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# The Distinctive Character of Hebrew Thought

## A Review Article

WALLACE I. WOLVERTON

*Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek.* By THORLIEF BOMAN. London: S.C.M. Press (Toronto: Ryerson Press), 1960. Pp. 224. \$4.25.

*A Study of Hebrew Thought.* By CLAUDE TRESMONTANT. New York: Desclee Co., 1960. Pp. xx, 178. \$4.15.

THIS subject, as Boman says, "is in the air of our day." Systematic theology is often criticized by the biblical theologian on the ground that its categories are Greek and not suitable for the expression of biblical revelation. The systematic theologian may protest this off-hand treatment of his science. Certainly there is need for a synthesis. The two books herein reviewed should do much to define the areas where translation of Semitic ideas into Western categories is possible, difficult, and impossible. Both of them are translations, Boman's *Das Hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem Griechischen* (1954) by Jules L. Moreau, and Tresmontant's *Essai sur la pensée hébraïque* (1956) by Michael Francis Gibson. Boman's work will be of special interest to those familiar with Hebrew and Greek. Quite a bit of it will be lost to the reader who does not know both biblical languages, but it may still be read with great profit; and the present reviewer would hope that theologians, scholars and pastors would be led to remedy their linguistic deficiencies through the reading of this book, or at least learn reasonable caution in dealing with biblical categories of thought. Tresmontant's work does not require so much familiarity with the languages of the versions. The approach is philosophical and succeeds remarkably well in presenting to the non-hebraist some of the distinctive Old and New Testament thought forms.

To begin with Boman. He first contrasts the dynamic character of Hebrew categories with the more static thought forms of the Greeks, using Plato as his Greek representative. He approaches this task first by a study of the formal aspects of the Hebrew language as such, leaving the ideational or thought content for later treatment. This procedure is justified by the finding of modern linguistic philosophy, that languages are the expressions of thinking peculiar to peoples. "Dynamic" and "static" have been words

used to describe Hebrew and Greek thought; the contrast should be, rather, dynamic—harmonic or —resting. Hebrew verbs, even the so-called stative ones (verbs of condition or quality) imply movement. For example, *standing* implies a prior movement of arising, or of taking a position, or of alighting; dwelling may assume a prior stretching of oneself out as in encamping, or a settling down as a stranger, or a resting, or simply a sitting down. The verb of condition or quality expresses the completion of the movement or process, a kind of coming to rest. Even the verb which is so often translated by some form of *to be* (Hebrew *hayah*) frequently means *to come to be* or *become*, *to be present*, and even simply *to come*; it may also mean *to effect*. This verb sometimes indeed does express a kind of *being*; but for the Israelite even this being is an inner activity, not something objective or a datum at rest in itself, as it is for us and as it was particularly for the Greeks.

In Hebrew the noun clause, the subject as well as the predicate of which is a noun or noun equivalent, is much better able to express the "static" or the notion of "that which is" in its logical sense than are Greek and our modern languages with their copula and verbs of inaction: for example, "all Yahweh's ways (are) grace and truth" where Yahweh's merciful guidance is an inseparable idea—rather like our expression, "all Yahweh's gracious and true ways." Thus it would seem that within the Hebrew idiom there is the possibility of expressing something quite like Greek (and modern) notions of being. This noun clause joined with a preposition can express something quite close to our idea of existence; but, says Boman, these demonstrate a kind of local "being somewhere"; and he adds, "in Hebrew experience, noun clauses express only attributive belongingness." But this, one can perceive, is quite far from a fully developed concept of being as we find it in Plato.

Boman's discussion of impression and appearance in Hebrew thought will be a delight to the reader of the Massoretic Text. "When we observe and study a thing, we involuntarily make for ourselves an image of it somewhat analogous to a photograph." Then by words we attempt to evoke the same image in someone else. "In the entire Old Testament we do not find a single description of an objective 'photographic' appearance." The Israelite on the other hand gives impressions of the thing perceived by detailing likenesses which he draws from other realities. Both Greeks and Israelites have an intellectual motive in the experience of beauty; but the sensuous motive is different. In the Greeks the sensuous finds a tranquil, moderate and harmonious expression of the intellectual motive; the Israelite finds the beautiful "in that which lives and plays in excitement and rhythm, in charm and grace, but also and particularly in power and authority"—not in form and configuration, but in sensations.

These are very small and inadequate samplings of Boman's treatise. They are not to be taken as representative, certainly not of the wide scope of his work. There is no room here even for a sampling of his discussions

of time and space, symbolism and instrumentalism, logical thinking and psychological understanding (these phrases are all titles of sections in his book). In a concluding chapter he analyses the psychological foundation for the differences between Hebrew and Greek thought. "Rest, harmony, composure, and self-control—this is the Greek way; movement, life, deep emotion, and power—this is the Hebrew way." "For the Hebrew, the decisive reality of the world of experience was the *word*; for the Greek it was the *thing*." And "for the Hebrew the most important of his senses for the experience of truth was his hearing (as well as various kinds of feeling), but for the Greek it had to be his sight." Thus were produced physiologically and psychologically conditioned presuppositions, issuing in a unity of conceptions in each culture. Each achieved a unity and an excellence as a result of its distinctive bias.

Tresmontant does not deal with the form and structure of the Hebrew language, although he does discuss key words which show characteristic Israelite viewpoints in anthropology, psychology and epistemology. He contrasts these viewpoints with Greek (chiefly neo-Platonist) and modern thought. Such semantic discussions come, however, in the last half of his book, after he has developed a biblical metaphysics. "We have limited ourselves," he says, "to a study of the metaphysical positions that underly biblical theology." Central to a biblical metaphysics is the doctrine of creation. "To analyse the metaphysical positions of Hebrew biblical thought is to make an inventory of the content and implications of the idea of creation; to distinguish this idea from all that it is not . . . and to develop all its requirements and all its consequences." The device he employs is quite novel, if not daring. He finds in Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* a near approximation to Hebrew thought, and the reader is treated to an exposition of the French philosopher's position. The central theme in the first part of his book is creation and the created. While presenting Bergson he begins to introduce Hebrew notions and is able to draw out the distinctions between what is characteristically biblical and what is neo-Platonist (and modern!) with respect to time, eternity, matter, and the sensible. He is convinced (and is generally convincing in his conviction) that we have suffered great loss in our metaphysical abandonment of biblical concepts. Not that we can ever make a complete recovery of these, or that such would be desirable. But the biblical view is incarnational and sacramental in a compelling way. It is reported that this book has produced quite a stir in theological circles on the European continent.

The reviewer is not able to appraise the value of Bergson's metaphysics as such, but he must say that as Tresmontant presents him one is led to the central issues which distinguish biblical thought from Greek. The author takes leave of Bergson, however, in the latter's neo-Platonist tendency—the other current in the philosopher's mind.

The doctrine of creation, it should be noted, was a late development in Hebrew thought. In terms of the metaphysics which Tresmontant finds

implied in other aspects of Hebrew thinking it is not surprising that the doctrine, while late, ultimately emerged; so he was probably justified in centring his investigations upon it. His discussion of its implications for the meaning of Israel and the Incarnation are most stimulating.

Indeed, the reading of this book is a stimulating experience from start to finish. It may upset a few systematic theologians, particularly those who do not know or understand Aquinas and Aristotle, and it will hearten others. What will biblical theologians make of it? It will depend upon how ready they may be at this time to stand off from their biblical data and philosophize with Tresmontant.

Here are two books with rich insights for the biblical scholar on the one hand and the theologian on the other. Perhaps they will serve to introduce them to each other in a profitable dialogue.

It seems to the reviewer that Boman should have given more than passing mention to the Hebrew verb for "to know," and to its derivative, "knowledge." Tresmontant does rather better in this.