relationship with Christ, and experience Christ's power, even if it meant experiencing the same kind of sufferings that Christ endured, and even if it meant crucifying all temporal priorities. Paul was willing to sacrifice the comforts of the body, and if necessary even physical life itself for the goal of Christ-like, *resurrection-quality character.*

Let us then embrace not only the study of Hebraic thought patterns, but also the priorities that emerge from the study. Let us renounce a preponderantly theoretical Christianity and commit afresh to a relational pursuit of Christ, and that quality of love for the lost that returns Christ-like character to a place of high esteem in our culture. By their vibrant thought and language, the Hebrews made the invisible things of heaven visible to us. By the grace of God, let us continue to make those invisible things visible to our culture by our lives.

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END NOTES

1. Quoted in *Our Father Abraham,* p.135.

2. The emphasis upon *action* in Hebrew is seen in its sentence structure. Whereas we like to identify a subject first (e.g., God), and then state what the subject did (e.g., created the heavens and the earth), Hebrew typically begins with the verb, "he created, *namely* God, the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1.1).

3. Hiphil infinitive of *yadah.*

4. *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek,* p. 77 ff.

5. To an Israelite mind, the function of an olive tree was to yield indispensable oil. The Israelites used olive oil first to provide for the Temple lamps (Lev. 24.2), then for food, thirdly for domestic lamps, and finally for making soap and medication. (See "The Olive Tree"*,* by Dr. James Fleming and Clarence H. Wagner, *Dispatch from Jerusalem,* Jan-Feb 2004.) Another thing an olive tree *does* is live a long time! I saw olive trees on the Mt. of Olives that had stood almost since the time of Christ. In Psalm 52 then, David is saying that he is highly valued and will have an enduring existence, as opposed to the disdain and rapid demise coming upon evil men.

6. For example, what does it mean for an evil spirit to go "through waterless places" and then return to the house it left (Mat. 12.43,44)? I suggest to the reader that a physical landscape, whether wet or dry, is irrelevant to a demon, but that Jesus was describing — *among other things* — what the demonic activity *felt like* to those who had experienced the departure and return of an evil spirit.

7. By *ontological* I mean "pertaining to the most fundamental level of being or existence." Jesus spoke of God ontologically when He said, "God is spirit…" (John 4.24). John spoke of Messiah ontologically when he called him "the word" (*logos,* John 1.1).

8. Harper & Bros., New York, 1928. Grab this rare volume should you run across it for sale!

9. *The Late Great Planet Earth,* p. 86.

10. *Our Father Abraham,* p. 138.

11. Ibid.

12. See Trumbull's *The Blood Covenant.*

13. Ibid., p. 146.

14. *The Christ of the Earliest Christians,* p. 26.

15. Ibid., p. 27.

16. Since the full publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars are recognizing the likelihood that the native language of Jesus and his disciples was true *Hebrew,* with Aramaic influences.

17. I've had clearly *unsaved* individuals assure me, "*I* believe Jesus is the Son of God!"

18. Compare 1 John 5.12.

19. *Our Father Abraham,* p. 153.

20. Ibid., p. 159.

21. Compare also 2Sa 6.2; 1Ch 13.6.

22. The Greek term is *patria,* meaning *fatherhood, nation, people.*

23. *The Christ of the Earliest Christians,* p. 85.

24. See *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus,* pp. 144, 145.