

Ancient Hebrew Thought

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In the world, past and present, there are two major types of cultures; the Hebrew (or eastern) culture and the Greek (or western) culture. Both of these cultures view their surroundings, lives, and purpose in ways which would seem foreign to the other. With the exception of a few Bedouin nomadic tribes living in the Near East today, the ancient Hebrew culture has disappeared.

What happened to this ancient Hebrew thought and culture? Around 800 BCE, a new culture arose to the north. This new culture began to view the world very much differently than the Hebrews. This culture was the Greeks. Around 200 BCE the Greeks began to move south causing a coming together of the Greek and Hebrew culture. This was a very tumultuous time as the two vastly different cultures collided. Over the following 400 years the battle raged until finally the Greek culture won and virtually eliminated all trace of the ancient Hebrew culture. The Greek culture then in turn influenced all following cultures including the Roman and European cultures, our own American culture and even the modern Hebrew culture in Israel today.

As 20th Century Americans with a strong Greek thought influence, we read the Hebrew Bible as if a 20th Century American had written it. In order to understand the ancient Hebrew culture in which the Tenack was written in, we must examine some of the differences between Hebrew and Greek thought.

Abstract vs. concrete thought

Greek thought views the world through the mind (abstract thought). Ancient Hebrew thought views the world through the senses (concrete thought).

Concrete thought is the expression of concepts and ideas in ways that can be seen, touched, smelled, tasted and/or heard. All five of the senses are used when speaking and hearing and writing and reading the Hebrew language. An example of this can be found in Psalms 1:3; "He is like a *tree* planted by *streams of water*, which yields its *fruit* in season, and whose *leaf* does not *wither*." In this passage we have concrete words expressing abstract thoughts, such as a tree (one who is upright, righteous), streams of water (grace), fruit (good character) and a unwithered leaf (prosperity).

Abstract thought is the expression of concepts and ideas in ways that can not be seen, touched, smelled, tasted or heard. Hebrew never uses abstract thought as English does. Examples of Abstract thought can be found in Psalms 103:8; "The LORD is *compassionate* and *gracious*, Slow to *anger*, abounding in *love*." As you noticed I said that Hebrew uses concrete and not abstract thoughts, but here we have such abstract concepts as compassionate, gracious, anger, and love in a Hebrew passage. Actually these are abstract English words translating the original Hebrew concrete words. The translators often translate this way because the original Hebrew makes no sense when literally translated into English.

Let us take one of the abstract words above to demonstrate how this works. Anger, an abstract word, is actually the Hebrew word אַף (awph) which literally means "nose", a concrete word. When one is very angry, he begins to breath hard and the nostrils begin to flare. A Hebrew sees anger as "the flaring of the nose (nostrils)." If the translator literally translated the above passage "slow to nose", it would make no sense to the English reader, so אַף, a nose, is translated to "anger" in this passage.

Appearance vs. Functional Description

Greek thought describes objects in relation to its appearance. Hebrew thought describes objects in relation to its function.

A deer and an oak are two very different objects and we would never describe them in the same way with our Greek form of descriptions. The Hebrew word for both of these objects is אֵיל (ayil) because the functional description of these two objects are identical to the ancient Hebrews, therefore, the same Hebrew word is used for both. The Hebraic definition of אֵיל is "a strong leader."

A deer stag is one of the most powerful animals of the forest and is seen as "a strong leader" among the other animals of the forest. Also the oak tree's wood is very hard compared to other trees such as the pine which is soft and is seen as a "strong leader" among the trees of the forest.

Notice the two different translations of the Hebrew word אֵיל in Psalms 29.9. The NASB and KJV translates it as "The voice of the LORD makes the *deer* to calve" while the NIV translates it as "The voice of the LORD twists the *oaks*." The literal translation of this verse in Hebrew thought would be; "The voice of the LORD makes the strong leaders turn."

When translating the Hebrew into English, the translator must give a Greek description to this word which is why we have two different ways of translating this verse. This same word is also translated as a "ruler" in 2 Kings 24.15, who is a man who is a strong leader.

Another example of Greek thought would be the following description of a common pencil: "it is yellow and about 8 inches long." A Hebrew description of the pencil would be related to its function such as "I write words with it." Notice that the Hebrew description uses the verb "write" while the Greek description uses the adjectives "yellow" and "long." Because of Hebrew's form of functional descriptions, verbs are used much more frequently than adjectives.

Impersonal vs. Personal Description

The Greek culture describes objects in relation to the object itself. The Hebrew culture describes objects in relation to the Hebrew himself.

As in the example above of the pencil, the Greek description portrays the pencil's relationship to itself by using the word "is." The Hebrew describes the pencil in relation to himself by saying "I write." Because Hebrew does not describe objects in relation to itself, the Hebrew vocabulary does not have the word "is."

A Greek description of God would be "God is love" which describes God in relation to God. A Hebrew description would be "God loves me" describing God in relationship to myself.

Passive vs. Active Nouns

Greek nouns are words which refer to a person, place or thing. Hebrew nouns refer to the action of a person place or thing.

The Hebrews are active people and their vocabulary reflects this lifestyle. The Greek culture recognizes the words such as a knee and a gift as nouns which by themselves impart no action. But in the Hebrew vocabulary the nouns come from the same root word בָּרַךְ (BRK) because they are related, not in appearance, but in action. The Hebrew word for knee is בֶּרֶךְ (berak) and literally means "the part of the body that bends." The Hebrew word for a gift is בְּרָכָה (berakah), meaning "what is brought with a bent knee." The verb from the root word is בָּרַךְ (barak), meaning "to bend the knee." As you can see, both Hebrew verbs and nouns have action associated with them where the Greek nouns do not.

Even the Hebrew nouns for father and mother are descriptive of action. The Hebrew word for father is אָב (av) and literally means "the one who gives strength to the family" and mother אִם (em) means "the one that binds the family together."

