

# Western Civilization Is Not Christian

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As a historian, I know what we call today “Western Civilization” was largely based on Christianity. I also know that it was a particular brand of Christianity. I leave for another day the debate whether that particular brand is now, or was then, the true Church. However, it is no criticism to note the Church of Rome which midwived Western Civilization had not precisely the same outlook on the world as the New Testament Apostles. That is, the Apostles were Jewish men with a distinctly Semitic outlook, and Rome was decidedly Latin-Greek. Specifically, it was Aristotelian.

The question is not whether faith can remain effective without a Semitic mind, for we see many obviously empowered by the Father who are neither Semitic nor Western. The question is one of discipleship. Just as Scripture assumes you come as you are, it also assumes you will not stay that way. If we are not changed from what we were as recently as yesterday, woe be unto us. The task of spiritual growth is never complete this side of Eternity, so we dare not stop growing. Argue if you wish whether Paul meant “study” or “be diligent” in 2 Timothy 2:15, but to accurately handle the Word of Truth surely requires spending time understanding the Scripture in its own context. That context was a Semitic people in a Middle Eastern country.

## History

New Testament Jews were most certainly aware of Western culture. Indeed, it's pretty clear the rabbinical tradition of Jesus' day was badly corrupted by it. On the one hand, the ruling party of the Sadducees was loaded with brilliant but liberal minds. They were eclectic, tending to the secularist mindset which denied miracles. They were all about power, politics and other practical matters. They clung to tradition for its own sake. Their kind existed since the beginning, and there was nothing remarkable about them, except to note they were mainly priests. The loyal opposition party of the Pharisees was more conservative, and given to believing very much in miracles, the reality of the spirit realm, and so forth. However, their teaching was deeply poisoned by the Alexandrian experience. It included a heavy dose of Western style logic.

The Alexandrian experience was an even older power struggle in Jewish politics. Departing the old Hebrew cultural traditions was a one-two punch. First, when the Medo-Persian Empire replaced Babylon, the Jews encountered a religion which assumed material wealth was the mark of favor from deities. Imperial politics was rife with calculations of profit and loss. We recall only a small minority of Hebrews returned from the Babylonian Exile. The majority stayed in Mesopotamia, where they were well established. With the loss of their beloved Temple, the center of religious life in Exile was the synagogue. It became also the center of political power for quite some time. As synagogues required no priest, the lay leaders who ran them needed training. Taking a cue from the Prophets' Academies founded by Samuel and revived later by Elijah, and extending on the concept of Jewish common schools where boys learned to read the Law of Moses, academies were founded for the rabbis who lead the synagogues. In the penitent atmosphere of the Exile, these academies were sticklers for the details of the Law.

There arose a mystical view that with such a high density of commitment and faithfulness to God, the land there became holier than the land of Palestine. The religious center of gravity never shifted back to Jerusalem, nor did the wealth and power. The popular view was to see them as stuck in ivory towers, out of touch with the real world. These were the Hebrew blue-bloods, and they never let anyone forget it. They became infected with the notion their wealth and power were a direct result of their better understanding of the Law of Moses. As lesser Jews later spread around the Mediterranean in pursuit of commerce, there arose a new middle class. Their wealth arguably surpassed that of the old Babylonian aristocracy, but the power remained firmly in those Eastern hands, at first. Meanwhile, these up-and-coming newly rich Western Jews wondered why their wealth should not be taken as a sign God favored *them* over the Babylonian branch of Judaism.

Then came the second punch. When Alexander the Great made his conquests, a very significant part of that conquest was to spread his native Greek heritage. While his successors were brutal and demanding about it, Alexander preferred to evangelize his culture as a great gift to the world. His legacy was taken up by Pharaoh Ptolemy, who funded the library at Alexandria, Egypt. It became a magnet to the intellectuals of that part of the world, along with those who merely pretended to be in that number. Such a center of learning naturally drew commerce, and created great wealth. The wealthy included the new middle class merchant Jews. The library and the college built around it naturally infused Greek understanding to all things. The temptation to reject the old Babylonian aristocracy and join in the fashionable trend of blending Grecian thought into all things gave rise to a uniquely Alexandrian school of rabbinical training.

In due course, as the center of civil imperial political power shifted West to Greece, then Rome, the dusty old halls of Babylon were forgotten. Alexandria wrested the power from there, but clearly forgot to bring the same commitment to the old Hebrew culture, already wounded by the cash nexus of Persian religion. While the Eastern schools were more cautious about adopting a Greek rational review of the Law, more careful in application of the Law to new circumstances, the Alexandrian school was profligate in adopting just about anything that sounded sweet to their itching Greek-trained ears. The blended logic of secular and pagan deeply compromised the original Old Testament religion. It was this Alexandrian corruption Jesus faced, and fought, in his condemnation of the Pharisees.

Many of Jesus' sayings constitute a call to go back to the genuine Hebrew root of faith and spiritual understanding. This opened old wounds for the Pharisees, if they understood it at all. For the Sadducees, it was just another brand of silly superstition in their secular agnostic minds. However, having corralled the Pharisees effectively, this odd-ball rabbi from Galilee threatened to undo all the Sadducees' hard work with Rome. Their ability to manipulate Rome for their own benefit was at risk. Jesus clearly thought politics was just another fact of life, and not something worthy of significant attention.

By His time, most of the Jews had accepted the notion that those who possessed of great wealth had it because they were favored by God. It was essentially a salvation of wealth. Having the gold was the proof of God's approval. Thus, the disciples wondered just who was saved if not the rich, when Jesus remarked how hard it was for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. While wealth was indeed a gift from God, it could also be a curse from Hell. The difference was in the heart of the man. While Jews gave lip-service to that idea, their gut reaction was the wealthy of Israel were holy, regardless how apparently evil.

This other-worldly focus, wherein conditions in this world are a mere background against which one played out the Lord's redemption, was indeed a threat to everyone then in wealth and power. Their cultural whip hand would be chained by such ideas. No more could they claim any moral superiority for maintaining their place. Was not the sin of Jeroboam in part a view that religion was merely politics? Ahab's sin was not that he hated Jehovah, but that it was politically wise to promote worship of Melkart as a means to make friends with Tyre and Sidon. To retain Jehovah as the God of Israel implied returning to the rule of House David in Judah, risking their hard-won independence. Thus, the declarations of Elijah were viewed merely as agitation from the political opposition. It really didn't matter if fire fell from Heaven at Mount Carmel on the sacrifice to Jehovah. It was the wisdom of man to build and shift alliances, and religion was just the dressing on them.

Yet Jesus did indeed bring a more substantive revelation, which was a revolution. The Law of Moses was all about maintaining the identity of the Jewish people. What the Jews tried hard to forget was that identity had a redemptive purpose. It was to be the cradle for the insertion into history of the very real presence of God as Man. Once that was done, so was the centrality of the Hebrew Nation among nations, unless they accepted Him as the Messiah. While David was quite right to assert pure military and political control over his people's neighbors, he at least kept in mind his success hinged entirely on faithfulness to God, and reliance on God for the final result. We have scant record of his tactics because it was always a matter of listening to God, not being a brilliant commander. His brilliance *was* his reliance on God. Some of his descendants remembered that, but the nation as a whole forgot it after the Fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. It became a mere matter of national pride. Their

identity as God's special People was hard won, demanding all sorts of ritual observance. Jesus claimed to offer that identity with little of those requirements.

Paul was uniquely prepared to bridge the gap between the religion of a small Jewish sect and the faith of mankind's one hope of salvation. It seems he didn't spend much time speaking of Jewish cultural background. Rather, he chose to correct Gentile fallacies by pointing directly at the differences. Western logic, crystallized early in Alexandria, assumed ultimate truth could be found by human logic alone. For Alexandrian rabbis, this meant God's truth could be clarified by such logic, but in practice it was superseded by that logic. Thus, their claim the oral tradition took precedence over the Law itself. Paul taught directly to the root of the falsehood. Put on Christ as a spiritual robe, and let your manner of life be focused outside this world. Seek to know the truth of things by revelation and communion, not by your limited mental faculties. The notion that man was inherently corrupt and fallen, including his intellect, was a heresy to Greeks and Romans. While such teaching got Paul into plenty of hot water, it was used by God to change the world.

The necessity that we each receive spiritual birth was forgotten over the next few centuries. The Church which faced the task of taming the Germanic hordes was successful, by and large, and for this was granted a voice in politics. The religious leadership could not resist. The idea of a Christian nation, or even a Christian empire, was just too attractive. What began first as mere influence became at times full control, de facto rule. At a minimum, this was a distraction from the task of winning souls through the preaching of the Word. Great and civilizing changes were mixed with petty political maneuvering. The hand that first restrained oppression later exerted its own crushing grip. It became doctrine the intellect was not fallen. Thus, conversion was a matter of teaching the mind, and demanding obedience. Even the Protestants accepted such notions reflexively for quite some time.

### *The Big Difference*

We might wonder, if it mattered so much, why Paul did not more pointedly address the huge difference between the intellectual culture of the Bible against the rest of the world. His choice not to spend too much time teaching the cultural background of Christian faith in his letters was no doubt the best choice at the time. He wasn't writing to scholars. It's quite likely he did go into detail with some of his better students, like Timothy. Apollos clearly understood it, if we accept him as the author of Hebrews, for he rejects the Alexandrian content, but uses the Alexandrian style of presentation. Still, for us to ignore how thoroughly Christian teaching assumes a radically different orientation in thought would be thoughtless.

It's not enough to note the essential differences between inductive and deductive reasoning. Both East and West contained a great measure of each. Rather, it's the proper place of human reasoning as a whole – subservient to revelation. The reasoning faculty is provided by God as a gift, but its purpose is to serve His Spirit. Thus, ultimate Truth is revealed from above. Not static, as a series of mere propositions, but a living Voice from above. For posterity, the record of revelation comes in the form of narrative. To say Scripture is simply propositional truth is to miss the point much of the time, and adopts the Pharisaical view. Ultimate Truth is ineffable – can't be told – which surely means it can't be known and memorized in the intellectual sense. In its own Semitic context, such a notion would be regarded silly.

What matters most is the source of Truth: God, and God alone. He is the living standard of all things. He is Truth in Person. Truth about the world is not a result of the Scientific Method. To examine all the particulars available, then build a logical framework to categorize and explain those particulars, will only take you so far. Indeed, such an approach may well take you contrary to Truth. The obvious mistake is assuming your observation can capture all the particulars. No matter how many observers you get, spread over any number of years and observations, you cannot assume to have observed it all. You are forced to remain tentative throughout. With God's revelation, we have the Truth, and it often appears contrary to observed particulars. Know the forest as a whole, then make sense from there of the individual trees. Particulars can deceive, since He sometimes calls us to fight the circumstances by faith, and at other times to accept them by the same faith. The controlling factor is Himself, not rules.

A purely observational basis will lead unfailingly to materialism. You cannot measure spirit, nor quantify faith. Perhaps we can quantify some of the activity those things produce in humans, but you and I know they can be faked by mere activity alone. We know from the Word there is a warning activity alone means nothing. To the Aristotelian, observable behavior is all their is. What we make of it is just a logical construct. Judgments of whether the actions, or their results, are “good” or “bad” are also mere logical constructs. The primary mission of the intellect is to discern the nature of a thing. Attempts to claim one has moved away from Aristotle and Eastern together, claiming some neutral ground, are self-deceptively Aristotelian in themselves. God is not impressed.

In our hearts, either our God is of our own making, or He is the one revealed long ago. It makes no sense on a human level that He does not incinerate the whole lot of us, should He notice us at all. That He should hold us accountable is not too surprising, but then to leave us no power to please Him seems unfair. Then to turn around and bear the pains of our sin in Himself is incomprehensible. From a human standpoint, it’s amazing anyone serves Him at all.

His service includes giving Him absolute authority in all our possessions, our actions, our thoughts, and anything else that seems under our control. He demands from us a host of things /not/ under our power, then insists we get those things from Him. Everything is demanded, yet nothing is truly acceptable without His touch. You can never see Him with your eyes, yet never leave His sight. Paradox upon paradox, life is a riddle under His hand. Life remains a tension of unresolved questions until it is over, in which case it has just begun. With words and propositions which have no sensible meaning in human conversation, yet bear the absolute Truth of all things, we speak the whole thing in parables because the Master did. He wanted all to follow Him, yet left them in complete confusion more often than not.

In our Western world, we demand clarity and precision. Words must be assigned meanings that don’t shift too far with differing contexts, lest they mean nothing at all. Statements must assume they can be verified to some useful extent. We are told to question every authority, to verify the assertions by duplicating the experiment for ourselves. The Kingdom of Light agrees we should question human authority, but accept divine authority without question. At the same time, we are taught to assume the veracity of those who claim a common faith. We are each unique in Him, experience Him individually, yet must work together for a common good which remains somewhat ill-defined. While we presume God will work miracles large and small through others, we cannot reject people for any failure, no matter how costly. There are some clear standards, yet there must be forgiveness.

The concept of a thing’s value has nothing to do with economic circumstances, but it’s usefulness to this undefinable Kingdom. We hold the smallest part of Creation precious in His sight, even while we quickly pass off great chunks of wealth to strangers, and are told to have no remorse if it is apparently wasted. Life is precious, and we make all manner of trouble for others to preserve the most miserable specimens of humanity, yet embrace our own extinction as a relief. We love the unlovely; we sacrifice much for the least deserving. We go out of our way to become close friends of those with whom we have *no* common ground aside from this self-proclaimed Kingdom citizenship. We persist in kindness to those who hate us. We claim all these things and routinely fail at them.

### *A Foot in Both Worlds*

The Apostle John warned us the world would naturally hate us. We should not say Semitic culture contains no flaws, only that it is radically different. While rooted in the field of Semitic culture, Christianity rises far above that ground. With the Jews themselves having left behind true Semitic culture, they were no longer in any position to bridge the gap until they had stripped away two or three centuries of Hellenism. Every other culture would be even more remote from the Truth. We who seek this deeper understanding of Christ are the ultimate aliens, yet the best friends the world has ever known. At times our love itself excites their hatred. Our goodness draws their judgment. We actively seek to confront all men with the Truth. We don’t belong in this world, but we struggle to wrest it back from the Enemy.

The ways of the West have brought the greatest prosperity to the world, yet impoverished itself spiritually. Western ideals of democratic government remain eternally broken on the crags of fallen

human nature. Individual freedom becomes license, and safety becomes oppression. The customs of human interaction become objectified and simplified, and the rules have driven out genuine love. Time is marked precisely and life seems shorter, even as medicine extends its years. All knowledge has been collected and cataloged, much new is added by the moment, yet Westerners are encouraged to specialize more narrowly so that nobody really knows much of anything. We measure and count everything, yet almost nothing we do with it counts.

In the midst of this madness, we are called to stop from time to time, and simply *know* the Lord. How many of us are able to naturally direct our minds in focused prayer for more than a few moments? We are conditioned to avoid intimacy, to avoid just being near someone in the silence of love. Does a minute without chatter among friends make us uncomfortable? Can we comprehend following a leader around, simply absorbing his ways without asking a bunch of questions? Can we sit and watch children struggle to get themselves ready to go somewhere without becoming impatient and helping them, denying them that moment of growth? Can we ever think of time without measuring it, placing a dollar value on it? Do we make room for honoring the faith of nobodies? Can we take up the office of leadership as a mandate to work harder than others, sacrifice more, and gain less praise?

The West is not a direct result of true Christian faith. To remain Western is to pull up short of the Kingdom. We have so very far to go.

### *A Little More on Semitic Thought*

Take a look at some examples of ancient Semitic thought. I am by no means an expert in cultural philosophy. This is nothing more than an overview of one historian who spent a lot of time looking at Semitic History. From behavior and writings we can deduce a bit about cultural substrata, and offer some discussion giving at least the flavor of the ancient Hebrew mind.

What we can discern might be narrowed down to one primary difference, as a starting place, with modern Western thought: The role of the subconscious. This shows up most visibly in learning style. It's common knowledge that Eastern thought is more deductive than inductive. Truth is revealed from above, not built up from below. One learns by absorbing revelation. Revelation is far more than propositional statements. It more often comes as an image within a context. Indeed, for the Hebrew mind, context is everything. Hebrew language is more a collection of symbols and images than a vehicle for passing information. It's a mistake to discount this as communication essentially by emotion. There is, indeed, a good bit of emotion, but it's more for the sake of drama than brutish gut reactions. The objective is to impart a message that requires one to sit down and ponder.

Such contemplation is the primary learning activity. There is a recognition that we cannot see well below the line of conscious mental activity. Even Western science recognizes the mind is not only mostly subconscious, but some of the best work is done below that line. The Hebrew language is primarily oral, and only secondarily written. Thus, we hear the spoken message today, and perhaps read it for reinforcement. Then we go about our normal business while letting that message echo in the mind, and gestate in the subconscious. When possible, we would simply sit and let the message replay in our minds repeatedly, perhaps associating it with other, similar messages. Even Westerners know that dreams often reveal to us the content of the subconscious. For a Semite, dreams are the place where God may light the fire of revelation from fuel previously delivered while awake. We would assume that at some point, we come to a working conclusion what changes are demanded of us. We would also assume other aspects of that message will eventually come forth into conscious thought. Only in our old age, after a lifetime of hearing and considering, could we claim to really understand much. Meanwhile, we would expect subtle mental associations and recognitions that are at first difficult to formulate. Rather, we perceive it in half-shadow. This is what many Westerners mistake for simple emotive response. The half-shadowy realizations are the way God works, whispering in our mind's ear subtle ideas.

To the Western mind, the Semitic God is somewhat capricious. For the Semite, it's a matter that God reserves all prerogatives. Accepting that we never really do come to the end of understanding leaves room for God to act in ways wholly unexpected and wholly incomprehensible. We may well be close confidants in the Court of Heaven, but a Lord would be silly to trust all His secrets to any one

servant. Servants inevitably fail, and so there must be an alternate route to getting the business done. That Our Lord is unfailing in Himself would lead us to expect a business so complex and all encompassing, we are blessed just to have one little part in it. We are included by His grace, not by our virtue. Thus, knowing intimately the design and content of our hearts and minds, He wisely reveals what we need when the time is right. Time is not measured precisely, and events are not scheduled by the ticking of the clock. They are scheduled to follow preceding events, whenever that may be. If some trusted servant fails to respond and carry out his duty at the appropriate place in sequence, there must be a way to move ahead without his contribution. Naturally, that involves calling on some other servants without warning. That these servants may be wrapped up in other affairs is their own fault. Their number one priority is to serve the Master at His call, at His time. Convenience is solely His possession.

That's not to say a major undertaking is pursued without planning. If we know from experience it takes three days to walk from this place to that, we prepare accordingly. If there's not enough road-ready food on hand, we prepare to do without. The Lord may well have prepared for that on our behalf, but if not, we assume He has strengthened us to bear the discomfort. He knows our pleasure, of course, but will have very good reasons for denying us our pleasure. We should hardly dare to ask what those reasons are, but just take the pain as part of our due service. Westerners call this "fatalism," with the implication it's not a reasonable way to operate. This is a mis-characterization. A Semite will war against apparent fate if he is certain fighting is the will of God, but seldom for the sake of his own comfort. Comfort is a gift of grace, not our just deserts, and certainly not a right. One's place in the world may be subject to improvement by persistent effort, but only if God grants it. The effort must be incident with duties.

Laws were expressed in terms of the ruler's character. It was assumed the laws were in the people's best interests. The broad generalities were fairly static, not subject to review. Some examples of the law's application always came with the publication of them. Every lord issuing laws knew to prepare for court hearings in cases with no obvious application, or when provisions seemed to conflict. Rulings were recorded, not to provide a static precedent, but to offer evidence of the lawgiver's character. Similar cases might be ruled differently because of nuances in context, which certainly included the individuals involved. Wisdom was insight into the lord's character, as expressed in the ability to rule on some cases as the lawgiver would rule. A judge was promoted on how few rulings were overturned on appeal to a higher court, especially in cases reviewed by the Lawgiver. This was associated with the wisdom of grasping human motives, less from their words and more from their actions. To accurately predict what individuals and groups would do under varying circumstances was regarded as wisdom. Obviously this requires minimizing wishful thinking. Wisdom also assumes you see things through the revealed moral implications, not mere pragmatism. Naturally, such prescience would put you at an advantage in dealing with your fellow humans. Whatever circumstances arose, you would be ready to act appropriately, or wisely. A servant who wisely anticipated his master's requirements was beloved, highly valued. It should be obvious this was as much the result of willingness as wisdom. A demonstrated desire to obey and please was the foundation of such wisdom.

Everyone served someone. Only God has no superior. The concept of the loner was that of an outlaw, a sinner rejected and barely allowed to live. While there was a place for the individual hero who saved the day, it was assumed he would arise from his own people at God's behest. There was no glory for the individual virtuoso apart from community. Heroes and experts were gifts of God to the community. Virtuoso talent existed only as a gift of God to guide others. There was an assumption of balance between the individual and community. The only good loner was the prophet who stood for God against the sinning masses. Even then, he was inevitably called to serve God by serving the community. It was assumed others would aspire to his high calling and join him. While great works were ascribed to great men in the community, it was quite rare for great men to do the work themselves. Almost no one went about their calling individually, but would have at least one servant or apprentice at his side. The warrior had his young shield-bearer, the prophet had his servant, as did every nobleman. Thus, any number of people might represent a great man, and would be treated as the man himself in many ways. It was said such a representative was going in his master's name. Delegation was a basic assumption of life. One gained glory most from sharing in that of another.

We conclude, then, with a contrast between the two cultures on two fundamental concepts, love and belief. In Western lore, romantic love is completely irrational and cannot be tamed. It follows its own whims and is proper justification for all manner of devotional behavior. On the other hand, belief is chosen, but may also be irrational. True convictions are viewed as intransigence in resisting reason. To the Hebrew mind, things are just the opposite. Love is a conscious choice, and romantic attachment is the natural result of marrying appropriately. Yet religious conviction is ordained by God. It is based on revelation coming down from God, established long before the believer was born. In covenant with God, revelation is brought to life in the believer's heart, and grips the soul eternally. The content of conviction may expand, but is not subject to change from human forces. It is ruled by God; it is intransigence to resist commitment to Him.