

Athens or Jerusalem? - Hellenism and Hebraism

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There has long been dissention between Hellenism and Hebraism as captured by the famous question of the Latin church father Tertullian (155-240 AD) – “*What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?*” Though there are clear differences, and Hellenism must be critiqued, these counterpoints have often been wrongly framed as a black and white matter: Hebraism is good; Hellenism is bad. However, a reflective caveat is needed here— there was surely a providential encounter between Biblical faith and Greek thought.

The pivotal story of when the apostle Paul was barred from going further into Asia and was instead led through a vision to Macedonia, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” (Acts 16:6-10), is perhaps symbolic. Paul’s Jewish apostolic band entered the Greek world, and the developing Christian Faith was shaped for all time. We may identify this encounter as the beginnings of the synthesis between Christianity and Hellenism, which, though there are negatives, was not all bad. Jewish communities had encountered Greek thought two or three centuries earlier. Philo of Alexandria and others absorbed the Greek spirit.

Because the Greeks were created in the image of God, and because of general revelation (Rom. 1:19-20), the Greek thinkers were able to achieve a discipline of rationality or use of reason that, when used under the authority of Biblical revelation, was enriching to theological understanding. As is said, “All truth is God’s truth,” and rigorous use of reason to explore, investigate, hypothesize, and learn as much as possible about creation and about reality was an enrichment to people of faith.

The Great Commandment to “love *Adonai* Your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind,” assumes a rigorous use of reason as part of holistic devotion to God and stewardship of His gifts. Followers of Messiah will not espouse an anti-intellectualism that

devalues higher education in the liberal arts, advanced scholarship and research in the social and natural sciences.

The Jewish people are known as the “People of the Book.” They are also “people of books,” valuing knowledge and education. The fact that we write and read systematic theologies is due to the Greek heritage. So, as we seek to recover and embrace more of the Hebraic epistemology, it is not rejection of the rigorous intellectual disciplines of learning, but a matter of bringing them under the authority of the Hebraic revelation and integrating them in practice in our teaching.

Philo of Alexandria, the great Hellenistic Jewish philosopher (20 BC- 50 AD), was born to one of the most respected Jewish families in Alexandria, Egypt. He theologized about the “Logos” as the manifestation of the transcendent God in the physical universe. The Apostle John chose the word “*logos*” to begin his Gospel. “In the beginning was the *Logos*. The *Logos* was with God and the *Logos* was God” (John 1:1). *Logos* means both “word” and “reason.” God is a God of reason, intelligible in His words and deeds. His character is intelligible. He does not act arbitrarily or inconsistently with His character. His created universe is intelligible; its principles and order (the laws of physics) can be known through the study of the natural sciences.



Greek Man; Hebrew Man

The New Covenant Scriptures (the New Testament) are written in *koine* (common) Greek, in God’s providence, and they bear the imprint of the Greek spirit. But they were written by Jewish authors—all the writers of the New Testament were Jewish (with the possible exception of Luke). There is a harmony between the best in Greek use of reason and Biblical faith. The *integration of faith and reason* has served in the successful development of Western civilization and in the university tradition. This is a gift of the synthesis between Greek and Hebrew thought. I could not write this present essay without the benefit of the higher education in this tradition, which I was privileged to receive.

Those who have benefited from a liberal arts education and engaged in advanced study and research at institutes of science and technology have greatly contributed to human flourishing. We can be grateful for this for this integration, as we have reaped the fruits of their

labor. In the providence of God, both Jerusalem and Athens are important, and both made it into inspired Scripture.

However, as modern Western secular humanism advanced Athens dominated, and Hebraic treasures were left behind. Let us rediscover those treasures.