

Further Reflections on the Greek and the Hebrew

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The process of taking the biblical revelation from the Hebrew world into the Greek world has begun well before the time of Jesus. The Tanakh, the Old Testament in Hebrew, was translated into Greek in Alexandria (the Septuagint) in the earlier part of the second century, B. C. This was the work of Jews, and though it produced tensions between Alexandria and the diaspora on the one hand and Jerusalem on the other hand, it did not occasion a division within the Jewish world. It was not long before there were Greek-speaking synagogues in Jerusalem. We read about the dispute between the Hebrew-speakers and the Greek-speakers in Acts, chapter 6, with the dispute about care of the widows.

The fact that the whole New Testament appeared in Greek makes nonsense of a slogan like “Hebrew good, Greek bad”. It is significant that the New Testament is totally written in Greek, not in Aramaic, a Semitic tongue that would have been the normal language of the Twelve, even though many scholars think that some writings like the Gospel of St Matthew were first written in Aramaic. It is very doubtful if any of the Twelve spoke Greek at the time of Jesus, though it is clear that Paul did. When he came to Jerusalem, “he talked and debated with the Grecian Jews” (Acts 9: 29). So the great teaching letters of Paul, making clear the right relationship between Jew and Gentile in Christ (Romans and Ephesians) were written in Greek. Then it was the Septuagint that the authors of the New Testament used when they quoted from the Old Testament. This decision played a major role in the Church accepting the writings originally composed in Greek (Wisdom, Tobit, Judith, Ben Sirach, etc) as part of the Old Testament Canon.

Most Scripture scholars agree that the tradition of Israel incorporated various elements of pagan origin, but only by freeing them totally from polytheism, dualism and idolatry. For example, the ways in which the creation story in Genesis was formulated by comparison with Babylonian creation myths; the sayings of Agur and Lemuel in Proverbs 30 and 31, who were probably pagans; probably the story of Job, who lived in “the land of Uz” and who was “the greatest man among all the people of the East” (Job. 1: 3); the organization of the royal court at the time of David and Solomon. In other words, the Old Testament already exhibits the pattern outlined above, despite the continuation of the “wall of hostility”. So it already begins to prepare for the opening to the Gentiles.

When Paul notes differences between the Jewish and the Greek approach to God (1 Cor. 1: 22 – 25), he does not extol the first and deplore the second. Rather, he shows how Jesus Christ is a profound shock and challenge to both. “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucifiedChrist, the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Some Principles

Now we can try to formulate some principles for guidance in this whole area of the carrying of the gospel of salvation and the mystery of Messiah to all the nations of the earth.

1. The chosen people of Israel are those to whom the saving word of God is first spoken. The people of Israel form the matrix of salvation. Salvation is brought to us from Israel and from Jerusalem. “The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Is. 2: 3). This is not just a fact of past history, but an ongoing reality. We receive the Word of God today from and through Israel, expressed in the Scriptures of Israel and embodied in the person of the Messiah of Israel.[\[1\]](#)

2. The nations have to hear the Word spoken to Israel and translate it faithfully into their own cultures. The process of translating into other languages is itself a key element in the transposition in other cultures, since languages are a major vehicle for the expression and transmission of each culture. The fact that the New Testament was written in Greek already represented a translation of the revelation to Israel into the Greek world and culture, a process that had begun first in the Jewish diaspora.

3. The translation into a new culture and language requires (a) a purification of the culture, (b) a creativity to adequately express the newness of the Gospel, and (c) a reception of the riches of that culture, when purified, into the Body of Christ and into the emerging Kingdom. Point (b) usually requires the development of new words to express the new reality and the expansion of meaning of existing terminology. Point (c) is expressed in Rev. 21: 26: “The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it [the new Jerusalem].” (see also v. 27), and was foreshadowed in Isaiah 60: 5.

When all three points under 3 are not fulfilled, something gets distorted. When the culture is not purified by the encounter with Israel-become-Church, then the Church receives pagan elements that disfigure the face of Christ. When new words are not formed and the meaning of existing words is not expanded, then the Gospel message cannot be properly formulated and the transforming power of the Gospel is weakened. When the nations glory in their own riches and do not bring them to Jerusalem and the glory of Christ, then the Church becomes arrogant and loses something of its servant character.

Key Point

The problem is not Hellenization in itself as many Evangelical Christians think. Obviously this mentality constitutes a huge barrier between them and the Orthodox Church. It is not wrong to express the Gospel in Greek and then in other cultures. In fact, it is a necessary task of the Church. The problem is a false Hellenization or a half-baked Hellenization in which something essential to the

Gospel and mystery revealed to Israel is lost, distorted or weakened. **A false Hellenization occurred through the influence of replacement thinking. REPLACEMENT IS THE REFUSAL TO SUBMIT TO THE SOURCE IN ISRAEL, a refusal of the primacy of Israel and of Jerusalem.**

The influence of replacement thinking on the process of Hellenization was especially found in the following areas:

1. the Messianic hope for the coming of the Messiah in glory to Jerusalem and for the establishment of the Kingdom of God within this creation;
2. an imbalance in the relationship of spirit, soul and body in the make-up of the human person;
3. the spiritualization of the promises given to Israel so that the promised land becomes heaven and no longer refers to this earth, the promises to Israel become promises to the Church and no longer refer at all to Israel); this distortion very easily leads to a focus that is all on the first coming of Jesus and very little on the second;[\[2\]](#)
4. the reduction of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Messiah to a universalism, which allied to the imperial model leads to the unity of the Church being influenced and shaped by the dominant thinking concerning the unity of the Empire; the authentic unity of the Church is a revealed reality absolutely prior to the unity of the Empire;
5. a concept of the Church in which the institutional and/or the mystical are so exalted that the history is presented simply as glory and not also as shame, the sinful side of the Church is ignored or denied and the tension in Israel that always held together the governmental, the priestly, the sapiential and the prophetic is lost.

The Coming Together of the Greek and the Hebrew

We need to identify and respect the riches that come from the nations and that are purified through the Gospel. Let us look at one or two areas where there has been an amazingly fruitful coming together of the Greek and the Hebrew.

My first example comes from the concepts of creation and of evil. The biblical concept of the creation of all things by the Creator God is distinctively Hebrew. Here there are no competing deities. There is no ontological dualism. But when Paul writes in Ephesians 1: 4 that “he [the Father] chose us in him

[Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” he is already incorporating in the phrase “before the creation of the world” and in the concept of kosmos, ideas that come from Greek thought. A French Catholic expert on Judaism, Père Bernard Dupuy, has written that: “The idea of a 'scandal' of evil ... appears to be linked historically to a Hebraic source or ethic, and is foreign to Greek usage.”¹ This scandal arises directly from the combination of one Creator of all things, originally good, and the existence of evil. Dupuy sees the ultimate impossibility of human explanations of evil, of which the supreme example is the Shoah, as manifesting the limits of philosophical thought, and implicitly as an affirmation of the unique originality of the biblical revelation formulated in Hebrew.

The concept of the *logos* in John's Gospel is a Greek idea brought in to illuminate a dimension of creation, a Hebrew concept. Of course, since the nineteenth century, many scholars had argued that the gospel of John was essentially based on non-Hebrew philosophies, whether Persian or otherwise. But in recent times, there has been increasing recognition of the fundamentally Jewish character of the fourth Gospel. I believe that this is true, but that it is wrong to oppose this totally to Greek influences as I believe this example illustrates.

A second and related example is an authentic coming together of the Hebrew notion of history and the Greek concept of eternity. In some way this coming together is already expressed in John's Gospel in the use of the phrase “eternal life”. When John writes: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3: 36), the “has” represents more a Hebrew grasp of the concrete being combined with the concept of “eternity”.

A third example is the coming together of the concrete Hebrew understanding of righteousness and the more abstract Greek concept of justice. The Hebrew concept of righteousness (root: *sdq*) does not just concern outward behaviour or the outer order of things; it concerns the whole person and the whole society. When Matthew says that “Joseph was a righteous man” (Matt. 1: 19), it does not just mean that Joseph had not done anything very unjust, but that his whole personal deportment before God and others was exemplary. It corresponds more to the English “upright” when referred to a person. But righteousness also concerns right relations in society, again not just outwardly but in the spirit that shapes the whole society (tribe, city, people): “for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain silent, until her righteousness shines out like the dawn” (Is. 62: 1). However, it was in the Greek culture that a whole philosophy of the polis developed, in effect a political philosophy. When this philosophy is deeply penetrated by the Hebraic biblical concept of righteousness, then something richer emerges formed out of the transforming encounter of the two. In the New Testament, the Greek word *dia* already has overtones of this enrichment. But when the Greek loses touch with the Hebrew root (and when Christian theology is not deeply rooted in the Scriptures) then the Greek concepts are in danger of

¹ “L'idée du 'scandale' du mal ... paraît historiquement liée à la source hébraïque ou éthique et étrangère au discours grec.” (Bernard Dupuy “Catastrophes naturelles et crimes de l'homme: Le scandale du mal” in *Quarante ans d'études sur Israël* [Paris; *Parole et Silence*, 2008])

becoming merely abstract and theoretical (eternity, justice).

[1] “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4: 22). “Their coming [the wise men] means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Saviour of the world only by turning towards the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament.” (CCC, para. 528)

[2] I just found a brilliant quote from an Evangelical Anglican Bishop of the 19th century: “I believe that we have cherished an arbitrary, reckless habit of interpreting first advent texts literally, and second advent texts spiritually.” (Bishop J. C. Ryle, cited in Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism must be Challenged*, p. 341).