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Holistic discipleship in the shadow of the cross: an interdisciplinary investigation of the anthropological foundations of Western theology and praxis

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*HOLISTIC DISCIPLESHIP IN THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATION OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS
OF WESTERN THEOLOGY AND PRAXIS*

A MASTERS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY IN CANDIDACY
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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

BY

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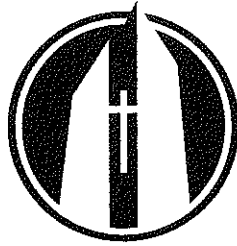
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Master Thesis: *Holistic Discipleship In The Shadow Of The Cross: An Interdisciplinary Investigation Of The Anthropological Foundations Of Western Theology And Praxis*



GEORGE FOX

EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

THESIS ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

Title: HOLISTIC DISCIPLESHIP IN THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS:
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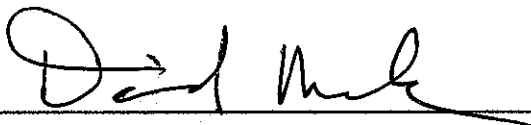
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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.



(R. Larry Shelton)



(David Mannock)

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Introduction

The Roots of the Contemporary Discipleship Crisis

In recent decades there is a growing awareness that a widespread discipleship failure is taking place within the Christian church, not only in North America, but throughout the world. That perception is well exemplified by the conclusions of the First International Consultation on Discipleship in Eastbourne, England (1999). At that symposium theologian John Stott called attention to the “strange and disturbing paradox” of our contemporary situation. While globally the church has experienced enormous numerical growth, this has occurred without corresponding growth in the “depth” dimension of discipleship, or the spiritual formation of those who are evangelized.¹

At the same conference, African theologian Tokunboh Adeyemo lamented the “strange incongruence” of the phenomenal statistical growth of Christianity in Africa in the last century. He comments that this growth has been paralleled only by the “mind-boggling savagery” of millions of African Christians engaged in the horrors of ethnic cleansing. In Adeyemo's words, “the church in Africa is one mile long, but only one inch deep.”²

Adeyemo's comment supports an assertion made more than a quarter century earlier by the

¹ The Eastbourne Consultation, *Joint Statement on Discipleship* (Eastbourne, England: 24 September 1999); “Editorial: Make Disciples, Not Just Converts,” *Christianity Today* [resource online] (Carol Stream, IL: 25 October 1999, accessed 30 January 2010); available from <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/1999/october25/9tc028.html>; [Internet](#). We consider the terms *discipleship* and *spiritual formation* to be effectively synonymous. We will use the terms interchangeably throughout. A slight preference will be shown for the biblically-derived term, discipleship, which resonates with the church's calling to “go forth and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). While we have begun our study with a discussion of discipleship, the primary focus of our study will be an interdisciplinary exploration of theological anthropology. We will be arguing that a biblically derived theological anthropology is fundamental to effective discipleship methods. In contrast, we would assert that the contemporary discipleship crisis, in great part, has resulted from the church's embrace of a theological anthropology that is heavily influenced by Platonic anthropological assumptions, more so than Scriptural ones.

² Ibid.

renowned African theologian John S. Mbiti. Long before the Rwandan genocide had raised questions about the effectiveness of missionary accomplishments in Africa, Mbiti had argued that European missionaries had failed to properly contextualize the gospel message to the African cultural context.³ Despite the fact that almost one-third of Mbiti's own Akamba tribe in Kenya had become Christian, Mbiti felt that African Christians had embraced the outward cultural and spiritual forms of European Christianity, but without experiencing a deeper conversion of their underlying worldview.⁴ "As a result the gospel has not yet been made relevant to Africans, conversions have not been real, and African Christianity is superficial."⁵

Although genocidal actions by tribally-conscious African Christians are a conspicuous example of the global church's failure to make disciples of the nations, we would insist that "superficial" conversion to outward cultural forms is much more than merely an African problem.⁶ In fact, the highly syncretized nature of U.S. Christian consumerism and materialism,

³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), as cited in David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 99. In the aftermath of the genocide, "Many were shocked that a nation nearly 90% 'Christian' could sink to such barbarities." (Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: 21st Century Edition* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2001), 551). This casts some doubt on the depth of religious transformation accomplished by the conversions that took place during and after the East African Revival, which began in Rwanda in the 1930s.

⁴ Ibid. On a similar note, missiologist Charles H. Kraft argues that contemporary communicators have been largely successful at getting people to accept the *outer forms of Christianity* but without their necessarily having experienced a true Christian conversion. In many ways this is similar to how the early Judaizers were sometimes able to convince Gentiles to adopt Jewish cultural forms like circumcision and dietary rules, whereas the Apostle Paul emphasized the deeper issues of a faith relationship with Christ, more so than external (Judeo-Christian) cultural markers like circumcision, etc. See Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979). David J. Hesselgrave is in agreement with Mbiti and Kraft, arguing for the necessity to "avoid the kind of false conversion which contents itself with conformity to certain forms instead of evidencing a change in worldview." (Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 67)

⁵ These are Mbiti's conclusions, as summarized by Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 99.

⁶ In fact, the American and European churches can be credited with exporting our own discipleship-impaired forms of Westernized Christianity to them in the first place. See, for example, Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Revolution, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 18-21. McLaren quotes a Rwandan pastor who commented, "Something is missing in the version of the Christian religion we received from the missionaries, which is the message we now preach ourselves. They told us how to go to heaven. But they left out an important detail. They didn't tell us how the will of God could be done on earth. We

or Latin American machismo, etc., can be viewed as equally significant examples of the church's struggle to practice effective discipleship in any and every cultural context.⁷

It seems reasonable therefore to argue that the discipleship crisis is a truly *global* phenomenon. It is not isolated to a particular people group, world region, or cultural setting. Rather, the discipleship crisis is fairly universal in scope, transcending the idiosyncrasies of geography, culture, and even historical setting.⁸ In fact, what we are describing as the discipleship crisis is probably best understood as being a convenient label for a timeless challenge. What we are attempting here is the global church's *growing awareness* of the profound difficulties involved in discipling the people of God to spiritual maturity, in any and all cultural settings.

The church's general ineffectiveness at making spiritually mature disciples of Christ is especially problematic because of the nature of the church's mission. The making of disciples is at the heart of the Great Commission. However, as theologian Dallas Willard has commented, disciple-making should perhaps be described as the "great omission" of the Great Commission, because we have largely "omitted" to do so.⁹ Instead, the church has often gone forth to make

need to learn what the message of Jesus says to our situation here in East Africa." (McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 20) Many American Christian leaders are asking the same question about our twenty-first century North American context.

⁷ McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 20. For an excellent, yet concise discussion of the discipleship crisis in the American context (which he describes as the "discipleship deficit" or "discipleship malaise") see Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 21-58.

⁸ Furthermore, we should probably mention that the discipleship crisis does not seem to be as much of a problem in areas where the church is experiencing violent persecution from outsiders, such as in many communist or Muslim nations. In any case, we are not asserting that the problem is truly universal, in the sense of *equally* affecting the church in all places and times. Rather, we would assert that this is a problem with deep historical and theological roots, which we will be explored more fully in subsequent chapters of this study. The key point here is to recognize that this is not a distinctly American, or African, or Latin American, or European problem. Nor is it merely a contemporary problem. The roots can be traced far back into Church history, as will be demonstrated in chapter one.

⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).

nominal believers of the nations. For example, prior to the genocide, Rwanda “appeared to be a model of national piety, a profoundly Christian country, with high levels of church attendance among Catholics and Protestants.”¹⁰ In the wake of the genocide, the horrific events that took place should serve as a powerful reminder of the superficiality of contemporary Christian discipleship.

While there is a growing consensus among Christian leaders that a discipleship crisis is in fact taking place, throughout the world,¹¹ there is little agreement regarding the likely causes of the problem or its potential remedy. An abundance of quick fix approaches can and have been suggested, such as small groups, new Bible Study curriculums,¹² “emotionally healthy spirituality,”¹³ etc. These suggestions are certainly valid and appropriate, but at the same time, we would like to suggest that a more thorough revision of our theological paradigm may be in order. Wise voices like Dallas Willard have consistently suggested that we must look beyond superficial “band-aid” fixes. Therefore it might be better to think along the lines of open heart surgery on our theological paradigms. Willard, for instance, has suggested that we “at least

¹⁰ Stephen D. Smith, “Introduction,” in *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches*, ed. Carol Rittner, John K. Roth, and Wendy Whitworth (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2004), 1.

¹¹ These kinds of comments are being made by a wide range of voices from across the theological spectrum, including politically conservative Christian leaders like Chuck Colson and James Dobson, and also from more mainstream voices like George Barna and Dallas Willard. In particular, we would recommend two works: George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001) and Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*.

¹² The Truth Project DVD-based Small Group curriculum by Focus on the Family would be one such example: www.thetruthproject.org. This is a quite decent curriculum which is certainly making a difference in many people’s lives. Nonetheless, it is perhaps part of the problem that the church’s solution to these kinds of issues tend to consist of 12-week information-based curricula that the church can push their people through in a kind of assembly line process, trying to produce spiritually mature “McChristians” at the end of our church program conveyor belt.

¹³ Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). This book is also quite decent. The point we are making, however, is that the discipleship issues being faced cannot be addressed easily by taking a church through a new program or study. The problem goes deeper than these solutions can effectively address.

consider the possibility that this poor result is not *in spite of what we teach* and how we teach, but precisely *because of it*.¹⁴ This study will take Willard's warning seriously.

In the pages that follow we will be examining an issue that we consider to be at the heart of the discipleship crisis. Though many factors are involved, we will be examining a single issue carefully and comprehensively from a variety of vantage points, trying to discover how it is undermining the church's efforts to make disciples in all the nations of the earth. Specifically, it is our hypothesis that the church's current discipleship efforts are failing, in great part, because they are based on a faulty theological anthropology whose foundation can be traced to Platonic philosophy, more so than Scripture.¹⁵

Since theological anthropology provides some of the basic foundational assumptions upon which all discipleship methods are developed and implemented, it is our assertion that the church has unintentionally engaged in the process of making disciples in the style, or "shadow," of Platonic philosophy, more so than the cross. This observation draws attention to the importance of carefully exploring the relationship between the transcultural elements of the gospel and the particular contexts of the various human cultures of the earth. In particular, our study will pay careful attention to the ways in which the cultural and philosophical categories of Greco-Roman civilization have come to shape contemporary expressions of Christian theology.

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 40; italics added.

¹⁵ The influence of Platonic philosophies on theology will be addressed significantly in chapters one, and throughout the rest of the study. We do not have the space available to discuss the ways in which Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers further developed the dualistic and rationalistic tendencies which were already implicit in Platonic thought. We would simply mention in passing Nancy Murphy's comment that "Descartes' radical substance dualism has so influenced current thinking on these issues that we tend to read Plato himself with Cartesian presuppositions." (Nancy Murphy, "Introduction," in *Whatever Happened to the Soul: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, eds. Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 7).

Theological Anthropology in the Age of Science

There are a number of resources available to help Christian theology recover a more biblical foundation for its theological anthropology. In particular, we would mention the remarkable convergence of conclusions being reached in the theological disciplines of Missiology, New Testament Studies, and Historical Theology. Later in our analysis it will be demonstrated how each of these disciplines has been steadily undermining the rationalistic, dualistic, and individualistic assumptions which have characterized the Western intellectual tradition for several millennia. It is important to observe the ways in which the intellectual cultures of both the (Western) atheistic scientific establishment *and* the (Western) Christian theological paradigm have both been thoroughly shaped by unbiblical, Platonic and Cartesian assumptions about the nature of the human person.

From time to time in our analysis we will be making reference to recent discoveries in the scientific discipline of cognitive neuroscience. At the end of the twentieth century, this academic discipline has experienced a growth spurt reported as “the decade of the brain.”¹⁶ It is important to note that many of the conclusions being reached by the scientific community are highly resonant with the new perspectives emerging from the theological disciplines.

Furthermore, it is of great significance that recent empirical observations concerning human nature tend to stand in such sharp contrast to the almost universally held anthropological assumptions of Western civilization. On the surface, the discoveries of contemporary cognitive neuroscience appear to be undermining the foundation of both the atheistic and the Christian worldviews. However, this emerging scientific understanding of human nature turns out to be

¹⁶ A.N. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), xv.

quite familiar to Christian theology, since a similar perspective was developed and articulated by John Wesley in the eighteenth century, and can perhaps be discovered clearly in the biblical texts themselves. This new scientific understanding is not only compatible with Wesleyan anthropology, but is also highly resonant with contemporary research in biblical anthropology.

Although secular scientists and Christian theologians would generally not consider themselves to be studying the same phenomenon, we will be exploring the ways in which their objects of study can be seen to overlap to a significant degree. The value of an interdisciplinary approach like the present one is that the empirical data from the social and biological sciences can be used to provide useful points of reference and comparison against the more spiritually oriented conclusions of the theological disciplines. What is especially remarkable is the degree of harmony that can be observed between the various disciplines we will be studying and mentioning here.

It is quite striking to notice that these diverse academic disciplines point to the same conclusions, arrived at independently using entirely different methodologies and epistemological approaches. Each of the disciplines consulted in this study utilizes diverse methodologies and begin with quite distinct assumptions about where their investigations will likely lead. Nonetheless, they are found to converge on similar truths about the holistically integrated, relational nature of the embodied human person.¹⁷

In the course of our analysis, it will be observed that a remarkable degree of similarity can be observed in the various conclusions scholars are reaching, as postmodern tendencies in

¹⁷ The two sources that perhaps best capture this unified perspective are F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), and Steven Porter, "Wesleyan Theological Methodology as a Theory of Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32 no 3 (2004): 190-199.

philosophy, theology, and scientific method are all converging together, bringing us back to what this study will be positing to be a more biblically-grounded worldview, from which Western orthodoxy has since strayed, under the influence of Platonic philosophy.¹⁸ It is important to remember that the strength of our argument does not rest upon any single strand of the analysis. Rather, the convergent observations of the various academic disciplines function together, providing collective support the conclusions put forth by each academic discipline.

After demonstrating the degree of resonance which is being observed between the findings of these various disciplines, we will conclude our study with a brief exploration of the ways in which the conclusions science is now reaching about the nature of the human person are also in harmony with the theological paradigm developed by John Wesley in the eighteenth century. This particular area of agreement is particularly useful from a practical perspective, because it will be observed that Wesley built his entire theological system and especially his method for discipleship upon the anthropological foundation which is now being validated by empirical science and biblical scholarship.¹⁹ Since Wesley's insights into anthropology are now being validated empirically, this makes his discipleship methods particularly valuable for further investigation.

For that reason, we will be suggesting that certain key aspects of Wesley's theological paradigm are worthy of study not only by Christians within the Wesleyan theological tradition, but by others as well. Furthermore, it will be shown that the core aspects of Wesley's theological

¹⁸ Porter, "Wesleyan Theological Methodology as a Theory of Integration," 190-199.

¹⁹ In fact, Wesley's approach to discipleship is so central to his theological paradigm that many scholars consider it to be "the method" of Methodism. D. Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley's Class Meeting* (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1997); Brad D. Strawn and Warren S. Brown. "Wesleyan Holiness through the Eyes of Cognitive Science and Psychotherapy," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23 no 2 (2004): 121-129; and Warren S. Brown, "Resonance: A Model for Relating Science, Psychology, and Faith," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* vol 23 no 2 (2004): 110-120.

paradigm which we will be focusing on here have, in fact, generally been lost from the Wesleyan tradition. Wesley's carefully developed and articulated affection-centered moral psychology was abandoned by his followers within a few generations of his death, to be replaced with the same Platonic rational-control model which Wesley had rejected. Up to this day, we find that Platonic moral psychology models remain ubiquitous. Therefore the Wesleyan traditions are as much in need of a re-examination of Wesley's theological anthropology and discipleship methods as are other theological traditions.

It turns out that perhaps there is nothing inherently "Wesleyan" about Wesley's moral psychology and discipleship methods. Our interdisciplinary analysis will demonstrate that his conclusions regarding human nature are perhaps best thought of as empirically validated biblical truths.²⁰ We offer this study in hopes that we all, regardless of our theological tradition and background, may continue to grow in our understanding of the biblical and scientific foundations of a properly Christian worldview.

Finally, we should note that this is an exploratory thesis. As such, it cannot address the various subtopics as comprehensively as might be desired. Nonetheless, it is only through interdisciplinary analysis that an issue of this complexity can be adequately investigated. The treatment in this study is therefore intended to provide a glimpse of the lay of the land, so to speak, rather than attempting to comprehensively address any of the individual topics touched upon.

²⁰ In any case, in other areas, Wesley often misses the mark as much as, and sometimes more than other theologians or reformers. We would assert that all theological traditions are in constant need of revision and re-examination, on the basis of both biblical and empirical data, properly analyzed.

Part 1

In the Shadow of Platonic Philosophy – A Brief History of Theological Anthropology

In this first section we begin with an examination of the complex relationship that necessarily exists between the transcultural message of the gospel, on the one hand, and the various worldviews of the human cultures, on the other. In particular, we will be drawing attention to the ways in which Greek philosophy exerted profound influence during the early centuries of church history, at the very moment when the foundations of Christian orthodoxy were being laid.¹ In the course of our analysis it will be shown that a centuries-long process of progressive cultural accommodation to Greek styles of thought has resulted in various unbiblical Platonic assumptions being integrated into the very fabric of Western Christian theology.²

Our goal in part one of this study is to set up the basic historical and philosophical backdrop for the interdisciplinary analysis that follows in section two. In a sense, these first three chapters can be seen to function somewhat analogously to an epidemiological analysis in the health sciences. However, in this case we will be investigating the ways in which extra-biblical Platonic philosophical assumptions can be viewed as potential “disease agents,” so to speak, which have infiltrated Christian theology and are impairing its health in various areas, especially

¹ Given the limitations of the present study, we will not have the opportunity to demonstrate how these same rationalistic, dualistic, and individualistic tendencies of Platonic thought came to be further intensified in the Western philosophical and theological tradition, during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods of European civilization. That topic is very much worthy of study. Mention of that development will be made in passing in subsequent chapters.

² We will be following the lead of F. LeRon Shults who writes that he is less “concerned with the current debates about the original intentions of Plato and Aristotle than with the way in which their ideas in fact were commonly interpreted and influenced the formulation of theological anthropology.” (F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 166) We certainly appreciate Plato’s brilliance. Nonetheless, we would consider his influence on Christian theology to have been largely detrimental, especially when viewed with respect to its contribution to the contemporary discipleship crisis.

in the area of its discipleship efforts.

Specifically, we will be hypothesizing that various Western “philosophical accretions”³ have attached themselves to the gospel message. We will be suggesting that Christian theology must be re-established on a more thoroughly biblical (i.e., Judeo-Christian) foundation. We would assert that this is the best means of releasing the gospel to minister effectively to people living in the many mission fields of the contemporary world. There are now many cultural contexts where the traditional Christian-Platonic synthesis which developed during Christian antiquity has either become anachronistic, or is simply foreign and unnecessarily incongruent with people’s perception of reality. This is of particular importance for the spread of the gospel in the shifting context of twenty-first century Western culture. It is also particularly appropriate to other regions of the world where traditional or indigenous worldviews remain dominant, such as in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere.

³ We are borrowing this term from Vincent Donovan, who suggests “the necessity of peeling away from the gospel the accretions of the centuries, and of Western, white, European, American culture, to get to the kernel of the gospel underneath.” (Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Notre Dame, IN: Claretian, 1978), 70)

Chapter 1

Platonic Influence at the Start of the Christian Era

The majority of this chapter will be devoted to historical and missiological investigation of the ways in which Platonic philosophy came to shape early Christian theology. Because of the complexity of this subject matter, before we enter into a more careful chronological treatment of the topic, we will first begin by providing a simple overview. The intention is to provide a basic lay of the land, so to speak, concerning the nature of cultural and philosophical influence on the development of Christian theology and the church's understanding of theological orthodoxy. After the initial orientation to the subject matter has been completed in this chapter, then we will then return to flesh out the relevant details in a more precise and methodical manner.

We begin by presenting the conclusions of two scholars whose observations, when held in dynamic tension, can be seen to helpfully illuminate both the magnitude and the character of the Platonic influence on historic Christian orthodoxy. The first of these sources is Cambridge philosopher Christopher Stead.¹ In his influential text, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, Stead explores the close relationship which existed between Platonic philosophy and early Christian thought, from the second through the fifth centuries CE. Summarizing the nature and extent of that influence, Stead writes,

At the start of this period, well-educated men [and women] in civilized Europe looked to philosophy for guidance... the Platonic tradition was already strong and would soon be dominant... Compared with other religions of its time and place [Christianity] was far more successful in organizing its beliefs into a coherent system. In doing this it borrowed largely from philosophy, and especially from Platonism. But it kept a sharply defined identity; its commitment to the Bible as a sacred book was far more uncompromising than the philosophers' respect for Plato... Nevertheless [Greek and especially Platonic] philosophy helped to mould its beliefs about God and the world, and taught it to uphold them in

¹ Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

argument... There is no doubt about the contribution which [Greek] philosophy made to early Christian thought; the fact is certain, though its value is sometimes disputed...²

In this eloquent and precise description, Stead captures the general scholarly consensus concerning the nature and extent of Greek influence on early Christian theology. This growing consensus can be loosely summarized as follows. First, Platonic philosophy has had a profound shaping influence on the development of Christian orthodoxy.³ Second, the nature of that relationship is such that the Greek categories of thought have tended to serve as the conceptual categories and interpretive filters through which the biblical content has been analyzed and systematized. Thus, Stead is emphasizing that while the biblical material is explicitly given precedence and priority, nonetheless, in the resulting synthesis, Platonic thought is seen to exert far more influence than might otherwise be suspected. In this way, while Christian orthodoxy may not appear to contain too much Platonic content, nonetheless, widespread Platonic assumptions are seen to underlie many of the unconscious philosophical assumptions of Christian theologians, both ancient and modern. It is because of the subtlety of this Platonic-Christian synthesis that contemporary Christianity is able to be profoundly influenced by Platonic thought while, paradoxically, that influence remains largely invisible to many scholars, and most laypeople.⁴

² Ibid., 79-80.

³ This is universally accepted by the historians, philosophers, and theologians consulted in this study.

⁴ Missiologist Paul G. Hiebert comments that “Because worldviews are deep, they are generally unexamined and largely implicit. Like glasses, they shape how we see the world, but we are rarely aware of their presence. In fact, others can often see them better than we ourselves do... We become conscious of our worldviews when they are challenged by outside events they cannot explain. Immigrants, refugees, bicultural children, and others caught between conflicting worldviews are also made conscious of their own deep assumptions.” (Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 46-7) Thus, it can be observed that missiologists and bicultural theologians tend to be much more aware of the implicit worldview assumptions of their culture. Having lived in multiple cultural settings, the underlying assumptions of the two (or more) cultures frequently come into conflict, liberating them somewhat from the implicit components of their (Western) enculturation. Missiologists and bicultural theologians are helpful guides for the rest of us, who are less culturally adept.

While Stead's research is excellent, it is also somewhat one-sided. He focuses almost entirely on the way in which Platonic philosophy influenced the key developments of Christian orthodoxy.⁵ This accurately paints one-half of the picture, but it is far from telling the whole story. Stead has investigated the elements of Christian orthodoxy which were either *new* or *foreign* to the biblical worldview of the Old and New Testaments. In contrast, there are other scholars who come at the same issue from the opposite direction. These scholars have chosen to carefully explore the *continuity of thought* which exists between the biblical witness of the Old and New Testaments and the historic creeds and councils of the early Church, during the same time period studied by Stead.

A prime example of this contrasting approach is found in Danish church historian Oskar Skarsaune. In his article "From the Jewish Messiah to the Creeds of the Church,"⁶ Skarsaune argues against the contemporary tendency to view the creeds as being thoroughly syncretistic in nature. Instead, Skarsaune suggests that a more careful analysis reveals that the Apostles' Creed "embodies a Messianic portrait of Jesus that is strikingly Jewish, and in line with that contained in the Synoptic Gospels." Skarsaune then goes on to demonstrate the clear continuity of characteristically Jewish Messianic / New Testament thought which is encountered in the other historic creeds. For example, he argues convincingly that the Nicene Creed has "no other Christology than the one contained in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, and in some important passages in the Pauline letters."⁷ Furthermore, he asserts that "this Christology has a solid

⁵ Specifically, Stead analyzes the historic creeds and councils of the church up to the Chalcedonian Definition (451 CE).

⁶ Oskar Skarsaune, "From the Jewish Messiah to the Creeds of the Church," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 32 no 3 (2008): 224-237, at 226.

⁷ Ibid.

biblical and Jewish basis.”⁸

In this way, Skarsaune is able to argue convincingly that both of the early orthodox Christologies – the “Synoptic” Christology of the Apostolic Creed, and the “Johannine” Christology of the Nicene Creed – though different, can both be seen to be thoroughly Jewish in character. In this way, Skarsaune skillfully draws attention to the strong continuity which exists between the biblical witness (especially of the New Testament) and the historic creeds and councils from the second through the fourth century CE.⁹

Though on the surface the conclusions of these two scholars seem contradictory, they can also be seen to be quite compatible, and in fact, complementary. When Skarsaune’s insights are combined with the conclusions of Stead, we are presented with a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the competing influences of the Jewish and Greek cultures, and their respective philosophical paradigms and worldviews, together came to be incorporated into the distinctive worldview of the early Christian community.¹⁰ Throughout the rest of this chapter, the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Skarsaune’s text, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), addresses the continuity between the two testaments, and explores the characteristic worldview of the Jewish and Christian communities of the first century CE. He takes this exploration to the next level in his 2008 essay, “From the Jewish Messiah to the Creeds of the Church,” where he explores the way in which that theological continuity then continues into the creeds of Christian antiquity.

¹⁰ The tension seen here between the positions of Stead and Skarsaune is in fact quite characteristic of various debates taking place within biblical studies. One set of scholars sees the Hellenistic (Greek) character of various biblical texts and authors, whereas other scholars see the essentially Jewish content of those *same* texts or authors. These debates are particularly heated in Pauline studies. Summarizing the state of affairs in that discipline, New Testament scholar Dean Flemming writes, “Even today, one stream of scholarship tends to read Paul’s letters as witnesses to his Jewishness while another tries just as energetically to demonstrate the influence of Greco-Roman philosophy, rhetoric and social practice on Paul. Is he ‘Paul the Hebrew’ or ‘Paul the Hellenist’? ... Unfortunately, there is no simple solution, and the issue needs to be addressed on more than one plane. Consider Paul’s ‘worldview,’ the core assumptions through which he interprets his experience in the world. In spite of attempts by history-of-religion scholarship to paint Paul as a Hellenistic Jew of the Diaspora who thoroughly accommodated his thought to Greco-Roman religion, his worldview remained firmly rooted in Jewish soil.” (Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 120) Flemming and Skarsaune are seen to be largely in agreement, though Flemming’s analysis addresses both the Greek and Hebrew influences simultaneously, whereas Skarsaune focuses on the Hebrew element only. Thus Flemming can be seen to bridge Stead and Skarsaune’s positions in one work. It is important to notice that

precise nature of that relationship will be explored more extensively. This has direct application to the hypothesis of our study, since these cultural and worldview factors shaped the anthropological understanding of the Christian community.

At this point we would merely point out that the perspectives of Stead and Skarsaune are not as incompatible as they may at first appear. When Skarsaune points to the (Second Temple, Hellenized) Jewish character of the Christian creeds, he is emphasizing their essentially and characteristically *first century* Jewish Messianic core content. In contrast, Christopher Stead examines the same creeds from the perspective of how that core content was expressed in the linguistic and philosophical thought forms characteristic of the Greco-Roman worldview of Christian antiquity. Both perspectives are accurate; they identify the distinctive cultural and philosophical influences of the Jewish and Hellenistic influences, respectively. The precise nature of the relationship between the first century Messianic Jewish core message and the outwardly Hellenized manner of its theological expression is a complex topic which we will explore in greater detail throughout this study.

As Stead mentioned, while the degree of Platonic influence on early Christian theology is not doubted by any serious scholars,¹¹ nonetheless, the validity of the resulting Christian-Platonic

Skarsaune is not denying the Platonic or Hellenistic influence. Rather, he is arguing that Hellenistic thought was already an integral part of the Second Temple Jewish religious context from which Christianity emerged. Though Skarsaune does not use the language of missiology to describe this process, if we were to translate his argument into missiological terms, it might be argued that Skarsaune's assertion is that the Judaism during the Second Temple period was appropriately contextualized to its new cultural environment, when Israel was brought under the rule and cultural influence of the Seleucid and Roman Empires. In his own words, Skarsaune's point is that the Hellenistic influence "did not...destroy Judaism. On the contrary, it introduced a new vitality into the old heritage. Instead of... incorporating Judaism into Hellenistic culture on Greek terms, the strategy was... to incorporate elements from Hellenistic culture into Judaism – on the terms of the Torah. This was not a conscious, deliberate strategy; in fact, the Hasmoneans and the religious leaders of their time were hardly aware of the extent they were influenced by Hellenism in their very efforts to defend and express Judaism." (Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*, 35).

¹¹ Stead, *Christian Antiquity*, 80. For instance, Skarsaune is in agreement with Stead's assertion that the early Christian tradition has been thoroughly influenced by Hellenistic thought. Skarsaune is emphasizing that the primary source of Hellenistic influence on Christianity comes not through syncretism prior to or during the writing of the New Testament, but rather, had occurred previously. As an expert in Second Temple Judaism and its influence

theological synthesis is debated.¹² As a self-declared “lover of Augustine,” Stead considers Platonic philosophy to have been a “godsend” for Christian philosophers.¹³ Although scholars in other disciplines might not view that syncretistic development as favorably, still, it should be

on early Christianity, Skarsaune draw scholars’ attention to the fact that the Hellenistic elements of the New Testament are characteristic of the diverse Jewish context of the first century. For more on this topic, see any of Skarsaune’s works previously cited, as well as the works of other experts in Second Temple Judaism, such as Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, 2 vols., trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974). David Flusser comments that the close connection which exists between Second Temple Judaism and Christianity has often been overlooked “not only because of inveterate Christian inhibitions but also because it is a very rare case that a NT scholar can break the language barrier and move freely in the Hebrew and Aramaic sources of early Judaism.” (David Flusser in the Foreword to Brad Young’s *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), ix) David Flusser is professor emeritus of the Second Temple Period, Judaism and Early Christianity at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

¹² Our analysis in this chapter becomes somewhat complicated because we are assessing the Hellenistic influence on Christianity during Christian Antiquity to have been largely negative, whereas we consider the Hellenistic influence on Second Temple Judaism to have been a largely positive development. On the basis of the conclusions of Skarsaune, Hengel, Young, Flusser, and others, we are asserting that at the time of Christianity’s emergence from Judaism, at least for the specific strands of Judaism(s) from which Christianity developed, the fundamental worldview assumptions and anthropological model of the Hebrew Scriptures had been largely preserved, to that point. In contrast, the syncretism of Christianity and Platonic thought which occurred during Christian Antiquity (especially under the influence of Augustine of Hippo) will be demonstrated to be the turning point when the consistent biblical anthropology of the Hebrew and Greek testaments was replaced with a Greek Platonic model. Thus, in the terminology of contextualization studies in missiology, we will be asserting that the contextualization of Judaism during the Second Temple period can be judged to have been an *appropriate* contextualization of the Jewish tradition. This positive assessment is attributed to Second Temple Judaism because it retained the core content of the Hebraic worldview, as Skarsaune and others have demonstrated. In contrast, the contextualization of Christianity which took place during Christian Antiquity can be demonstrated to be a syncretistic accommodation to the implicit worldview assumptions of Greco-Roman thought. We consider this to have been inappropriate because the Augustinian synthesis of Platonic thought and Christian theology distorted significant core aspects of the Judeo-Christian worldview, especially its theological anthropology. Furthermore, moving beyond missiological criteria to a more broadly interdisciplinary perspective, we can also assess the validity of Second Temple Judaism’s anthropological model on the basis of scientific and philosophical criteria. If the Platonic anthropological model was now being validated and verified by empirical studies in contemporary neuroscience, then the Hellenization and Platonization of Christianity could be considered a positive development. However, in contrast, contemporary scientific investigation has radically undermined the Platonic anthropological model (see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) and has affirmed the holism and relational emphasis of the Hebraic, biblical model. This will be demonstrated in chapters two, five and six.

¹³ Stead, *Christian Antiquity*, 243. Stead comments that “Platonic ontology has proved a valuable support for Christian philosophers, and Christians have come to rely on it and take it for granted.” (Ibid.) Stead is not certain whether the introduction of Platonic philosophy was merely a “fortunate chance” or “literally a divine dispensation,” but either way he considers it to have been “a godsend.” (Ibid.) Nonetheless, Stead does recognize that Platonic ontology “formed no part of the original message of Christ or his Apostles.” (Ibid.) For our study, the key point is to emphasize the thoroughness with which Platonic philosophical categories came to be incorporated into the very structure and fabric of Christian theology. Of course, this could be argued to be the very nature of the gospel, which perhaps exists as a transcultural message waiting to be integrated into existing philosophical systems and human thought constructs. In any case, Stead writes that Platonic thought was “something that could be adopted and used and ultimately worked into the whole fabric of Christian orthodoxy.” (Ibid.)

acknowledged that the resulting synthesis greatly contributed to the spread of the Christian faith in its original Greco-Roman cultural context.¹⁴ However, subsequent cultural developments have now made that Platonic synthesis anachronistic. We would suggest that Platonism's continued influence on Christian theology may in fact be preventing the further spread of the gospel into many twenty-first century cultural contexts, both in the U.S., Europe, and abroad.¹⁵

While Stead and other fans of Augustinian theology may struggle to even conceive of a Christian philosophy “divorced from Platonism,”¹⁶ in this study we will be attempting exactly that. We will not have the opportunity to explore these possibilities in detail, but we will do our best to point them out as we proceed. For instance, Wesley's theological paradigm will be suggested as a key example. It is important that future research continues to search for alternative forms of Christian theology and praxis which are biblically based and appropriately contextualized for the present cultural environment, not previous ones.

It is worth considering the possibility that the church would be better off now without Plato's hierarchical tripartite anthropology. That model is very much wed to the intellectual model of modernity. The Platonic anthropological model brought with it a variety of rationalistic,

¹⁴ R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006).

¹⁵ We would argue that it is not only Western Christianity which was Hellenized. In turn, that influence has been felt in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and beyond. The Westernization of traditional cultures has occurred whenever and wherever Western missionaries carried Hellenized forms of Christianity with them. Nonetheless, counter examples are common throughout church history. An excellent example of an intentional effort to bring Christianity to Africa *without* Western philosophical accretions is Roman Catholic missionary Vincent Donovan (Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Notre Dame, IN: Claretian, 1978). Donovan discusses “the necessity of peeling away from the gospel the accretions of the centuries, and of Western, white, European, American culture, to get to the kernel of the gospel underneath.” (Ibid., 70) Numerically speaking, Donovan was hugely successful. Previous to his missionary work with the Masai, missionaries had been operating for over a hundred years only to produce a mere handful of converts. Within several years, many thousands of people came to faith in Christ through the work of Donovan. The relevance of Donovan's work for our study is that it demonstrates the value of separating pagan accretions to the Gospel in order to reveal what Donovan refers to as the “transcultural core” of the gospel.

¹⁶ Ibid., 244.

dualistic, and individualistic presuppositions which our study will show to be quite foreign to the gospel.¹⁷ Stead is certainly right to point out the profound difficulties faced in reconstructing a post-Augustinian, post-Platonic theology.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it may be necessary to make an attempt. There is little value in trying to crawl back into the invalidated anthropological assumptions of a prior age, when those assumptions came from extra-biblical sources.

¹⁷ Shults, *Anthropology*, 187-8.

¹⁸ Stead, *Christian Antiquity*, 244.

Chapter 2

The Hebraic Roots of Christianity and Its Repeated Recontextualization

We now turn our attention to the cultural forces that came to shape and form the theological paradigm of the first century Jewish renewal movement originally known simply as “the Way of The Lord.”¹ For many decades now, missiologists have recognized that the spread of the gospel to new cultural settings requires that the message be “contextualized” or “inculturated.”² This means that to be transmitted effectively across a linguistic and cultural divide, the transcultural truths of the gospel must be translated into the characteristic thought forms and linguistic structures of the human culture being evangelized.³

This is necessary because when people hear the gospel message proclaimed to them, their ability to comprehend and respond to that message depends significantly on the particular manner in which that message is verbally encoded and communicated to them.⁴ Ideally, the

¹ Throughout the book of Acts, and beyond, the early Christian community referred to themselves simply as “followers of the Way,” or “the Way of the Lord” or “the Way of God.” (Acts 9:1-2, 18:24-28, 19:9, 19:23, 22:4, 24:14, 24:22, and 2 Peter 2:2). According to Acts 11:26, it was only later, at Antioch, that the followers of the Way were first called “Christians.” Because of the semantic complexities surrounding the origins of the Christian movement, it seems appropriate at this point to define how we will be using the term “Christian” in this study. We have chosen to follow the straightforward definition provided by Skarsaune et al. who use the term “Christian” in what they suggest is likely the same sense as it was probably used in Acts 11:26. In that context, it appears to refer to “someone who holds Jesus to be the Χριστός, the Messiah.” (Oskar Skarsaune, “Jewish Believers in Jesus in Antiquity – Problems of Definition, Method, and Sources,” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 4).

² Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 19-35. For instance, Andrew Walls notes that “No one ever meets universal Christianity in itself: we only ever meet Christianity in a local form and that means a historically, culturally conditioned form. We need not fear this; when God became man he became historically, culturally conditioned man in a particular time and place.” (Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 235)

³ Ibid.

⁴ David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 158-180.

translation process will introduce as little distortion as possible to the transcultural content of the gospel message. The challenge for cross-cultural missionaries is that the linguistic categories of human languages subtly filter our perceptions of reality, shaping our beliefs and organizing our understanding of the world.⁵ Therefore, when the gospel is translated between cultures, the “purity” of the original message can easily be impacted during the cultural transmission process. This is particularly important to understand in relation to that unique moment in history when apostolic Christianity was first translated out of its original Jewish cultural context into the wider Greco-Roman world.

Scholars of early church history remind us that the first generations of Christ-followers viewed themselves merely as members of a renewal movement operating within the confines of Judaism.⁶ In its earliest stage of development, the incipient Christian movement did not yet consider itself to be a religion distinct from Judaism. Rather, they understood their Christ-centered community to be nothing more or less than the fulfillment of Jewish hopes, promises, and expectations.⁷ It was only later that Christianity would come to view itself as a separate and distinct religion, over and against Judaism.⁸

⁵ This insight was emphasized especially by the cultural anthropologists Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1921) and Benjamin L. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1956). For a thorough treatment of the relationship between language and worldview from an evangelical Christian perspective see Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, especially pp. 91-96 and 31-50, and also Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), especially pp. 97-100 and 153-159.

⁶ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 3. To give an example, church historian Richard A. Horsley writes that the Gospel of Mark “portrays Jesus carrying out a renewal of Israel over against (and in condemnation of) the rulers of Israel and their Roman patrons.” (Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 74) Furthermore, when viewed in light of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus’ mission can be seen to self-consciously follow the prophetic patterns set by Moses, Jeremiah, and the other Old Testament prophets. Cf. Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 126-224.

⁷ Tennent, *Theology*, 3.

A careful study of the book of Acts suggests that the transcultural nature of the gospel was far from obvious, at first, for the earliest Christ followers.⁹ In spite of Jesus' promise of a universal witness by his believers, mentioned in Acts 1:8, chapters one through five describe a Christian movement that was operating entirely within the ethnic and religious boundaries of the Jewish people.¹⁰ Dean Flemming suggests that at first, as seen in the first five chapters of the book of Acts, the Jerusalem believers seem to have unconsciously "inculturated"¹¹ the newness of the gospel message into their own Jewish heritage.¹² Nevertheless, even this early in the account of Acts that were already signs that the gospel would break out of the Jewish cultural mold, "overcoming [cultural] obstacles even during this early stage of close identification with Jewish culture."¹³

Flemming points out that it is only later in the Acts account, in chapters six through fifteen, where we see a clearer "actualization of the boundary-shattering work of the Spirit, as the gospel moves incrementally from a singularly Jewish to a multicultural sphere of influence."¹⁴

⁸ Stated succinctly, "For the first few years of the Jerusalem church, the Christians were all Jews." (Donald A. Hagner, "Paul as a Jewish Believer – According to His Letters," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 119)

⁹ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 30.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Inculturation," "contextualization," and "indigenization" are three closely related technical terms from the discipline of missiology. They represent slightly different positions but can be treated as being essentially synonymous, for our purposes. They refer to the manner in which the transcultural truths of the gospel are translated into the characteristic thought forms and linguistic structures of the various human cultures of the earth. (Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 33-34)

¹² Flemming, *Contextualization*, 30.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

Flemming writes eloquently about the process of repeated transmission across cultural boundaries which has occurred down through the centuries,

Like the rippling effect of a stone dropped into a pool of water, the witness of Jesus' disciples extends to ever-wider geographical areas and new people groups... The result is that fresh 'translations' of the gospel occur under the guidance of the Spirit as the word of God spans cultural, linguistic and religious boundaries.¹⁵

This paints a compelling word-picture of the process by which cultural diffusion and theological development of the church's self-identity took place throughout the history of the church. Our study will be particularly concerned with this process of cultural transmission of the gospel across linguistic and cultural divides. Specifically, we would point out that when the gospel was contextualized for the first time, there were some ways in which the translation process was healthy and appropriate, and other ways which led to a certain degree of inappropriate accommodation to the dominant culture, as will be seen shortly.¹⁶

The First Cross-Cultural Transmission of the Gospel

As recounted in the book of Acts, it was only after the martyrdom of Stephen that the gospel was first communicated cross-culturally to non-Jews. Prior to Antioch, it appears that Christianity (as we refer to it today) was merely one religious movement among many within the diverse Judaism(s) of the period.¹⁷ However, that would all begin to change in a single moment which is captured succinctly in two verses from the book of Acts.

¹⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹⁶ In particular, in this first translation process, we will be demonstrating that during the second through the fourth centuries, the Christian tradition came to gradually abandon the holistic relational theological anthropology which had previously been an inseparable component of its early Judeo-Christian heritage.

¹⁷ Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 55. This supports Tennent's observation that "the continuity between Judaism and Christianity [would have] seemed so seamless to the earliest believers that they would have never thought of themselves as changing their religion from Judaism to something else. They understood Christianity as the extension and fulfillment of their Jewish faith." (Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 3).

As a result of the persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen, we see the members of the early Christian community coming to be scattered “throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.” (Acts 8:1) With time, the dispersed members of the Christ-believing Jewish community came to share the gospel with fellow Jews, “as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.” (Acts 11:19a) It is important to note that the book of Acts is careful at this point to emphasize that the messianic message had, until that point, been proclaimed “only to Jews” (Acts 11:19b). It was only later that second generation converts to this new messianic faith, “men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and *began to speak to Greeks also*, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 11:20, italics added)

Thus, it would appear that it was only after the apostolic community was driven out of Jerusalem that some of its members began to share the Good News with the Diaspora Jews in Antioch.¹⁸ Luke’s account in the book of Acts then shows that it was these bicultural, second-generation, Christ-believing Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene who were the first to share the gospel with Gentiles.¹⁹ Emphasizing the significance of this event, New Testament scholar Timothy Tennent writes that Acts 11:19-20 refers to what is certainly “one of the most important missiological moments in the entire New Testament.”²⁰

However, the significance of that event is easily overlooked, for a variety of reasons. One

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ It should be noted that J.T. Sanders, among others, is critical of the possibility of using Acts as a source for the historical situation in Antioch. However, a number of other scholars (W.A. Meeks, R.L. Wilken, J.P. Meier, F.W. Morris, B. Zetterholm, and others) consider the Acts account to be historically reliable. We would tend to agree with the latter group. In any case, whether Acts 11:19-20 is historical (as evangelical scholars would tend to assert) or is merely a fictional account (as more liberal leaning scholars might be inclined to assert), even in the latter case the Acts account would still be describing the basic contours of how the first cross-cultural transmission of the gospel is likely to have taken place. It seems most probable that the mission to the Gentiles would be initiated by bicultural, Greek-speaking, Jesus-believing Jews, which is exactly how the Acts account describes it (Zetterholm, *Formation of Christianity in Antioch*, 88). Zetterholm provides significant social-scientific evidence in defense of the historicity of the account in Acts 11:19-20.

²⁰ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 3.

issue is the historic anti-Semitism of the Christian church, and the resulting desire to avoid emphasis on the thoroughly Jewish character of the earliest Christian tradition.²¹ An even more significant factor, however, is the profound influence semantics exerts on our worldviews, mostly at an unconscious level.²²

It will be worthwhile, therefore, to carefully explore some of the subtle connotations implicit in commonly used terminology. This is important because of our tendency to project our own contemporary Western understanding of Christianity onto the originally apostolic Jewish context. Throughout our analysis we will be observing the ways in which the underlying worldview of the early Christian tradition, which included a Hebraic understanding of theological anthropology, only later came to be replaced with a (Platonic) Hellenized understanding of the nature of the human person. It appears that when Christianity was transplanted out of its Jewish “cultural soil,” so to speak, it came to pick up various aspects of the dominant Hellenistic worldview, including its Platonic anthropology and Platonic rational-control model of moral psychology.²³

²¹ New Testament scholar James C. Paget comments that there is now a “much greater emphasis scholars are...willing to place upon Christianity’s Jewish heritage. This emphasis has been present within scholarship for a long time, but in recent times it has become notably prominent, in part stimulated by its post-holocaust setting, in part inspired by a recognition of Jewish diversity.” (James C. Paget, “The Definition of the Terms *Jewish Christian* and *Jewish Christianity* in the History of Research,” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 22-52). See also Brad H. Young, *Jesus: The Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), xv.

²² This is of particular relevance to our study, since it will be shown that a characteristically Hebraic or Semitic theological anthropology is more consistent with the biblical studies evidence and also the conclusions being reached through empirical (scientific) study of human nature. Thus the present study is found to support the conclusions of scholars like Skarsaune, Hagner, Paget, Reed, Young, Zetterholm, Flemming, and others, who emphasize the thoroughly Jewish characteristics of the early Christian community, and the biblical texts.

²³ Steven Porter, “Wesleyan Theological Methodology as a Theory of Integration,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32 no 3 (2004): 190-199. The effect of the Platonic moral psychology on Christian theology will be examined specifically towards the end of our study. At that point, it will be shown that the moral psychology model introduced by John Wesley has been validated by contemporary discoveries in cognitive neuroscience.

Chapter 3

Terminological Difficulties in Describing the NT Christian Community

New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn has commented that it is hardly surprising that many people brought up in Protestant Christianity think of Judaism as being essentially “the antithesis of Christianity.”¹ This belief is widespread because of the powerful shaping effect that the dominant culture’s conceptual categories exert on all our thought processes.² Those of us who have been raised within Western culture naturally encounter within our minds ready-formed semantic categories which almost irresistibly lead us to conceptualize the adjectives “Jewish” and “Christian” as if they were intrinsically contradictory.³

New Testament scholar Anders Runesson comments on the power which semantics exerts in the fields of New Testament studies and church history. He writes that the influence of semantic categories can easily lead scholars to conceptualize the early Christian community in simplistic terms. For example, in the field of Matthean studies, scholars tend to think “in terms of binary opposites, whereby *Jesus and the disciples/the Mattheans/ Christianity/the church* are at

¹ James D.G. Dunn, “Was Paul Against the Law? The Law in Galatians and Romans: A Test-Case of Text in Context,” pp. 455-475 in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts: Essays in Honor of Lars Hartman*, ed. T. Fornberg and D. Hellholm, (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 455. Similarly, Zetterholm comments that Judaism has often been pictured as the ultimate contradiction of Christianity (Zetterholm, *Formation of Christianity in Antioch*, 1).

² According to missiologists and cultural anthropologists, the deepest level of a culture’s worldview is comprised of its conceptual categories, logical systems, and epistemological paradigms (Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 33). Each of these three “core” or “deep structure” dimensions of a culture’s worldview function to powerfully shape the more superficial levels of the culture, such as the belief systems and thought processes of the people. This topic will be explored in more detail shortly. For now, we would merely observe the profound ways in which seemingly simple conceptual categories have caused us to reify religious categories, as if the descriptors “Christian” and “Jewish” referred to real phenomena that were actively opposed and contradictory to one another.

³ Anders Runesson, “Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic Intragroup Conflict,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 no 1 (2008): 95-132, at 99.

one end of the spectrum, and *Jews/Israel/Judaism/the synagogue* at the other.”⁴ This leads many scholars to simplistically perceive early Christianity as being a homogeneous and independent religious phenomenon, which can then be compared and contrasted with “Judaism.” Because of the power of semantics on our conceptual processes, both Christianity and Judaism can be easily assumed to be singular, monolithic, and opposed to one another. However, regardless of how common sense these conceptual categories might appear at first glance, Runesson insists that a “close reading of the Gospel...suggests that such distinctions are not found in the text, but rather [are] imposed on it from other ancient or modern sources.”⁵

This reminds us that the categories and conceptual schemes which comprise our worldview tend to exert profound influence on all our hermeneutical endeavors. This influence is felt both in our efforts to rightly interpret Scripture, and more broadly, in our attempts to correctly discern the nature of reality. Runesson comments that “while it is human to think in categories and concepts, these tend to create boxes limiting our horizons.”⁶ Access to the truth, therefore, seems to require a significant degree of epistemological humility, if we desire to see beyond the distorting power of our human worldviews and their conceptual categories and linguistic structures. Throughout this study we will be particularly concerned with this discussion of how worldview factors and semantic distinctions are influencing every aspect of our theological self-understanding.

The Distorting Influence of Semantics on our Understanding of Early Christianity

Recognizing the power of terminology to shape our thought processes, scholars have

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Runesson, “Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations,” 99.

searched for a term which can best describe the first few generations of the early Christian community. Unfortunately, no consensus has been reached and none appears forthcoming. Nonetheless, it is worth briefly summarizing the ongoing debate, because it gives insight into the complex cultural factors which were active as Christianity was first taking form.

One suggestion of terminology to describe the earliest stage of Christian belief is the phrase “Jewish Christianity.”⁷ This is a particularly apt descriptor for the phase of Christ-belief that preceded the “parting of the ways” of Judaism and Christianity.⁸

⁷ This term was popularized by the Tübingen School in the 19th century by F.C. Baur and his successors. In their use of the term, they tended to strongly contrast Pauline and Jewish Christian factions in their research (Paget, “The Definition of the Terms *Jewish Christian* and *Jewish Christianity*,” 35). Later, various scholars challenged that perspective, including the 20th century French scholar Jean Danielou (Ibid., 41). Danielou attempted to broaden the definition of Jewish Christianity, suggesting that in the early church there existed three types of Jewish Christianity: 1) the Ebionites, 2) orthodox Jewish Christians, like the disciples in Jerusalem who were Jews by birth, and 3) a third type of Jewish Christianity which he identified as “a type of Christian thought expressing itself in forms borrowed from Judaism.” (Jean Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. and ed. by J.A. Baker (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1964), 9). Thus the Apostle Paul, although by no means a Jewish Christian in the first two senses of the term, would have been considered to be a Jewish Christian in the third sense, as were a number of other Christian leaders. This assertion would be supported by a wide variety of scholars, include E.P. Sanders, Oskar Skarsaune, etc. Paget comments that what Danielou had accomplished was to make clear how important and widespread the influence of Judaism was upon the Christianity of the first century, and beyond. This was something that most of the Tübingen scholars had acknowledged, but unlike many of them, Danielou straightforwardly termed the Christianity so influenced as “Jewish Christianity” (Paget, “The Definition of the Terms *Jewish Christian* and *Jewish Christianity*,” 35). However, it is important to note that Danielou’s typology may be best understood as identifying a particular *religious atmosphere* which was prevalent at the time of Christian origins, rather than identifying three distinct religious movements (Ibid.). Therefore Danielou’s third type of Jewish Christianity emphasizes the widespread “first form of Christian theology [which was] expressed in Jewish-Semitic forms,” (Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 10). Even though Danielou’s typology may be simplistic, in some ways, and at times vague as to whether it referred to a distinct group like the Ebionites or a general religious atmosphere, nonetheless, we find Danielou’s perspective helpful. Our study will be entirely focused on Danielou’s “third type,” which can be considered to be the primary source from which the Roman Catholic and Protestant expressions of Christianity would later emerge. It is important to recognize that other scholars use the same term, “Jewish Christianity,” to refer to distinct Judaizing movements within Christianity, which is confusing. We will not be discussing specific Jewish Christian groups, but rather will emphasize the Jewish character of biblical Christianity.

⁸ This occurred sometime in the late first century or early second century, or perhaps later. We will not be addressing the “parting of the ways” in any depth in our analysis. It is a highly complex debate. For further information on that issue see James D.G. Dunn, ed., *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1999); and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Boyarin and others have challenged some of the assumptions underlying Dunn’s broadly influential work. In any case, despite the difficulty in determining how quickly and completely the schism may have developed, Zetterholm cuts to the heart of the matter when he succinctly states that while “Christianity certainly was a variety of Judaism [at some point it] definitely ceased to be so.” (Zetterholm, *Formation of Christianity in Antioch*, 2) The dating of the split is widely debated, and is not of direct relevance to our study.

However, we should mention that while the term “Jewish Christianity” may function well as a general descriptor, nonetheless, a number of influential scholars have criticized that label. For instance, Runesson has pointed out that the term ‘Jewish Christianity’ tends “to obscure what [it is] intended to denote, namely, a belief in Jesus as the Messiah embodied in communities existing within the religious system of Judaism.”⁹ Nonetheless, if used in “a vague sense,” not referring to a distinct movement but rather to a characteristic religious atmosphere, then the term “Jewish Christianity” can be argued to be the most useful descriptor. According to Paget, “the period of church history up to the Bar Kokhba revolt could be described as the Jewish Christian period of the church’s history, as distinct from the Hellenistic and Latin periods.”¹⁰ We will be using the term in this sense.

As we will see, even the subtle details of these kinds of semantic debates are significant, because of our human tendency to unconsciously project contemporary Western cultural assumptions onto the early Christian community. When we do so, we significantly distort the image of early Christianity, remaking it into our own image. This creates a feedback loop, of

⁹ For that reason, another term suggested by scholars to describe the first generations of the Christian community is Anthony Saldarini’s phrase “Christian Judaism(s).” In some ways this may be an improvement over “Jewish Christianity,” because it better highlights the diversity of the early Christian movement(s), while also emphasizing their common origin within the boundaries of the complex diversity of the Judaism(s) of the first century. See Anthony Saldarini, *Matthews Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). In any case, the key points to recognize are that scholars are in broad agreement that the Judaism of the first century CE was “a complex, diversified phenomenon.” (Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch*, 55). Furthermore, the early ‘Jewish Christian’ community was also quite diverse: “there existed not a single phenomenon, Jewish Christianity, but several Jewish Christianities.” (Marcel Simon, *Versus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire AD 135-425* (London: Littman Library, 1986), 240).

¹⁰ Paget, “*Jewish Christian and Jewish Christianity*,” 41. We will be following Paget’s use of the term, as a preferred way of referring to the earliest phase of Christ-belief, prior to the Hellenistic and Latin periods of Church history, which we will be investigating in chapter two. Nonetheless, we do acknowledge that the term is potentially confusing. Still, we find it adequate for our purposes here, where our primary goal is simply to demonstrate the characteristically Hebraic theological tone of the early Christian community, and the New Testament itself. Nonetheless, we will freely use other terminology as well. Hopefully this will help reduce the “semantic noise” which arises from the use of any particular terminology, since any and all terms tend to constrain our conceptual understanding, because of the shaping effect of linguistic categories on our conceptual process.

sorts, as our own cultural assumptions about human nature, the church, and the gospel come to be reflected back at us eisegetically, when we read Scripture or read Patristic and other sources.

Runesson's warning needs to be heeded closely. It is important for scholars to be extremely cautious about the power of unconscious assumptions which are an implicit component of every culture's worldview, including our own. These preunderstandings can too easily be projected onto the texts, even when the assumptions are totally foreign to the character of the biblical texts. This process of projecting our own experience of contemporary Western/American Christianity onto the early biblical and apostolic tradition is particularly problematic when we recall that the early Christian tradition had not yet become Westernized (i.e., thoroughly Hellenized and modernized). In the same way that White European culture tends to re-imagine Jesus in our own image (as a light-skinned, blond-haired, blue-eyed man), similarly, it is all too easy for contemporary Western Christian scholars to project other aspects of our worldview and faith onto the source materials. As difficult as it may be for us, it is important to remember that at the time of the writing of the New Testament, Christianity was still thoroughly Hebraic in many, if not most, of its core philosophical assumptions.¹¹

¹¹ Concerning the Hebraic or Semitic character of the New Testament, three articles that are particularly strong are: Flemming, *Contextualization*; Reed, "How Semitic was John?"; and Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*.

Chapter 4

The Theological Anthropology of the Hebrew and Greek Testaments

As was mentioned in passing in the introduction, bible scholars have reached a general consensus that the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament both possess a holistic, relational model of the human person.¹ That topic has been well summarized elsewhere.² In our analysis, we will focus our attention on four key biblical anthropological terms, in both their Greek and Hebrew forms. This provides insight into the holistic, relational anthropology of the biblical texts, which is now being verified empirically by contemporary research in cognitive neuroscience.

A key point to be made is that, biblically, the human person is not seen to consist of two (or three or more) autonomous, discrete parts, as the Christian tradition has commonly assumed under the influence of Platonic anthropological assumptions.³ For instance, Green insists that in Scripture “we find no room for segregating the human person into discrete, constitutive ‘parts,’ whether ‘bodily’ or ‘spiritual’ or ‘communal.’”⁴ In contrast to the reductionism of the Platonic-

¹ F. Leron Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, 175.

² See for example, Joel B. Green, “‘Bodies – That is, Human Lives’: A Re-Examination of Human Nature in the Bible,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, ed. Warren S. Brown, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 149-73, and Colin Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology, and Anthropology,” in *Persons: Divine and Human*, ed. C. Schwöbel and C. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clar, 1991), 47-61.

³ Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 13. Nonetheless, despite the general consensus which has been achieved, “a threefold division of the human person [still] attracts a few champions today.” (Ibid.) Furthermore, Green asserts that outside of scholarly circles, a trichotomous view continues to be quite prevalent. This is particularly true of some popular Christian circles, especially among charismatics, where the influence of Watchman Nee’s trichotomous Platonic-influenced anthropology is “enormous.” (Ibid.)

⁴ Ibid., 49.

influenced tripartite model,⁵ contemporary biblical scholarship suggests that the human person is best viewed as a complex “living whole.”⁶ Furthermore, the biblical witness asserts that humanity is not only holistic in nature, but that human beings by nature are set within a relational nexus, at the center of which is God.⁷

In some ways, Pauline anthropology can perhaps be viewed as a microcosm of the field of biblical studies. Summarizing recent developments in the field of Pauline studies, Joel B. Green comments,

If, until the onset of the twentieth century, Pauline anthropology was understood in dichotomous (body-soul) or even trichotomous (body-soul-spirit) terms, the same could not be said by mid-century or subsequently. Credit for this transformation is due especially to the authority of Bultmann, whose [holistic] reading dominated subsequent discussion.⁸

Green is pointing out the holistic anthropological perspective which has now become well accepted in the field of Pauline studies. These topics are perhaps more amenable to study within the Pauline corpus, but similar conclusions are being reached in Old Testament studies as well.

For instance, almost thirty years ago Brevard Childs’ asserted that the Hebrew Scriptures use a variety of different anthropological terms, each of which views humanity from a different perspective.⁹ Thus for Childs, observing the Old Testament, and Bultmann, examining Paul’s

⁵ It should be noted that while Plato’s threefold division of the human psyche was maintained, in the trichotomous Christian anthropology of the Augustinian synthesis, the constituent elements were adapted to conform with the three biblical anthropological terms mentioned in 1 Thess. 5:23. Thus the Christian trichotomous anthropology consists of three discrete parts: 1) a physical body (the seat of Plato’s passions); 2) a rational soul (reason, emotion, will); and 3) an immortal soul (that relates to God). (James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 127) This blending of biblical and Platonic characteristics fits the pattern of synthesis described by Christopher Stead earlier in this chapter.

⁶ Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 4.

⁷ Ibid., 9. Green argues that our relational context places us necessarily in relation with God, and with one another. Furthermore, in Green’s analysis, God’s activity of drawing humanity to himself is seen to constitute the basis for humanity’s openness to God, and with other humans (Ibid.).

⁸ Ibid., 5.

writings, in both cases a human being does "not *have* a soul, but *is* a soul."¹⁰ Or, in other words, the human person is "a complete entity and not a composite of parts from body, soul and spirit."¹¹ As Shults has affirmed, these statements by Childs have come to represent the scholarly consensus concerning not only the Old Testament, and Pauline Studies, but the rest of the New Testament as well.¹²

The characteristically holistic, relational anthropology we have been discussing to this point has been affirmed by nearly every source consulted in this study, except for three authors who are strong advocates of substance dualism.¹³ However, even those authors emphasize the relational character of the biblical anthropology. Furthermore, they also emphasize holism, but it is a "holistic dualism," to use their own phrase. In refutation of their position, Shults asserts that "Theologians who still cling to anthropological [substance] dualism appear to be motivated primarily by the desire to maintain belief in the survival of the person after death [prior to a bodily resurrection at Christ's Second Coming]."¹⁴ That appears to be the motivating factor for them. In any case, we see no need to affirm either monism or dualism concerning the nature of the human person. In both cases, acknowledging the thoroughly holistic nature of the biblical treatment of the human person, all the scholars, whether dualists or non-reductive physicalists,

⁹ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 199.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Shults, *Anthropology*, 167.

¹³ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person* and Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*. Nonetheless, Beck and Demarest can still be seen to support the relational nature of biblical anthropology. However, their attachment to historical Christianity's substance dualism prevents them from more fully recognizing the holistic nature of biblical anthropology.

¹⁴ Shults, *Anthropology*, 184. The concerns of Beck, Demarest, and Cooper will be addressed briefly, elsewhere. We are not actually concerned with proving or disproving substance dualism. It is a contested issue. We would prefer to speak to both groups. Our conclusions herein should be acceptable to both sets of scholars.

are in agreement concerning the *functional* holism of the entire human person.¹⁵

Concerning the irreducibly holistic nature of the human person, New Testament scholar Klaus Berger has written that the New Testament texts “know nothing of a bifurcation of the human being into separate categories...”¹⁶ In the world of the New Testament, many of the polarities contemporary Westerners take for granted simply do not exist as such. Berger reminds us that in the biblical texts, there is no such thing as a dichotomous polarity between body and soul, visible and invisible, knowledge and behavior, or faith and works. Berger insists that these polarities cannot be found to exist *as such* in the biblical texts.¹⁷ Instead, these apparently “contrasting” categories (to modern eyes) can be seen in the biblical witness to unambiguously “resist differentiation in Scripture, with the one merging into the other.”¹⁸ For Berger, the holism of the biblical witness emphasizes the fundamental category of embodied relationality, which is implicit to the theological anthropology of the New Testament.¹⁹

Similarly, in the latter part of the Twentieth Century, Old Testament scholar Hans Walter Wolff demonstrated that a variety of Hebrew anthropological terms refer to the whole person, as he or she attends to the other, the self, and God.²⁰ For instance, in a general sense, the word

¹⁵ For instance, substance dualists Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce Demarest assert that “The whole person is a complex unity composed of two distinct entities, soul and body, intimately interacting with one another. Neither of them is the whole person, yet either part can stand figuratively for the whole person... Although body and spirit are separate entities ontologically, in this life they are intricately united. [Yet,] For metaphysical purposes... a human being is composed of an *interacting dichotomy* of spirit and body.” (Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987-94), 2:148) In other words, the human person is functionally holistic (based on how it is described in Scripture), but they continue to insist on the ontologically dualistic nature of the human person, for theological purposes.

¹⁶ Klaus Berger, *Identity and Experience in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ This section is based on the research of Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 10-58. However, whenever possible, more recent corroborating

nephesh refers to all biological life.²¹ More specifically, when applied to human beings, *nephesh* describes the “life principle” or “life-force” which gives life to the human body (see, for example, Lev. 17:11; 26:16; Ps. 19:7; Isa 42:5; and Jonah 2:7).²² In relation to humanity, the term is best understood as referring precisely to the *whole* person, as she or he is viewed as a living, desiring being.²³

A similarly holistic, relational semantic context is encountered for the other Hebrew anthropological terms used in the Old Testament. For instance, the word *basar* is usually translated with the English word “flesh.” Biblically, this Hebrew term refers to the whole person, under the aspect of “embodiedness.”²⁴ The word *basar* also applies to the human person in a particular kinship relation (Gen. 37:27), or to the overall weakness of the human person in dependence on God (Job 34:14-15).²⁵ These secondary meanings also emphasize the relational orientation of the Hebrew anthropological terms.

The holistic character of Hebrew anthropology is also demonstrated in the biblical usage

support will be given from more recent scholarship. Also, we will attempt to make our case, as much as possible, citing the conclusions of Beck and Demarest, who are the most theologically conservative scholars consulted. They are strongly opposed to the relational anthropology of Shults, especially, but are still in agreement about the holistic nature of the human person, and the relational orientation of the biblical anthropological terms, but for theological reasons, seem unable to bring themselves to question substance dualism. Their critique of the approach of Shults and other “existentialists” is found in Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 305ff.

²¹ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 131.

²² Ibid.

²³ Shults, *Anthropology*, 175-6. According to Beck and Demarest, in its broadest meaning the word *nephesh* refers comprehensively as a “living being, or the whole person.” This is seen particularly in Gen. 2:7; 9:5; Ps. 6:3; 63:1; 104:1; Ezek. 18:4, 20. (Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 130) More precisely, its usage in Scripture can be seen to relate to the integration of all interior functions of the human person. As such, the *nephesh* is understood to be the seat of the intellect, the will, and the emotions, especially in relations with other people. Scripturally, it is seen to function variously: as the seat of the intellect (1 Sam. 2:35; Prov. 2:10), memory (Lam. 3:20), volition (Gen 23:8), love (Song 3:1-4), desires (Ps. 10:3; Prov. 21:10), emotions (Deut. 28:65; 1 Sam. 1:10; Job 7:11; Ps. 6:3; 42:5, 11), hope (Ps 33:20), and religious life (Ps. 42:1-2; 84:2; 143:6), including worship (Ps. 25:1; 104:1). (Ibid., 131)

²⁴ Shults, *Anthropology*, 176.

²⁵ Ibid.

of the word *lēb* (“heart”).²⁶ This term is sometimes used to refer to the physical organ of the heart, as in Psalm 38:10 and Jeremiah 4:19.²⁷ However, more commonly, it is used in reference to the whole human person, and as such, this is a key biblical term used to describe the human self.²⁸ According to Wolff, *lēb* is “the most important word in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology.”²⁹ It describes the whole person (Ps. 22:26), or “the core of the inner life of the person,” as used, for example, in Exod. 7:3, 13; Ps. 9:1; Jer. 17:9.³⁰ As such, it refers to the volitional seat of the human person. In other words, in biblical usage, the “‘heart’ can be considered to be like a hidden control-center of the whole human being.”³¹ In this way, the word *lēb* typically refers to the center or unity of the various aspects of the self (Ps. 27:8; Prov. 3:5).³²

A similarly holistic connotation is found to the Hebrew word *rûach*.³³ In a general sense, it is used to refer to the wind (Gen. 8:1; Amos 4:13), physical breath (Job 9:18; Ps. 135:17), or the Spirit of God (Ps. 51:11; 106:33; Isa 42:1).³⁴ When applied to humans, it is most often translated as “breath” or “spirit,” whether this expresses how people are willing (Ezra 1:5; Ps

²⁶ This term is used 598 times in the Old Testament (as *lēb*) and another 252 times as *lēbāb* (Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 133).

²⁷ Shults, *Anthropology*, 176.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Wolff, *Anthropology*, 40. John Wesley seems to have picked up on this. This is reflected in the way in which his theological anthropology and entire theological paradigm revolves around the importance of “heart religion.”

³⁰ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 133.

³¹ John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 42.

³² Shults, *Anthropology*, 176. Often *lēb* points to the intellectual (Prov. 15:14; 1 Sam. 25:37; Job 12:3) or ethical operation of the self (Exod. 35:21; Deut. 10:16; Job 34:10; Prov. 24:30, 32; 1 Kgs. 11:3, 4) in relation to the community or to God.

³³ *Rûach* occurs 378 times in the Old Testament (Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 131).

³⁴ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 131.

51:10), feeling (Judges 8:3, Job 15:13), or simply existing in relation to God (Isa. 42:5).³⁵ Here also the holism of the Hebrew term is evident in the way that whole persons are empowered, or “stirred,” by the Spirit that gives life.³⁶ The result of empowerment by the Spirit is that whole persons become oriented toward worshipful recognition of their dependence on God.³⁷ This draws further attention to the highly relational nature of Hebrew anthropology.

When we turn to the New Testament, the same holism is also evident. As a result, New Testament scholars are increasingly interpreting the Greek anthropological terms *pneuma* (“spirit”), *psyche* (“soul”), *kardia* (“heart”), and even *soma* (“body”) as referring to the whole person, under different aspects of the person’s existence in relation to others.³⁸ For instance, in the Gospels, it has been observed that while Jesus himself does not appear to develop an explicit anthropology, he addresses *whole persons* and calls them to a new relation to God which “transforms all of their embodied conscious life.”³⁹ This demonstrates a holistic, relational anthropology that is evident in the Gospel accounts. This is similar to the characteristic theological anthropology of the Hebrew Scriptures, as interpreted by contemporary scholarship.

The extent to which Paul’s anthropology was shaped by both Greek and Hebrew understandings of humanity has been the subject of much debate in New Testament scholarship. It is often observed that Paul uses the terms “spirit” (*pneuma*) and “soul” (*psychē*) in a way that

³⁵ See Wolff, *Anthropology*, 34-35.

³⁶ Shults, *Anthropology*, 176.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. Beck and Demarest comment that through study of biblical anthropological terms, “it quickly becomes clear that considerable fluidity and overlap of meanings occur among the biblical words best translated ‘soul,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘heart,’ ‘body,’ and ‘flesh.’” (Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 136). They assert this to be true of both the Hebrew and Greek terms.

³⁹ Shults, *Anthropology*, 176.

is closer to the Hebraic model than any other.⁴⁰ Likewise, Paul uses the Greek term *pneuma* similarly to the way the Hebrew term *rûach* is used in the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul seems to be using this Greek term to describe the vital principle that animates the person, empowering the “mental” processes which contemporary English-speakers refer to as feeling, thinking and willing.⁴¹ Furthermore, in line with the characteristically relational character of Hebrew anthropology, Paul uses the Greek term *pneuma* in a way that emphasizes human dependence on God for life.⁴² In a similarly holistic tone, the Gospel of John uses the Greek anthropological term *pneuma* to describe the whole person as he or she is called to honor and worship God “in spirit” (John 4:23-24).⁴³

Summarizing the New Testament usage of Greek anthropological terms, Udo Schnelle has demonstrated that the terms *kardia*, *psychē*, *nous*, and *ho esō anthrōpos* (“the inner man or woman”) all refer to the center of the whole human self.⁴⁴ He writes, “As the ‘innermost’ organ the heart [*kardia*] defines the whole person.”⁴⁵ The person in relation to Christ “believes” in her or his heart (2 Cor. 3:14-16), and the Spirit of the Son is sent into her or his heart (Gal. 4:6). Feelings and emotions are also ascribed to the heart (2 Cor. 2:4, 7:3).⁴⁶

Similarly holistic in its usage in the New Testament is the term *psychē*, which is used in

⁴⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 76. See also the treatment in N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 252-56.

⁴¹ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 136.

⁴² Shults, *Anthropology*, 176-7.

⁴³ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 136.

⁴⁴ Udo Schnelle, *The Human Condition: Anthropology in the Teachings of Jesus, Paul, and John*, trans. O.C. Dean Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 103.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

reference to the life of the person in its entirety, as in Romans 2:8 and 13:1. Similarly, the Pauline blessing of 1 Thess. 5:23 (“may your spirit and soul and body...”) should not be interpreted as the evidence of a trichotomous Hellenistic anthropology in Scripture. Instead, Schnelle suggests that this passage is “emphasizing that the sanctifying work of God concerns the whole person.”⁴⁷

Similar care for the holistic nature of biblical use of anthropological terms should be used when interpreting Paul’s exhortation to the Romans to be transformed “by the renewing of your minds” (12:2). The *nous* that is in need of renewal is addressed to the activity of the whole person as he or she discerns God’s call. It also appears to be used holistically. Although Paul frequently adopts the distinction between the “outer person” (*exō anthrōpos*) and the “inner person” (*esō anthrōpos*) from Greek philosophy, his appropriation does not necessitate substance dualism but simply addresses “the one [unitary] existence of believers from different perspectives.”⁴⁸

Since the mid-twentieth century, most scholars have acknowledged Rudolf Bultmann’s point that Paul uses the term *sōma* (body) in a way that represents the whole person, as an embodied being.⁴⁹ In his own words, Bultmann asserted that “Man, his person as a whole, can be denoted by *soma*... Man is called *soma* in respect to his being able to make himself the object of his own action or to experience himself as the subject to whom something happens.”⁵⁰ In his analysis of the term *sōma*, as used throughout 1 Corinthians, E. Earle Ellis argues that “it is because Paul regards the body as the person and the person as the physical body that he insists on

⁴⁷ Schnelle, *The Human Condition*, 104.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁹ Shults, *Anthropology*, 177. For a discussion of scholarly reception of Bultmann’s thesis, see Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 56 and 61.

⁵⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1951-55), I:195.

the resurrection of the body, placing it at the *parousia* of Christ in which personal redemption is coupled to and is a part of the redemption-by-transfiguration of the whole physical cosmos.”⁵¹

This perspective is true of other Pauline letters as well, such as Romans 8:19-23.⁵²

Although Paul makes the distinction – paradigmatically in Romans 8 – between living according to the “flesh” (*sarx*) and according to the “spirit” (*pneuma*), it is important to note that this language does not necessarily imply substance dualism,⁵³ nor a functional anthropological dualism. The “spiritual” person is one whose whole self is oriented towards the Spirit, whereas the “fleshly” person is one whose whole self is oriented toward fulfilling the passion of worldly desire (cf. Rom. 8:16; 1 Cor. 2:10-11; 6:17).⁵⁴

This holistic, relational anthropology is also found in Hebrews. Anthony Thiselton argues that the author of Hebrews does not seem to think of *sōma* as being one component of human nature over against the soul. Rather, Hebrews uses the term for an explicit theological purpose – to refer to the relationality of the whole person “as called into a temporal movement toward salvation,” as they are related to others and to God.⁵⁵

Overall, then, Scripture depicts the human person as a dynamic unity. This functional anthropological unity is considered from various perspectives in Scripture, using various terms such as “soul,” “spirit,” “mind,” “heart,” “body,” and “flesh.”⁵⁶ The Platonic anthropological assumptions of ancient theologians led them to focus on a tripartite anthropology, but this is a

⁵¹ E. Earle Ellis, *Christ and the Future in New Testament History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 177.

⁵² Shults, *Anthropology*, 178.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Anthony Thiselton, “Human Being, Relationality, and Time in Hebrews, 1 Corinthians and the Western Tradition,” *Ex Auditu* 13 (1997):76-95 at 77.

⁵⁶ Shults, *Anthropology*, 178.

projection of their own assumptions onto the text, not the result of careful hermeneutical or exegetical study. Nonetheless, distinguishing the various aspects or components of human relationality is important. However, the Bible seems to be primarily concerned with the salvation of the whole person, in community, in relation to God.⁵⁷ The Bible seems to have little, if any, regard for our Western, scientific concern with identifying and delineating the various component parts of the human person. Scripture is not very amenable to the type of reductionistic analysis which is particularly attractive to the style of thought of contemporary (and ancient!) thinkers in the Western tradition.

Nonetheless, nearly two millennia of Greek philosophical influence has trained Western theologians to view human nature from the perspective of a rigid typology based on dichotomous or trichotomous Greek anthropological constructs. In contrast to that tendency, contemporary biblical scholarship reveals a Scriptural understanding of human nature which is much more fluid than the Christian theological tradition has often recognized. Viewed from the perspective of our (Greek-influenced) systematic theologies, there are a very large number of problematic, seemingly “messy” or contradictory passages in Scripture, where anthropological terms are used in seemingly “strange and bizarre” ways.⁵⁸ These examples function powerfully to point out the failure of our rigid modern Western anthropological models to properly correspond to the biblical understanding of theological anthropology. At least that was the case, prior to the discovery in the late twentieth century of the holistic, relational nature of the biblical anthropologies of both testaments.

Beck and Demarest list a number of Scripture passages that draw attention to the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 136.

weaknesses of the outdated Platonic anthropological model. For instance, in Job 7:11, Isaiah 26:9 and Luke 1:46-47 the terms *soul* and *spirit* are used in parallel to refer to the same reality. Elsewhere, we find *soul* and *spirit* used either interchangeably (compare John 12:27 with 13:21 and Hebrews 12:23 with Revelation 6:9), or as quasi-synonyms (Hebrews 4:12).⁵⁹ This usage is less contradictory to our common sense than is Deuteronomy 6:5 and 10:12, where the terms for *soul* and *heart* are used as quasi-synonyms. The same pattern is found with *heart* and *flesh* in Psalm 73:26. Elsewhere, *spirit* and *heart* are sometimes used to describe the same reality, as in Deuteronomy 2:30. Taken together, all of these examples make it clear that the principal anthropological terms used in Scripture do not appear to correspond well with the anthropological assumptions of modernity, or postmodernity for that matter. This makes it particularly difficult to translate a biblical anthropology directly into terms that are easily comprehended from within our contemporary Western worldview. Therefore we would like to suggest that the problem may be with the Western worldview, not a supposed “sloppiness” or “imprecision” of the biblical texts.

Functionally, then, the entirety of Scripture – and most especially the Hebrew portion of the Bible – is seen to depict the human person *operationally* as a unified whole.⁶⁰ A variety of terms are used to emphasize different aspects of this complex functional unity. This is a common pattern in Scripture, in fact. Unity and complexity are often found together, somewhat paradoxically, existing in dynamic tension. Unfortunately, both the contemporary scientific mind *and* the fundamentalist Christian mindset tend to balk at such paradoxes. Nonetheless, whether we are theologians studying the nature of the Trinity, or physicists studying particle physics, or

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 137.

biologists studying the human body, at all levels of reality we encounter the paradox of complexity and unity coexisting together in a harmonious manner.⁶¹

⁶¹ This pattern of complex unity in theology has been analyzed by practical theologian James Loder. He draws attention to similarities found between theology and the patterns of relationality in other fields of study, such as physics and psychology. (James Loder, “Barth, Bohr, and Dialectic,” in *Religion & Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 271-89). In physics, Loder was particularly interested in the relationality depicted in the Copenhagen interpretation of the quantum reality of light, which is commonly referred to as “complementarity.” This describes the way in which light exhibits the characteristics of both waves and particles. For that reason, physicists sometimes refer to light as “wavicles.” Shults comments that “Loder showed us the valuable mutual enhancement that can occur when we transgress the boundaries of the traditional disciplines of theology, physics, and psychology.” (Shults, *Anthropology*, 57) We hope to show similar benefits from our interdisciplinary study of biblical studies, missiology, historical theology, and cognitive neuroscience. Loder believes that these patterns of complexity within unity point toward the ultimate relationality which is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Part 2

Missiological Perspectives on the Nature of Human Being – The Westernization of Christian Theology

Chapter 5

Jewish and Greek Cultural Influences on the Early Christian Tradition

In this chapter we will be suggesting that the analysis of theological terms in chapter four suggests a pattern in which the early Christian tradition maintained a thoroughly Hebraic theological anthropology, for a time. This includes the human authors of the New Testament texts. That explains the consistent anthropological assumptions encountered in both testaments.

Previously, in chapter two, we explored some of the debates surrounding terminological distinctions used by scholars to emphasize the thoroughly Hebraic character of the first generation(s) of the early Christian tradition. We mentioned the ways in which contemporary terminology and other cultural assumptions have tended to obscure biblical truths from our gaze. The significant take-home point from that discussion was that Christianity emerged only gradually out of a thoroughly Jewish cultural and philosophical context. This discussion highlighted the thoroughly Hebraic, or Semitic, nature of the New Testament, and the early Christian community. That observation now becomes the starting point for the next section of our study.

First, we need to begin by adding a few qualifications to the basic statement we had previously made about the thoroughly Hebraic, or Semitic, character of the early Christian tradition. First, it is very important to emphasize the significant influence which Hellenistic thought had exerted throughout Second Temple Judaism, up to and including the time period when Christianity began to emerge from Judaism.¹ Because the Judaism(s) of Jesus' time had already been significantly influenced by Hellenistic thought, it is important to discern the extent

¹ Chapter one of Skarsaune's text contains an excellent treatment of this topic. (Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002, 23-46)

to which the Greek influence occurred directly from Greek culture, in syncretistic fashion, as some scholars have suggested.

This is a complex debate. It is only late in the twentieth century that scholarly consensus came to conclude that first century Judaism, not only in the diaspora but in Palestine as well, “was highly diversified and already significantly influenced by Hellenism.”² This diversity included significant Hellenistic influence which had entered into Judaism during the intertestamental period.³ Hengel and others have shown that Hellenistic influence on Judaism became quite significant in the centuries following the conquest of Judea by Alexander the Great, in the fourth century BCE.⁴ However, it is important to note that this influence occurred in ways that generally managed to preserve the core aspects of the Semitic worldview.⁵ In Judea there was certainly a general relationship of accommodation and acculturation to Hellenism, but scholars insist that this influence existed “on a continuum of resistance and integration.”⁶ The result was the production of a subtly nuanced dynamic tension between the Jewish and

² Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 123. In particular, the significant degree of Hellenistic influence during the intertestamental period was decisively demonstrated in Martin Hengel’s landmark study, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

³ We should acknowledge that this is a somewhat contentious issue which has only recently begun to be resolved conclusively. This topic of the Semitic nature of the New Testament will be addressed further in Appendix 1. Our treatment there will explore the nature and extent of Hellenistic philosophical influence on the Gospel of John, as a particular case study. The Fourth Gospel was selected for special treatment because the previous generation of twentieth century scholars had identified it as being a particularly “Hellenistic Gospel,” even calling it the “paragon of Hellenistic thought in the New Testament canon.” For more on this debate, see the treatment of this topic by the eminent New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 371ff. A particularly insightful article on the same topic is David A. Reed’s piece, “How Semitic Was John? Rethinking the Hellenistic Background to John 1:1,” *Anglican Theological Review* 85 no 4 (Fall 2003), 709-726. The cause of the recent shift in scholarly consensus has much to do with the new light the Dead Sea Scrolls research has shed on the nature of the influence of Hellenistic thought on Second Temple Judaism.

⁴ Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 51.

⁵ Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 33-42.

⁶ Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 51.

Hellenistic cultural influences. In that process, “Judaism was able to absorb Hellenistic ideas without losing its own identity or compromising its essential principles.”⁷

Although the Hasmonean dynasty (140 – 36 BCE) had been founded by the leaders of the Maccabean revolt, who were resisting the forced political and social Hellenization of Jerusalem, nonetheless, the Hasmoneans can themselves be seen to have been subtly and profoundly influenced by Hellenism. However,

This was a Hellenism of a different sort – a Hellenism adjusted so as not to contradict the fundamental truths of Judaism. At the same time as the Maccabees secured political freedom for Judea, their religious supporters – the forerunners of the Pharisees – were able to integrate important elements of Hellenistic culture into Judaism in such a way that it was no longer felt as a threat, but an enrichment.⁸

Among the “fundamental truths of Judaism” which was retained in most Second Temple forms of Judaism is the characteristically Hebraic holistic relational anthropology that many scholars observe to have been consistently maintained throughout the New Testament as well.⁹

It is helpful to remember that the phase of early Christian development which we are referring to as ‘Jewish Christianity’ (which preceded the Hellenistic and Latin periods of church history)¹⁰ can be seen to overlap with the time when the New Testament was being written.

⁷ Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*, 38.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The continuity between the anthropologies of the two testaments is supported by many authors, including Brevard Childs, who finds a “basic coherence” between the Old and New Testament witnesses to the nature of humanity (Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 566-94). Beck and Demarest comment that “Confusion in Christianity between the Judaic and Greek understanding of the word *soul* comes largely through a Gnostic and Neoplatonic misinterpretation of the apostle Paul’s use of the Greek words *sarx* (‘flesh’), *soma* (‘body’), *pneuma* (‘spirit’), and *psychē* (‘soul’). Paul used these four terms in similar ways to refer to the self, reflecting a Hebraic rather than a Greek-Hellenistic understanding.” (James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005) 360). The consistency we will be observing between the Hebraic and New Testament perspectives on the human person are seen to substantiate the assertion that theological anthropology is one of these “fundamental truths of Judaism” which were retained in the Hellenized Judaism of the Second Temple Period, during which time Christianity emerged from within the Judaism of its day.

¹⁰ James C. Paget, “The Definition of the Terms *Jewish Christian* and *Jewish Christianity* in the History of

Therefore the various texts of the New Testament are seen to reflect the theological convictions and underlying worldview of the diverse ‘Jewish Christian’ communities which composed them.¹¹ In this way, the New Testament texts provide a window into the worldview of the early Christian communities, at the exact moment in church history which is being referred to as the ‘Jewish Christian’ stage of theological development. Ironically, these texts have been interpreted through a Greek / Western philosophical lens for several millennia, obscuring the clearly (Second Temple) Hebraic character of the New Testament canon.

It is important to remember that the New Testament was written prior to the progressive Hellenization and Platonization of Christian thought, which began in force with Augustine. It was at that time that the Semitic core of the Christian worldview came to be progressively overlaid with pagan¹² philosophical elements, as we will be demonstrating in chapter nine.¹³

Research,” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 41.

¹¹ For an excellent and very thorough treatment of this topic see Dean Flemming’s work, *Contextualization in the New Testament*. Also helpful is Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*.

¹² We will be using the word “pagan” in this study merely to indicate that a belief system or worldview is not Christian in origin, or nature. We do not intend to imply any negative connotation with our use of the term, beyond the fact that beliefs and worldviews not derived from Scripture should be tested against it before being accepted as reliable. Therefore we would consider secular philosophies as well as beliefs derived from other world religions to be pagan, if they contradict Christian revelation. Nonetheless, methodologically we would affirm that all truth is God’s truth, and consider Scripture (when properly interpreted) to be the definitive arbiter of truth. However, given the complexity of biblical hermeneutics, which we will be discussing later in this chapter, it becomes clear that a tremendous amount of humility is required to properly interpret Scripture when a person’s culture inclines them in a contrary direction. Still, as difficult as it may be to discern truth, it is much easier to discern falsehoods. The goal of this study is to reveal significant false beliefs concerning human nature which have been accepted as biblical truth within the Christian tradition, but which have been discovered through interdisciplinary analysis to be false. Interdisciplinary analysis proves itself to be a highly effective means of separating out (pagan) cultural assumptions from properly deduced Scriptural truths.

¹³ The Hellenistic stage of development cannot be treated adequately in this study. We will not be able to address the issue beyond a cursory investigation of Augustine’s contribution to theological anthropology. Later thinkers like Tomas Aquinas and Rene Descartes furthered the development of the rationalistic, dualistic, and individualistic tendencies which had previously been introduced to Christian theology from the Greek philosophical context. While particular individuals like Augustine, Aquinas and Descartes stand out, we should emphasize that the progressive shift in worldview assumptions which has occurred in Western Christianity cannot be attributed to any particular individual, or series of individuals. Rather, this was a fairly continuous process of cultural accommodation which took place gradually and progressively throughout the two millennia which have passed since Jesus’ birth,

Thus, in summary, while the New Testament emerged in a cultural context saturated with Greek philosophy, nonetheless, the biblical authors can be demonstrated to have adapted the terminology and conceptual categories of their day in a distinctively Christian or Hebraic sense. A particularly important point, which we will be returning to periodically, is the observation of theologian F. LeRon Shults, who writes that

In the last two centuries, biblical scholars have increasingly moved toward a consensus that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament provide a holistic model of the human person... The general consensus is that the biblical view of the human person is holistic, not dichotomistic as in Greek and some Hindu thought.¹⁴

In this way, the entire Bible can be seen to teach a thoroughly relational and holistic understanding of theological anthropology.¹⁵ Nonetheless, this anthropology was first established in the Hebrew Scriptures, and then we assert that this characteristic perspective on human nature was retained in the New Testament canon, in what later became a counter-cultural element of Scripture which was often overlooked.

In contrast to the initially Hebraic character of the New Testament texts, over the next several centuries, the Semitic core of the early Christian community's theology and worldview

life, death, and resurrection. Nonetheless, there were certain historic moments when a particular individual moved the process along significantly during the short span of their lifetime. Augustine and Descartes are two particularly noteworthy figures in the "Westernization" of Christian thought. We will explore these later figures in a cursory manner towards the end of our study.

¹⁴ F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 175. We would like to suggest that the holistic relational Hebraic anthropology which is characteristic of both Testaments can be considered to be a normative component of a truly biblical worldview. Furthermore, not only are relational models more biblical, they are also highly resonant with postmodern sensitivities. For instance, Larry Shelton writes about the "concern for relational – as opposed to rationalistic, or 'modernist' – values and methods in this postmodern age..." (R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 217) Similarly, the biblical model's holistic, relational character is also in agreement with contemporary scientific investigations into the nature of mind, and its embodiment.

¹⁵ This is asserted by virtually every scholar consulted in our study, though it receives the most extensive treatment in three works: Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (2005), pp. 130-153, Joel Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 4-9 and F. LeRon Shults' 2003 text, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 175-8.

came to gradually be infiltrated and overlaid with various pagan Greco-Roman philosophical constructs. This occurred as Christianity transitioned from its Jewish cultural and philosophical context into the Roman world. The infiltration of Christian theology by pagan philosophy has been widely recognized by scholars from across the theological spectrum. In the words of biblical scholars James Beck and Bruce Demarest: “Most everyone agrees that the early church fathers were heavily influenced by Platonic dualism...”¹⁶

¹⁶ Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person*, 172. Though it is best to avoid pigeon-holing scholars in this way, we feel it is helpful to occasionally highlight the theological commitments of our sources. Beck and Demarest represent a more theologically conservative approach to Biblical Studies than the other sources examined in this study. Since scholars’ intellectual commitments necessarily influence the conclusions they reach, whenever agreement can be found across a broad theological spectrum, then it is more probable that the conclusions are reliable. Concerning the influence of Platonic thought on Christianity’s theological anthropology, we find significant agreement between conservative evangelicals like Beck and Demarest, and at the opposite extreme, agreement from the post-foundationalist Reformed theologian F. LeRon Shults, and also the various Wesleyan scholars who will be consulted in chapter eight. Every scholar consulted in this study was in agreement with the observation that Christianity’s understanding of theological anthropology was profoundly influenced by Platonic thought.

Chapter 6

Christianity's Native Thought Forms

Given the unique origins of Christianity's cultural, philosophical, and theological worldview, which emerged from within Judaism, we would assert that biblical Christianity's native thought forms are best described as *characteristically* and *essentially* Hebraic, not Hellenistic. This is especially true of deep worldview themes like theological anthropology. A helpful biblical analogy for the proper relationship between the two worldviews is provided by Romans 11:17, where the apostle Paul compares gentile believers to wild olive branches grafted into an older, cultivated olive trunk. This analogy seems to have been provided to remind the Christian community of the respect they should have for the cultural roots they had inherited from their Jewish brothers and sisters in the faith.¹

Before we proceed, it is important to mention that in this study we will frequently be using the term "Hebraic" in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner. Rather than describe the early Christian tradition as possessing a Jewish cultural and philosophical paradigm, we will instead refer to their anthropological perspective as being characteristically Hebraic, or Semitic. This is a minor semantic distinction, but it is worth making. What we are attempting to do here is point towards a fundamental aspect of the cultural foundations of the early Christian worldview. We would assert that the Hebraic component of their philosophical worldview is necessarily caught up in the linguistic structures and characteristic thought forms of the cultural paradigm of the Jewish people. As such, the anthropological assumptions of the Jewish people can be considered

¹ Jim Fleming, *The World of the Bible Replicas: A Study of Full-Scale Archaeological Replicas Which Help Interpret the Scriptures* (Jerusalem: Ein Karem Biblical Resources, 1999), 24. This resource is not peer-reviewed, but Fleming's exegesis has been included here because of its eloquence. Jim Fleming, Ed.D. (not to be confused with Dean Flemming, PhD), is on the advisory board of the journal *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

to be more central to their worldview than are other more superficial components of their religion and culture, which are more easily exchanged.

On this topic of the relationship between linguistics and worldview, Dean Flemming has commented that “language and culture are closely wedded. A people’s particular way of perceiving and interpreting reality (its worldview) is to a large extent built into its language.”² Thus the theological anthropology which is characteristic of the Hebrew Scriptures appears to be more closely “wed to,” or identified with, the Hebrew language, rather than with the Jewish religion, per se. For this reason we prefer to describe the characteristic theological anthropology of the entire Bible as being essentially or characteristically Hebraic in character, rather than “Jewish.” This helps prevent the power of semantic distinctions from lumping the Hebraic anthropology of *both* testaments with the Jewish religion, which became anachronistic, in most Christians’ eyes, after the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus.

Even after the “parting of the ways,” when Christianity ceased to be a part of the Jewish religious establishment, even then the early Christian community’s worldview and anthropology would appear to have remained characteristically Hebraic for a generation or more, until the new Gentile converts joined in sufficient numbers to overwhelm the communities’ corporate worldview assumptions. In the same way that the anthropology of the early Jewish Christian community was more resistant to change than their identity as religious Jews (because it was a “deeper” aspect of their worldview), in the same way, new gentile converts would more easily change their outward religious identity and affiliation to become Christ-followers. However, the

² Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 128. This assertion is supported by other respected missiologists like Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), and Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 247.

“deep structures” of the gentile worldview, including its Platonic philosophical influences and anthropological assumptions, would be much more resistant to change.

Missiologist Paul Hiebert writes that because worldviews are “deep,” they are generally unexamined and largely implicit.³ For this reason it would be difficult for either ethnic Jews or ethnic Greeks to be consciously aware of the anthropological assumptions of their worldviews. The significance of all of this to the gospel message is these aspects of the gospel message would likely go unnoticed. Hiebert writes that worldview assumptions function like glasses. In this way, our worldviews “shape how we see the world, but we are rarely aware of their presence. In fact, others can often see them better than we ourselves do.”⁴ Another metaphor Hiebert suggests is that worldviews “are like the submerged portion of an iceberg, which keeps it afloat but is unseen.”⁵ In these ways, the anthropological assumptions which are fundamental to the gospel, according to its Old and New Testament expression, seem to have been unintentionally lost, when Christianity traversed from a Jewish to a gentile context.

Because of the power worldviews exert in the shaping of our perception of reality, it becomes especially important for contemporary scholarship to become more aware of the implicit assumptions underlying our worldview. This is especially important because many of our worldview assumptions are derived from the Platonic influence on Western civilization, and have nothing whatsoever to do with biblical Christianity.

Arguing for the relevance of this task for contemporary missions in a North American context, Shults writes, “Our task is to retrieve and refigure the relational thought-forms of the

³ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 46.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

biblical tradition...”⁶ He asserts that this will help us to better respond to the “late modern anthropological self-understanding.”⁷ Theologian Larry Shelton affirms this as well, commenting on the developing “concern for relational – as opposed to rationalistic, or ‘modernist’ – values and methods in this postmodern age...”⁸ This is of importance not only for the sake of ministry to postmodern peoples. It is also vitally necessary if we are to properly understand what it means to be human, from a biblical, or scientific, or epistemologically sound perspective. If humanity is to be discipled at the foot of the cross, and not in the shadow of Plato, then we would insist that closer attention must be paid to these matters.

⁶ F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 33.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 217.

Chapter 7

Dissecting the “Structural Layers” of Human Cultures and Worldviews

Missiologists and cultural anthropologists have developed a way of conceptualizing culture which will be quite helpful for our analysis. As we will see shortly, this perspective sheds light on the nature of the discipleship crisis, and it reveals some of the causes of the problem. Of interest to our study the way in which human cultures can be considered to possess various “layers.”¹ Surface layers build upon the deeper layers, and in this way, the unseen, deepest levels of a worldview can be seen to function as the foundation for the more externally observable elements of human cultures.² The deepest elements of a culture’s worldview are the most inaccessible to human consciousness, since they are caught up in the very linguistic structures which function as the operating language, so to speak, of human consciousness.³ It will be worthwhile at this point to examine the three primary levels of culture analyzed by cultural anthropologists and missiologists.

Visible Elements of a Culture’s Worldview

On the surface level, culture manifests itself in tangible ways in the material world. In

¹ G. Linwood Barney, “The Supracultural and the Cultural Implications for Frontier Missions,” in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973), 49-50.

² The material in this section is drawn primarily from the final published works of Paul G. Hiebert, including *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 32-50, and *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 153-158. We will also be consulting the works of David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 52-53, and Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005).

³ This will be explored in more detail in the analysis that follows. As a simple thought experiment, try thinking an abstract concept without using words. This gives a sense of the ways in which human consciousness is captive to the linguistic structures of language.

this way, human worldviews can be said to possess *visible* elements, such as the observable behaviors and customs of a people group.⁴ This is the level of culture which is most easily observed by outsiders. This surface layer of culture includes all the socially prescribed customs and behavioral patterns which dictate how people within a society tend to greet one another, drive their vehicles, cook their food, divide labor in their homes, relate to one another and to strangers, etc.⁵

Slightly “below” this level, but still within the layer of culture anthropologists consider to be visible, exist the sign systems by which people communicate, and through which people make sense of their world.⁶ Sign systems not only help us to communicate with one another, but also structure our experience of life. Hiebert describes this process simply and eloquently:

Our knowledge of the world around us is rooted in an unending flow of experiences, each of which is unique. To make sense of these (given the limits of the human brain), we need to reduce them to a limited number of categories, so we create words that lump a great many experiences into one. We see many different objects and label them all “trees.” We see a great many people, each of whose face is distinct, and call them “humans.” It is this ability to generalize and to create languages that enables us to think about the world and decide on courses of action.⁷

It is our ability to construct complex sign systems that also makes humans particularly unique among the creatures of the earth. We alone among the species of the earth, seemingly, are able to create and live within an entire symbolic universe within our minds.⁸ As a result, our experience of reality comes to be mediated to us by means of words, symbols, and concepts. It is in this way that the “visible” linguistic structures of our human worldviews can be seen to function as a sort

⁴ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 81.

⁵ Hiebert, *Gospel in Human Contexts*, 154.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 81.

⁸ Ibid.

of lens, or filter, which interprets and colors all of our experience of life. Thus we can be said to live our lives out within the webs of signs which we create to help us make sense of our world.⁹ Cultural Anthropologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy is probably only exaggerating slightly when he writes that apart from meeting the immediate satisfaction of biological needs, “man lives in a world not of things but of symbols.”¹⁰

This has many implications for theological anthropology. First, we are reminded of the dangerous tendency mentioned earlier by Runesson, to confuse our conceptual categories with the reality of what they are meant to describe.¹¹ Because of the power of our semantic systems on our cognitive processes, we all too easily confuse our symbols and concepts with the realities they are meant to signify.

For instance, following the lead of Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, the Western tradition has tended to consider human beings to possess a tripartite nature. Once this belief became firmly encoded in the language systems of Western cultures, identifying terms in each Western language for each of the three components of the human person, then afterward anyone raised within Western civilization has tended to perceive reality in light of its hypothetical tripartite psychic structure. When Westerners seek biblical answers to questions about theological anthropology, we tend to fixate on passages which mention three terms (such as 1 Thess. 5:23). We tend to then

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: George Braziller, 1981).

¹¹ Runesson warned us specifically of the danger of mistaking the semantic labels “Judaism” and “Christianity” for the real thing. The nature of the cognitive structures of our minds seems to be such that once we create a label or descriptor for something, we tend to assume that the thing thus label exists as an objective reality, according to the structure of our semantic world. However, just because we create words for Judaism and Christianity does not imply that the realities are not necessarily overlapping realities, to a significant degree. See Anders Runesson, “Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic Intragroup Conflict,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 no 1 (2008): 95-132, at 99.

construct our systematic theologies on the basis of those three terms, even if there are many other places in Scripture where two, or four, or five anthropological terms are mentioned. Because we have words which refer to the components of this hypothetical construct, there is a strong tendency for us to assume these words refer to substantial entities. As a result, a tripartite anthropology easily becomes a conceptual filter through which we perceive all of reality and interpret all of our experience. As mentioned previously, the discipline of biblical studies has only recently begun to study the use of anthropological terms in Scripture carefully. That research now concludes that the tripartite Platonic anthropology of Christian orthodoxy is actually a distortion of the clear biblical teaching.¹²

In this way, once a belief is able to pass into the deep levels of a culture's worldview, it is as if it passes out of conscious awareness, becoming an unconscious filter of all future experiences. Thus, those of us inculturated within Western civilization will even tend to find our Platonic assumptions reflected back to us when we read Scripture, and the same will tend to happen in our scientific research as well.¹³ This can occur even when Platonic anthropological assumptions are in direct contradiction to both Scripture and empirical studies conducted by neuroscientists and others.

“Core” or “Deep Structure” Layers of Human Culture

Cultural anthropologists consider the visible elements of a culture to be expressions or reflections of the deeper levels structures of a people's worldview. In a sense, it is as if the visible elements (such as a people's habits, customs, sign systems, and so forth) are “floating” upon the

¹² See the treatment in chapter four.

¹³ For instance, Joel Green warns of the “human propensity to find in the biblical materials a mirror for already-held views, including the contours of theological anthropology.” (Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 16-17)

conceptual structures of the deeper levels of a people's worldview, which function as the foundational level of their underlying worldview.

Hiebert comments that the "deep" level worldview structures contain assumptions that tend to be shared fairly equally, and unconsciously, by all the members of a culture.¹⁴ Because of the way that these deep worldview assumptions function, the conceptual categories we possess tend to filter our experience of reality. This all occurs largely outside of our own awareness. Not only that, but these unconscious assumptions will only be observable to outsiders to the extent that they influence outward, visible behavior.

In contrast, the sign systems of a culture are a more intermediate level of culture, which is more readily visible than the deep structures. These mid-level sign systems then give clear indications of the underlying categories which shape each culture's deep structure.¹⁵ In this way, language can be seen to function as a kind of bridge, or mirror, between the conscious and unconscious, and the visible and invisible dimensions of a human culture. This is a point of great significance to our study. We have gone to significant length both to explore the ways in which semantics influences the study of church history, and biblical texts. We have also looked at the particular biblical terminology used to describe different aspects of the human person, from a biblical perspective. Later, all of this will be brought together as we try to bring to conscious awareness the ways in which our Western worldview is interfering with our ability to understand ourselves, and disciple one another.

For this reason it is extremely important for us to develop a more rigorous understanding of the power of human worldviews to shape our perception of reality. Again, as mentioned

¹⁴ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 32.

¹⁵ Hiebert, *Gospel in Human Contexts*, 156.

previously, a lot of this is tied in to the linguistic categories through which we filter all our experiences. In his analysis of the nature and function of conceptual categories on cultures, Hiebert comments that underlying the beliefs of a culture are the fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions which we make about the ultimate nature of things.¹⁶ He writes that these “largely implicit cognitive substructures constitute our *worldview*.”¹⁷ In the iceberg analogy provided by Hiebert, the deep worldview level can be considered to be the largely hidden cultural mass which holds the visible elements in place, above the surface. Hiebert goes on to state that a

worldview is based on deep assumptions about the nature of reality, the ‘givens’ of life. And it clothes itself with an aura of certainty that convinces us that it is, in fact, the true reality. To question a worldview is to challenge the very foundation of life, and we resist such challenges with strong emotional reactions. There are few human fears greater than the fear of a loss of a sense of order and meaning.¹⁸

This is perhaps the greatest challenge Christianity faces, in its attempts to develop more effective discipleship methods. Though our worldviews may be profoundly unbiblical, we will unconsciously defend the Platonic-Christian anthropological paradigm. To criticize this will feel to many as if the earth is being pulled out from under their feet. This seems to be fueling much of the fundamentalist reactivity against postmodern theology, the emergent church, and other attempts to rescue Christianity from the sinking ship which is modernized, Westernized forms of the Christian faith.

¹⁶ Hiebert, *Gospel in Human Contexts*, 152-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* If Hiebert is right about the strongly conservative and defensive reaction most people tend to have when their worldview is threatened, then it may be difficult for the conclusions of this study to gain a fair hearing. However, because the scientific community has already quite effectively undermined many aspects of the (Western) Christian worldview, then perhaps the results of this study will be welcomed by many who will encounter herein the means through which to begin rebuilding a Christian worldview on a foundation that is more compatible with empirical observations from the psychological and scientific disciplines, while remaining true to the biblical materials as well.

Hiebert comments that we cannot help but be largely unaware of our own worldviews and the ways in which they shape our thoughts and actions. We simply assume that the world is the way we see it, and that others must see it in the same way. It is the *implicit* nature of worldviews which makes it so hard to examine them. Hiebert comments that we “tend to become conscious of our worldviews [only] when they are challenged by outside events they cannot explain.”¹⁹ For that reason, immigrants, refugees, bicultural children, and others who are caught between conflicting worldviews are more likely to become conscious some of their own deep assumptions.²⁰ This highlights the importance of consulting missiologists when investigating theological anthropology. Because of the nature of their calling, missiologists tend to develop a greater degree of cultural sensitivity. They are significantly more likely to be truly bicultural, compared to their peers in other theological disciplines.

More precisely, Hiebert discusses three components of the “core” worldview: conceptual categories, logics, and epistemology.²¹ He mentions that “[a]t a fundamental level, worldviews are based on the way people form mental categories.”²² Therefore, one of the characteristic ways in which cultures differ in the core structures of their worldviews is in the types of logic which they use to organize its conceptual schemes.

The logical system of the Western worldviews is largely built on “digital” or “well-

¹⁹ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 47.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 33. In contrast, Hesselgrave mentions ideology, cosmology, and worldview as being the foundational layers of culture. In any case, these are largely synonymous, though Hiebert has helpfully added logic. This is especially relevant to our study because of the influence Greek systems of logic have had on the Western Christianity, in contrast to the more Middle Eastern style of logic encountered in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Jesus’ teaching.

²² Ibid.

formed,” or clearly delineated sets.²³ This style of logic developed sometime around the sixth century BCE, on the Ionian coast of what is today Turkey.²⁴ Philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson comment that, “The character of much of the Western philosophical tradition was fatefully determined by its origins in the writings of a small group of Greek scientist-philosophers.”²⁵ This group of Greek philosophers, which included Plato and Aristotle, were struggling to develop “rational” accounts of the events in nature. Their goal was to find a way of supplementing, or possibly supplanting, the traditional mythic stories of their ancient culture, which attributed natural occurrences to the willful, unpredictable, and sometimes frivolous actions of the gods. It is from this ancient tradition where we have received the styles of logic and argumentation which serve as the foundation for scientific, and theological, reasoning in the Western tradition.²⁶

However, there are other worldviews, such as those in India, for instance, which are built on analogical or “fuzzy” sets.²⁷ This is in contrast to the clearly delineated “digital” sets of Western logic. Hiebert provides a helpful analogy for the difference between these two styles of thought. The underlying logical systems of Western and Eastern cultures can be observed in their

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 350.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 380-1.

²⁷ Fuzzy sets were first discussed by Lofti Asker Zadeh, “Fuzzy Sets,” *Information and Control* 8 (1965): 338-53. Hiebert comments that despite our tendency to privilege digital sets over fuzzy ones, it is worth remembering that “analogical mathematics is more powerful than digital mathematics, because it deals with an infinite set of categories.” (Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 34) Digital logic received its classical formulation by Aristotle (Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 380). Aristotelian thought is syllogistic: “The syllogism, for Aristotle, is the most fundamental form of reasoning... This, for Aristotle, is the major mechanism by which we gain scientific knowledge.” (Ibid., 381)

different approaches to music, which is a “visible” aspect of their respective worldviews:

[C]lassical Western music is based on seven notes and five half notes, and singers pride themselves on a clearly articulated scale when they sing. In Indian classical music, based on fuzzy sets, there are sixty-four steps between *sa* (do) and *ri* (re), and sixty-four between *ri* (re) and *ga* (me) [in both cases these sixty-four steps correspond to a single step in a Western scale]. If the player needs more, he can subdivide these microsteps further. The result is that musicians slide from one note to the other, rather than jump from one step to another. Slides and quivering notes, not precise scales, are the beauty of the song ... After listening to Indian music with its slides and glides, Westerners often ask when the performers are ‘going to hit a note.’ They are listening for precise scales, which to Eastern ears sound mechanical and wooden.²⁸

This is just one example of the differences in logic which exist between cultures. It is problematic, however, if ethnocentrism were to lead us to privilege our culture’s characteristic logical style over those of other cultures. This is especially problematic when the logical style of Scripture turns out to be characteristically Semitic (Middle Eastern), instead of Western!²⁹

Another difference in category formation involves what defines a set. In modern cultures, intrinsic sets are dominant. The world is considered to be made up of discrete, autonomous categories.³⁰ For instance, a person may be identified as being “male,” “adult,” “drives a Mercedes,” and “has a PhD.” In contrast, in most traditional cultures, including the Hebrew culture, extrinsic or relational sets are dominant.³¹ A middle-aged woman may have a doctorate, but that is secondary to the fact that at home and in the community she is the wife of James, the daughter of Rick and Mary, and the mother of Sarah. In other words, her identity is defined not primarily in intrinsic terms but in terms of who and what she is related to.

However, every human culture uses all four types of sets.³² The difference lies in which

²⁸ Ibid., 33-34.

²⁹ We will be returning to this point shortly.

³⁰ Ibid., 35.

³¹ Ibid.

are more fundamental to the thinking of the people. Our discussion earlier in this chapter demonstrated that the early Christian tradition held a characteristically Hebraic worldview. Only later did this holistic, relational worldview come to be replaced with the Greco-Roman assumptions of the dominant culture. Therefore, it is important to observe the characteristic differences between the set logic of the Greek and Hebrew cultures. This is of truly immense significance to biblical interpretation. Hiebert addresses this point, commenting that

The Greeks, with their stress on the autonomous individual, developed abstract, algorithmic logic in their search for universal theories based on impersonal facts. For them knowledge was “knowledge about” reality – detached and impersonal. The Hebrew [in contrast] stressed relationships and relational knowledge of others in the particularities of life. To “know” another was to know that person in relationship, intimately and personally, not abstractly and objectively. They saw the world not simply as a mechanical system of empirical objects in logical connection but as an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and evolving community of creativity and compassion. This knowledge draws us into personal response and accountability in learning to know another.³³

Previously, it was mentioned that Paul used the Greek term *pneuma* to describe the vital principle that animates the person, in a way that more closely resembles the relational context of the Hebrew term *rûach*. Scholars have observed that Paul uses the Greek term “in a way that emphasizes human dependence on God for life.”³⁴ This is an example of how we see a characteristically relational, holistic Hebraic worldview evident in the New Testament writings, as the New Testament authors utilize Greek language and terminology but within a characteristically holistic, relational Hebraic worldview.

³² These can be seen to form four quadrants of cultural set logic: well-formed vs. fuzzy, and intrinsic vs. relational. For the implications of how these four quadrants affect evangelism and church-planting, see Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 107-36.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35-6.

³⁴ F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 177.

Chapter 8

The Cross-Cultural Transmission of the Gospel into New Cultural Forms

As mentioned in chapter three, the transmission of the gospel to gentiles at Antioch appears to have occurred without a lot of forethought from the formal leadership of the church. However, once gentile believers came to be formally accepted into the Christian community (at the Council of Jerusalem as recounted in Acts 15), from that time forward a profound theological shift was set in motion. Timothy Tennent comments that once Christianity came to include gentiles on their own cultural terms, the community could no longer regard itself as a special subset of Judaism. This moment in history marked an impressive accomplishment. The faith had successfully traversed its first major cross-cultural transmission.¹

However, the way in which this development played out, once Christianity had spread out into this new cultural frontier, the new cultural context quickly came to eclipse Christianity's originally Jewish cultural roots, heritage, and underlying worldview. Within a century or two, the large scale evangelization of Greco-Roman gentile believers resulted in the Apostolic Jewish church being overrun, from a cultural perspective. In this chapter we will be tracing a few of the most significant worldview shifts which have taken place in Christian theology, after the time of the writing of the New Testament.

As mentioned previously, the deep structure of a culture's worldview tends to be highly resistant to change.² Thus, when a person or people group converts to Christianity from a pagan

¹ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 4.

² Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 158. This was discussed at length in chapter seven.

cultural background, there are certain aspects of their worldview which will be transformed, and there will be other, perhaps “deeper” aspects of their worldview which will remain largely untouched, unless those areas are specifically targeted by the church’s discipleship efforts.

As Hiebert points out, worldviews can be seen to function somewhat like icebergs.³ This analogy highlights the fact that most of the “weight,” so to speak, of a person’s worldview can be said to exist below the surface of conscious awareness. This makes it particularly difficult for Christ followers to recognize the extent to which their perception of reality has been formed by their childhood experience and the culture(s) they were raised within. It therefore seems quite reasonable to assume that when the first gentiles became Christ followers, there would have been a strong tendency to retain the deep level worldview structures of their Greco-Roman upbringing. Of course, to the extent that there were many Jewish Christians in their midst, especially in leadership positions, then it can be assumed that the new converts would be helped by the Semitic Christians to develop a more truly biblical (i.e., Hebraic) worldview. However, with time, it can only be imagined that this “preservative” effect of the culturally Jewish Christians in their midst would decrease, as more and more gentile believers came to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. With time, the worldview assumptions that each new generation of pagan converts brought with them to their new faith would tend to exert a cumulative effect, gradually distorting the Hebraic worldview of the original Apostolic community.

Thus over time significant aspects of the new converts’ enculturated pagan belief systems would tend to be retained after conversion. The new converts could not help but bring with them a whole host of unconscious assumptions concerning human nature, hierarchical structures in the

³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 46.

family and society, epistemology, metaphysics, moral psychology, etc.⁴

This hypothetical process can be presumed to have resulted in the syncretistic form of Christianity which became the norm in the Western world. This is a perfectly understandable development. Furthermore, at the time, the syncretism which resulted can be considered to have been a reasonably appropriate contextualization of the gospel message for the Greco-Roman cultural context of that time period. Discipleship may have been impaired, but evangelism would have been enhanced, since the newly Hellenized religion would feel less “foreign,” as a result. Down through the centuries, however, the initially appropriate Hellenization of Christianity has since become a threat to its continued viability in a very different twenty-first century cultural context.

We would suggest that two factors came together to create the form of normative Western Christianity. The first is the rapidity with which the gospel spread among the gentiles in the second and third centuries. This made it very easy for the (Hebraic) biblical worldview to be lost during the rapid cultural transmission process. Second, the phenomenon of the *incomplete* or *partial conversion*⁵ of newly baptized gentile believers was and always will be problematic. Put

⁴ The same is true for us today. We cannot help but retain a thoroughly twenty-first century American worldview, glossed over with a Christian veneer. Perhaps it is as if our underlying secular worldview structure has been shellacked over to give it a shiny Christian sparkle. For a popular treatment of this topic, see Craig Groeschel’s *The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but Living As If He Doesn’t Exist* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). Our point is that ever since Christianity shifted out of its original apostolic Jewish cultural context, there is a certain inevitability that it would acquire layer after layer of foreign worldview “accretions,” to use the language of missionary Vincent Donovan. The result is that the core foundational structure of a truly biblical worldview has been supplanted and overlaid by a variety of Western cultural assumptions that are derived from Greco-Roman culture and philosophy. The initial Westernization of Christian theology was then developed further throughout the history of Western civilization. The global discipleship crisis we have described in the introduction is perhaps simply a demonstration of the failure of contemporary Christianity to deeply disciple its people, at the worldview level. We would assert that the problem is that the gospel has failed to penetrate us to the depths of our being.

⁵ By the phrase “partial conversion,” we are referring to the phenomenon described by missiologist Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979). Kraft argues that contemporary communicators *have been* quite successful at getting people to accept the *outer forms of Christianity* but this has perhaps occurred without people experiencing a true conversion of their underlying worldview. It is worth emphasizing that a conversion to Christ-belief from Judaism is a much simpler process, compared to a conversion from atheism, Islam, or African indigenous belief, to give just a

together, these two factors were very significant, as we will be demonstrating throughout our analysis in this chapter.

The cultural transmission process which occurred in the early centuries of church history is important to understand today because gentile forms of Christianity so quickly became the standard by which “normative Christianity” would be evaluated.⁶ Although Christianity’s exodus out of its Judaic context and into the gentile world occurred innocuously enough, nonetheless, within a short period of time Greco-Roman Christianity would come to be established as the “professed faith of the overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman empire.”⁷ In the process, Christianity became essentially *coterminous* with the physical and, more importantly,

few examples. As mentioned in the introduction, African theologian John Mbiti and American missiologist Charles Kraft have both questioned the validity of the religious conversions to Christianity which have occurred in Africa. Mbiti wonders if Africans have commonly been “converted” merely to outward European religious and cultural forms, having failed to experience a full-fledged conversion of their underlying worldview (John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969). We would take Mbiti’s skepticism even further. We also question the thoroughness of conversion experiences in the West as well. Our analysis up to this point has suggested the necessity of a deep conversion of one’s underlying worldview, as opposed to the more common experience of a surface level “psychological” (or subcultural) “conversion” experience. Regardless of how existentially or emotionally meaningful a particular moment may be, when a person first accepts Christ into their heart and life, we would suggest that true conversion requires a thorough reorientation of a person’s entire being. This necessarily includes a progressive transformation of their underlying worldview. Renowned evangelical missiologist David J. Hesselgrave is in agreement with Kraft and the others mentioned so far. Hesselgrave argues for the necessity to “avoid the kind of false conversion which contents itself with conformity to certain forms instead of evidencing a change in worldview.” (David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 67) See also Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*. We would suggest that between the two extremes of Kraft’s “false conversion” and a hypothetical complete conversion in worldview, there are many shades and variations. It is also worth discussing whether a “complete” conversion to a Christian worldview is even attainable, this side of eternity. If so, it would no doubt require a lifetime spent dedicated to a thorough renewal of the mind, in obedience to the Apostle Paul’s admonition in Romans 12:2, where he instructs us to be renewed through the transformation (or metamorphosis) of our minds. Thus the objective of Christian discipleship would be the transformation and renewal of all aspects of a person’s being, including their underlying worldview. The challenge faced by the church in every time and place is that people experience profound transformation in certain aspects of their lives, but at the same time there are residual aspects of their secular or pagan worldview which remain untouched. These pagan worldview “residues” tend to wreck havoc on the Christian life, producing syncretistic religious beliefs and practices. These “cultural residues” impede the discipleship efforts of churches in their call to bring transformation to the lives of individuals and to all nations.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*. Vol 1 (Peabody, MA: Prince), 2000.

the cultural borders of the Roman Empire.⁸ This resulted in even further identification of Christianity with its cultural context, a problem we face today as well.⁹ Once Roman civilization was Christianized, the influence flowed the other way as well, resulting in a significant “Romanization” of Christianity. As a result of the demographic shifts which occurred, “Greek-speaking peoples with a Hellenistic culture and a pagan background were now the best example of *representative* Christianity. Indeed, by the fourth century, Jewish Christians represented only a tiny percentage of the church.”¹⁰ The significance of these developments is far reaching. We will continue to explore the implications of this throughout the rest of our analysis in this chapter.

Discussing the cultural and philosophical shifts which took place in the early centuries of church history, Wesleyan scholar R. Larry Shelton writes,

As early as the second century, the church theology began to shift its perspective from the Palestinian context of biblical covenant community to a more philosophical perspective, in order to be more intelligible to the Greek and Roman mind. This shift, motivated by a desire to communicate the gospel more effectively to a different culture, was understandable and necessary from the church’s perspective; but we must not lose sight of its significance for later theological developments. It meant that Christian revelation *would now be recast from the concrete, interpersonal biblical forms of speech to the philosophical thought forms of the Greek categories*.¹¹

The significance of this shift in characteristic thought forms is a topic of great significance to this study.

⁸ Stephen Neill, *History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1990), 39.

⁹ On this topic Christine and Tom Sine of Mustard Seed Associates write, “Scripture teaches that God wants to transform us not only spiritually and morally *but culturally too*. We can no longer do our discipleship *on top of individualism, materialism, consumerism, and status-driven values* and wind up with anything that looks like authentic biblical faith... Jesus’ call to whole-life discipleship was clear. He didn’t invite his disciples to a private pietism they could work in *around the edges of lives largely shaped by the dominant culture*.” (Christine and Tom Sine, *Living on Purpose: Finding God’s Best for Your Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 95-96, italics added for emphasis)

¹⁰ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 4.

¹¹ R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 147, italics added for emphasis.

In the centuries that followed, profound changes occurred in the fundamental structure of Christian theology, as Christianity came to be progressively accommodated to the Hellenistic thought forms of the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. These changes occurred despite Christianity's origins in a Hebraic culture and worldview. They also happened in spite of the retention of the Hebrew Scriptures within the Christian canon. These developments can be seen to have profoundly shaped our understanding of theological anthropology. In turn, that has powerfully shaped the manner in which the church has approached its calling to "make disciples of the nations" (Matthew 28:19).¹²

Larry Shelton has demonstrated some of the consequences these various cultural and philosophical shifts have had on the church's understanding of the atonement. He emphasizes the impact this has had on the discipleship practices of the church: "Focused only on addressing the removal of guilt and assurance of the goal of getting to heaven, many persons have entirely missed the fullness of life in Christ and both the freedom and discipline of the life of discipleship."¹³ Similarly, Dallas Willard has described this type of truncated understanding of the Christian life, based on a simplistic, transactional understanding of the atonement, as being a form of "sin management." Willard considers this to be a significant cause of the decline of profound behavioral transformation witnessed in the Christian life.¹⁴

¹² In particular, the methods of discipleship typically employed by the church have often been built upon the rationalistic and individualistic assumptions of Western civilization, which can be traced back to Plato's anthropology and moral psychology.

¹³ Shelton, *Cross & Covenant*, 200.

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998). In chapters 2, 8, and 9, Willard extensively analyzes the implications for contemporary discipleship that result from an *exclusive* penal substitutionary view of the atonement. We would argue that this is really just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, when it comes to ways in which accommodation to Greco-Roman thought forms has effectively crippled the transformational power of the Christian faith. The effects on theological anthropology, and the ways in which this has affected our understanding of the purpose and value of the spiritual disciplines are equally significant. The influence of rationalistic, individualistic, and dualistic (body-passions vs. mind-reason) tendencies in contemporary Christianity are hugely problematic. This will be discussed at length throughout the rest

Throughout his extensive text, *Cross & Covenant*, Shelton conclusively demonstrates how the Westernization of atonement models has negatively affected Western theology. Building upon the foundation established in Shelton's work, we would suggest that theological anthropology is another area which has been adversely affected by the cultural and philosophical developments which have taken place during the development of Western civilization.

Enculturation Factors and the Cultural Captivity of the Gospel

In order to understand how the gospel came to be Westernized, it will be helpful to explore some of the sociological processes involved in the enculturation process. This helps to explain how the best and brightest minds of the early Christian era could so easily abandon the biblical understanding of the human person which they had received directly from the apostolic tradition.

Anthropologists and sociologists have long recognized that people raised within a culture tend to absorb that culture as simply and effortlessly as we take in the air we breathe.¹⁵ Commenting on the power of worldviews to shape our interpretation of Scripture, missiologist David Hesselgrave comments, "The Bible interpreter is constantly tempted to project the meanings of his own cultural background into the exegetical process, with the result that the original meaning is missed or perverted. This temptation is heightened by the fact that, for the most part, all of us learn our own culture quite unconsciously and uncritically."¹⁶ This perfectly describes the challenge faced by the church in every age, as the cultural context of the readers of

of our analysis.

¹⁵ Juris G. Draguns, Jefferson M. Fish, and Uwe P. Gielen, *Principles of Multicultural Counseling and Therapy* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2008).

¹⁶ David J. Hesselgrave, "The Role of Culture in Communication," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Revised Edition), ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1992), C-34–C-41, at C-38.

Scripture tend to shape their hermeneutic endeavors.

Elaborating the same point metaphorically, missiologist Norman Geisler compares the various human worldviews to colored eye-glasses. He writes that it is through our worldviews that we view ourselves and the world around us.¹⁷ In the process, everything is given the “tint” or “hue” of the particular “world view glasses” we happen to be wearing. Moreover, since the vast majority of people today are monocultural, they are accustomed to “wearing” only one pair of worldview glasses from the time of their earliest recollections. As a result, it would appear that human beings are not naturally predisposed to set aside their worldview perspectives even for a moment, if such a thing is even possible.¹⁸ Perhaps the reason most culture critics are missionaries returning from overseas is because it is necessary to be bicultural to take off a particular set of worldview “glasses” to view the same situation from a different vantage point.

The Enculturation Process

It seems to be an unhappy reality that without constant active resistance, we inevitably tend to mirror our immediate social context. This process can be attributed to the relentless socialization process which anthropologists refer to as “enculturation.”¹⁹ Through this process, as children grow up they tend to absorb and assimilate the philosophical assumptions of the surrounding (dominant) culture. Since this process of enculturation occurs unconsciously, every culture’s worldview assumptions are disguised as “common sense.” In this way, the anthropological assumptions of the Greco-Roman culture in Christian antiquity would have

¹⁷ Norman Geisler, “Some Philosophical Perspectives on Missionary Dialogue,” in *Theology and Mission*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 241.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ David J. Hesselgrave, “World View and Contextualization,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Revised Edition), ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1992), C-42–C-53, at C-43.

gradually gained ground against the holistic Hebraic outlook of the early Christian community.²⁰

With time, the also *unconsciously* held (biblical) worldview of the early apostolic Jewish Christian community would have been replaced with the *unconsciously* held assumptions of the pagan Greco-Roman culture, with its Platonic philosophical foundations. Thus the Hebraic/biblical model which was characteristic of the Jewish Christian stage of Christian history would, with time, become even more counter-cultural than it had been in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day. Therefore, in time, the original biblical witness' understanding of theological anthropology would become contradictory to the common sense assumptions of the majority of the Christian world, throughout the Hellenistic and Latin stages of Christian history, and beyond.²¹ However, the tables have now turned, and scientific advancements have brought us full circle, with the secular culture appearing to now possess a more accurate understanding of theological anthropology than the mainstream Christian community, at least when it comes to *certain aspects of our embodiment as human beings*.

With time, without having to rewrite the Bible, the changing cultural context of the Christian tradition can be seen to have shifted the very foundations of Christian theology. This shift of theological assumptions was especially pronounced in the area of theological anthropology, although many other areas were no doubt affected as well, including metaphysics, epistemology, atonement theories, and so forth.²² As a result, it has been stated that in America

²⁰ It is important to remember that the worldview of the original apostolic community has been permanently preserved for us in narrative and epistolary form in the biblical witness of the New Testament. This is our primary means of entry into the worldview of the earliest Christian community. This was discussed in more detail in chapter two.

²¹ The delineation of these three cultural epochs in Christianity has been adapted from James C. Paget, "The Definition of the Terms *Jewish Christian* and *Jewish Christianity* in the History of Research," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 41. This was discussed in greater detail in chapter two.

²² For an excellent example of the rationalistic influence which Hellenistic thought has had on atonement

and Europe, our cultural and ecclesiastical history is seen to flow *primarily* from the Roman Empire, more so than from any other culture (including Jewish culture).²³

Returning to the metaphorical language introduced by Geisler, we can perhaps state that the Greco-Roman “worldview glasses” which we wear to this day are quite “thick” indeed. That has always been the case, but the Western worldview glasses seem to have been getting thicker and thicker with time, through the influence of Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers.²⁴ These philosophers continue to influence both our perception of ourselves and our understanding of the world around us, in significant ways. This is problematic for the church’s discipleship efforts because the people developing the church’s discipleship methods have tended to buy into the Western cultures’ common sense assumptions. It is problematic that those assumptions are now being revealed to be quite hostile to the biblical perspective on human nature.

On Being Human

It seems to be a fundamental quality of human beings to ask questions about the kind of beings that we are. One might assume that a straightforward investigation of what Scripture has to say on this issue would be sufficient. However, New Testament scholar Joel Green insists that “From the standpoint of the biblical materials, addressing this question is less easy than one might expect.”²⁵ In great part, this is because of the power our worldview assumptions exert over every aspect of the hermeneutical endeavors.

As Green and many other scholars before him have warned, there is a subtle

theories, see R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006).

²³ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 254.

²⁵ Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 46.

epistemological circularity to this type of questioning. When we reflect upon the nature of mind and its embodiment, our mind is both the subject and object of the investigation. Even when we turn to the biblical texts for answers to these questions, the assumptions we unconsciously bring to the reading of the text will tend to subtly but powerfully guide the results of the hermeneutic process.

Scholars have observed that all cultures throughout time seem to have contemplated this core question about human nature and its physical embodiment. It seems to be a fundamental quality of human beings to always be wondering what kinds of beings we are.²⁶ However, the various cultures of the earth have reached different conclusions, which are perhaps characteristic of the assumptions each culture brings to the investigation.

Cognitive scientist Clarence Joldersma gives a particularly eloquent treatment of the distinctive way in which Greek philosophers came to address this culturally universal question of human nature. He writes that the Greek answer to this question suggested that “humans are rational selves, whose essential nature is to reason.”²⁷ For people raised in the Western tradition, this might seem like the most common sense answer that can be given. However, it is helpful to remember that most cultures of the earth give some other response, of one type or another.²⁸

And yet the characteristically Greek answer has remained a dominant one in the West. This is part of the legacy of Hellenistic philosophy on the development of Western civilization. The influence of that rationalistic anthropological assumption can be traced down through history to the Enlightenment and on into contemporary discussions in science and theological

²⁶ Clarence W. Joldersma, “The Missing Subject of Mind: Toward an Inner Reformation of Cognitive Science,” in *Science and the Soul: Christian Faith and Psychological Research*, ed. Scott VanderStoep (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 117-143.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, at 118.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

discourse, as we will be investigating in the next two chapters.²⁹ As we will see, St Augustine gave a very distinctive answer to this question of human nature. His answer took the biblical answer to this question, and cast it in a light that was intelligible to the philosophically refined Greco-Roman world. However, his treatment of the issue resulted in a subtle recasting of the biblical perspective in a way that has powerfully shaped Christian theology ever since.

²⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 9

The Enduring Legacy of the Augustinian Synthesis

In this and the next chapter we will be studying the influence of key figures from church history who have contributed to the Westernization of the deep worldview structures of Christian theology. Due to space constraints, the only one of these figures we can examine in some detail is Augustine of Hippo. Because St Augustine has been so hugely influential on the contemporary forms of both Protestant and Roman Catholic theologies, it is important to devote significant attention to him.

Emphasizing Augustine's lasting influence to this day, Christopher Stead writes that the synthesis Augustine effected between Greek philosophy and Christian theology "left its mark on the classical structure of Christian theology [in such a way that the influence] passed from Augustine to the Schoolmen, and so to Luther and Calvin, to Schleiermacher and to Karl Barth."¹ As such, "It is the common inheritance of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican churchmen."² Many scholars go so far as to assert that there is no other theologian who has been as influential to the shaping of Christian theology as Augustine has been.³

Joldersma insightfully describes the clash of worldviews which occurred in the life and teachings of Augustine, and the blended theology which resulted from that encounter. This is seen in particular in the way that Augustine approached the question of human being. He was hardly the first to wonder about what is the most quintessential aspect of our human nature. It is

¹ Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ix-x. Italics added for emphasis.

² Ibid.

³ Stead comments that "Historians of philosophy can, at a pinch, pass over all earlier Christian writers, but Augustine is the one figure which no student of late antiquity can ignore." (Stead, *Christian Antiquity*, x)

here where Augustine brilliantly blends the Christian and Platonic models, in a way that largely respects the biblical tradition. Joldersma writes,

Augustine himself had been schooled in a version of Plato's thought, likely never leaving it completely upon becoming a Christian. Yet, Augustine brought into the Western intellectual world new thinking about the nature of being human, given the domination of that world by Greek thought... [The answer] Augustine introduced into the West... comes from the Hebrew tradition of the Old Testament.⁴

Joldersma then goes on to elaborate how Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah gave a very different answer to this timeless question of human being. He writes, "In that [Jewish] answer, the self is thought of as the *will* rather than the *intellect* as in Greek thought."⁵

There are various reasons why Jeremiah might have developed this answer. Central among these is Jewish culture's concern with their relationship with their God. Joldersma comments that the notion of self as *will* seems to reflect the relationality of the Jewish worldview, and its emphasis upon the twin qualities of *relationship* to God, and their concern to know (and do) the will of their personal God. In contrast, the gods of Greco-Roman society were much less relational, and much less interested in personal relationship. Thus, in the Jewish conception of the anthropological question, the self is viewed primarily as a *will* which exists in response to the will of God, necessarily putting us in relation to God's personhood in a very intimate and direct manner. Thus, for both the Jewish tradition and also for Augustine, it is the *will* rather than the *intellect* which is the essence of a human being.⁶

Another way of saying this is to assert that humans are *persons* first of all, not *rational animals* (as the Greeks had claimed). The core meaning of personhood is understood by the

⁴ Clarence W. Joldersma, "The Missing Subject of Mind: Toward an Inner Reformation of Cognitive Science," in *Science and the Soul: Christian Faith and Psychological Research*, ed. Scott VanderStoep (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 118-119.

⁵ Ibid., 119. Italics added for emphasis.

⁶ Michael J. Scanlon, "The Augustinian Tradition: A Retrieval," *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989): 61-92.

Jewish tradition to consist in our relationship with our Creator. They are particularly concerned with the idea of having a responsive, willing heart towards their God.⁷ This in turn suggests that the anthropological core of the biblical tradition is the agency, or volition, of the human person. We would assert that this Hebraic understanding of human nature can be seen to continue into the New Testament.⁸

In contrast, the Greek tradition viewed human nature primarily in terms of our intellect and rationality. Therefore their approach to reality is primarily concerned with knowledge of its rational structure. This would tend to describe our contemporary worldview as well.⁹ This demonstrates the lasting influence of the rationalistic strands of the Greco-Roman worldview in the Western world. In contrast with both those worldviews, the Hebrew tradition viewed human beings first and foremost as responsible selves, subjects who ought to be obedient to the Law, and personally subjected to the lawgiver, Yahweh.¹⁰

Augustinian scholar G.B. Matthews comments that “In Augustine's own thought, the notion of person as well as a personal God at times gets domesticated by the rational God of the Greeks and its corollary, viewing humans as rational beings and reality as rationally structured. However, even in this, Augustine innovatively introduces into the Greek emphasis on the intellect the first-personal standpoint.”¹¹

In the Hebrew tradition, human beings appear to view themselves as personal beings in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. This assertion is beyond our ability to demonstrate here. This was demonstrated briefly in our treatment of the biblical anthropological terms in chapter four. We would point out that in the four gospels, Jesus’ use of the term *kardia* is used in harmony with its usage in the Old Testament, understood to be the seat of human volition.

⁹ This will be discussed further in the conclusion.

¹⁰ Joldersma, “Missing Subject of Mind,” 119.

¹¹ G.B. Matthews, *Thought's Ego in Augustine and Descartes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

relationship and response to the activity and will of a personal God. Old Testament Prophets like Jeremiah portray God in a highly relational and personal way, suggesting that human personhood is defined in response to God.¹²

It is interesting that Augustine is the primary figure who can be attributed with bringing this Jewish notion of person to the West, infusing it into an intellectual climate that was dominated by the notion of humans as intellectual, i.e., epistemological (knowing) beings.¹³ It is thus in the person of Augustine that the Judeo-Christian religious designation of person came to the West, meeting up with the Greek religious notion of self as rational animal.¹⁴

The Danger of Common Sense Assumptions

Given the influence of Greek philosophy throughout Western Civilization, it is perhaps not surprising that the Greek answer to the question of human nature would be so harmonious with our “common sense” intuitions. Since American culture is derived fairly straightforwardly from Western Civilization, via the British Empire, for us as well as for the ancient Greeks, the answer to the question of human nature is answered as follows: we are rational beings, and rationality is the defining characteristic of human nature. For twenty-first century American and European intellectuals,¹⁵ the Hellenistic answer to the question of human nature may appear to be the most natural and intuitive answer to the question. However, missionaries and others with

¹² J.B. Cobb, *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

¹³ Joldersma, “Missing Subject of Mind,” 119.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ I mention intellectuals specifically because through the influence of postmodernity on contemporary popular culture, most people on the streets might consider that what most defines them as human beings is their ability to experience life, through emotion, artistic expression, etc. The senses and sensual experience have taken a greater significance as a result of recent cultural developments. For a more thorough discussion of the turn to experience in contemporary thought, see Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

significant cross-cultural experience are probably more inclined to attribute our “common sense” notions of human nature to inherited cultural paradigms, which can be traced back to the philosophical roots of Hellenistic culture. Those in turn have influenced Western Civilization up until the present day. For that reason, missiology has a significant part to play in our analysis of biblical anthropology. Without their help, we will likely be trapped in solipsism, forever projecting our cultural presuppositions into the mirror of self, allowing our unconscious assumptions to be reflected back to us in mirror-like fashion.

While the Augustinian synthesis remains quite attractive to many philosophers, both ancient and modern, it is nonetheless controversial. Augustinian scholar Robert Crouse comments that “Nebridius of Carthage, dear friend and often companion of Augustine, was delighted to find Augustine’s letters full of Plato and Plotinus, as well as full of Christ... That conjunction, however, which Nebridius found so pleasant and so edifying, has been a major problem for modern students of Augustine.”¹⁶ Crouse explains in some detail the current debates occurring within the fields of Augustinian and Neoplatonic studies. He writes that “For well over a century now, no aspect of Augustinian studies has been more marked by controversy than the question of his ‘Platonism.’”¹⁷

¹⁶ Robert Crouse, “*Paucis mutatis verbis*: St Augustine’s Platonism” in *Augustine and His Critics*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (New York: Routledge, 2000): 37-50, at 37.

¹⁷ Ibid. Crouse points out that there are several different approaches to this issue. In particular, there are two dominant positions concerning Augustine’s contribution. First, there is a group of scholars who think of Augustine as a Christian whose thought was more or less deeply influenced by Platonism. In contrast to this first group, there are also many scholars who think of Augustine as simultaneously a Platonist and a Christian. This second group views his theology as being a genuine synthesis of Christian and Neoplatonic positions, both of which are considered to share “a profound common ground.” (Crouse, *St Augustine’s Platonism*, 32) According to Crouse, there is also a third group of scholars who sees in Augustine’s Platonism a transformation or ‘conversion’ of Neoplatonic theology. This is Crouse’s position. He considers Platonism to have reached its fulfillment in Augustine (Crouse, *St Augustine’s Platonism*, 47-8). A particularly eloquent description of this third group’s understanding is given by Augustinian scholar John Rist, who suggests that Augustinian theology is “ancient thought baptized.” (John Rist, *Augustine. Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).) Regardless of which of the dominant positions should be considered most accurate, the key for our discussion here is the existing range of options all agree on the thoroughly syncretistic character of Augustine’s synthesis. This is not to diminish the

Beyond Ethnocentrism: Towards A Hebraic Understanding of Human Nature

As a result of the cultural influence of Hellenistic thought on contemporary American society, the Greek answer to the question of human nature can appear to us to be quite natural. It can be difficult for us to imagine any other answer to that question. However, other cultures, such as the Hebraic tradition, have come to very different conclusions from those we have reached. Furthermore, as has been shown, significant biblical studies research into the anthropology of the Old and New Testaments by scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann, Brevard Childs, Klaus Berger, Udo Schnelle, Joel Green, James Beck, Nancey Murphy, Anthony Thiselton, and others, provides consistent strong support for the assertion that the Greco-Roman/European/American answer to this question does not closely resemble the biblical one.¹⁸ Instead, scholars who have investigated this topic closely lament the fact that the Christian understanding of the human person has drifted so far from a biblical perspective, towards a Platonic conception of the human person.¹⁹

Beyond Ethnocentrism: Discernment of Cultural and Theological Blindspots

Timothy Tennent has argued that every culture in every age has blind spots and biases it is oblivious to, but which are immediately evident to outsiders.²⁰ He writes, “Although every

profundity or brilliance of Augustine’s thought, or Plato’s, for that matter. Augustine’s theology was perfectly contextualized for the Greco-Roman cultural context of 4th century Rome. The question that needs to be asked, now, however, is whether the Augustinian synthesis continues to be an appropriate contextualization for contemporary cultural settings, or whether it might be better to return to an earlier understanding of the gospel, *prior* to recontextualizing it to our present setting, if we so choose.

¹⁸ James R. Beck, “Self and Soul: Exploring the Boundary between Psychotherapy and Spiritual Formation.” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31 no 1 (2003): 24-36.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 12.

culture has its own... blind spots, it seems clear that as we become more active listeners at the table of global Christianity, Christians from different parts of the world can help to expose each other's blind spots."²¹ This is a noble ideal, and one that needs to be taken seriously. Nonetheless, to step outside of one's socio-temporal context to evaluate our theology objectively is extraordinarily challenging. Among other things, it requires a significant degree of humility, to be willing to accept outside help from nonwestern peoples, or from others who do not share our worldview assumptions. Nonetheless, inter-cultural dialogue seems to be the best means available to us to test our unconscious assumptions and the theological blindspots they engender.

Future Directions

Timothy Tennent is right to point out the power of intercultural dialogue to reveal our unconscious assumptions. However, we would assert that theological blindspots can also be brought to the surface through interdisciplinary analysis, as has been done in this study. We would suggest that this is especially likely to occur when dialogue takes place between disciplines whose starting assumptions are highly disparate. In particular, the dialogue we have been exploring between theology and the scientific community can be an especially helpful tool for investigating the nature of the human person, since they begin with such drastically different assumptions and investigative methodologies and epistemologies.

In particular, our study examined the convergence of conclusions reached through scientific and theological investigation into the nature of the human person. We have consulted the work of Western scholars in the fields of biblical studies, theology, philosophy, cognitive neuroscience, clinical psychology and social psychology. The interdisciplinary approach taken here has produced robust conclusions affirmed through consensus by the various disciplines and

²¹ Ibid, 197.

subdisciplines consulted.

As we look towards future directions in the investigation of theological anthropology, we would suggest that the type of cross-cultural dialogue advocated by Timothy Tennent could serve to further validate the conclusions reached through our interdisciplinary analysis. In fact, the dialogue we have explored between different groups of Western scholars can be said to function in a way that resembles cross-cultural dialogue. Although the scholars consulted mostly all work within the boundaries of contemporary Western culture, nonetheless, the various academic disciplines can perhaps be viewed functionally as if they were foreign cultures to one another. Their underlying worldviews, epistemological criteria, and styles of logical argumentation are extraordinarily distinct. In fact, it could be reasonably asserted that within the global Christian community, there is a greater cultural divide separating Christian scientists from Christian non-scientists, compared to the cultural distance which exists between Christ-followers of different nationalities. We would suggest that if the academic community is sincerely committed to unraveling the deep mysteries of human nature, we should be careful not to privilege the worldview assumptions of any one particular group, as we have tended to do.

Appendix

The Hebraic Character of the Fourth Gospel (A Case Study)

Throughout church history, biblical commentators have noticed the distinctive character of the Fourth Gospel. In the early third century, Clement of Alexandria mentioned the Gospel of John's uniquely "spiritual" character, compared to the Synoptic Gospels.²² Similarly, in the twentieth century, New Testament scholar Lucetta Mowry pointed out its "peculiarity" as a gospel. She notes that in comparison to the Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel seems as if it has been "shot through with a new element."²³

While scholars have been quick to recognize the unique characteristics of the Fourth Gospel, they have been slow to reach consensus on the source of its distinctive theological style. What has been particularly challenging for scholars to explain is the source of the strongly dualistic symbolism of light and darkness, which is found throughout the Johannine literature.²⁴ Describing the state of scholarship in the mid-1970s, New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks commented that scholars had been vigorously debating their various conflicting interpretations and hypotheses for over three-quarters of a century, "perhaps *ad nauseum*,"²⁵ with seemingly no

²² Clement of Alexandria's classic description is quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.7.

²³ Lucetta Mowry, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Background for the Gospel of John," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 no 4 (1954), 78. Mowry comments that this new "Johannine element" has something to do with the way the gospel has been "spiritualized." The events of Jesus' life and ministry have been organized and presented so as to carefully communicate distinctive ideas and objectives. However, in contrast to Mowry's assertion that there is a distinctive element in the Fourth Gospel not present in the others, Raymond Brown argues instead that although John has sometimes been deemed the most theological of the Gospels, "the theological difference becomes one of intensity and of the extent to which theological insight is woven creatively and imaginatively into the memories of Jesus." (Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 364).

²⁴ This symbolism is found particularly in the Prologue, and again in 8:12, and throughout the rest of the Gospel, and also in 1 John. (Brian J. Capper, "'With the Oldest Monks...' Light from Essene History on the Career of the Beloved Disciple?", *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 no 1 (Apr 1998), 1.)

²⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, "Gospel of John and Judaism" (Review), *Interpretation* 31 no 4 (October 1977), 420.

resolution in sight. However, despite the lack of resolution that was evident thirty years ago, the situation has changed somewhat in recent decades. Scholars can now be observed to be finally moving towards a general consensus, at least on certain aspects of the debate.

Through at least the middle of the twentieth century, and into the time when Meeks was writing, many prominent New Testament scholars had considered the dualistic language of the Johannine literature to be completely unprecedented in the biblical canon. For that reason, the Gospel of John was often characterized as a “Hellenistic Gospel.”²⁶ Some scholars went so far to describe it as “the paragon of Hellenistic thought in the New Testament canon.”²⁷

In contrast to that view, at least since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1940s, a growing number of scholars have insisted that the seemingly “foreign” dualistic elements of the Gospel of John which had previously been attributed to religious and philosophical syncretism, are in fact quite at home within the diverse religious context of Second Temple Judaism.²⁸ For that reason, many scholars would now assert that the philosophical roots of the Johannine tradition can be attributed more simply and appropriately to the messianic symbolism of Isaiah and the OT prophetic literature, as well as apocryphal and pseudepigraphal texts from Second Temple Judaism.²⁹

In this appendix we will be exploring the cultural and philosophical influences which are apparent in the Gospel of John. In particular, we will be focusing on the Johannine symbolism of

²⁶ Brown, *Intro to the New Testament*, 371.

²⁷ David A. Reed, “How Semitic Was John? Rethinking the Hellenistic Background to John 1:1,” *Anglican Theological Review* 85 no 4 (Fall 2003), 709.

²⁸ Amos Yong, “‘The Light Shines in the Darkness’: Johannine Dualism and the Challenge for Christian Theology of Religions Today,” *The Journal of Religion* 89 no 1 (January 2009), 44. In light of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library of ancient Gnostic texts in the 1940s, Brown comments that “most scholars now doubt that John borrowed from such Gnosticism” (Brown, *Intro to the New Testament*, 372).

²⁹ Reed, “How Semitic Was John?”, 709.

light and darkness, which have often been considered to be its most characteristically “gnostic” elements. It will be argued that the dualistic style of the Gospel of John can, in fact, be explained entirely in terms of the philosophical and religious traditions of first-century Palestine, without needing to seek recourse in outside philosophical or religious influences.³⁰ The conclusions reached in this brief excursus provide further support for the assertion made in previous chapters of this study, where it was suggested that the New Testament as a whole exhibits a characteristically Hebraic worldview, especially in its theological anthropology.

Ethical Dualism and the “Distinctive” Symbolism of the Fourth Gospel

Early twentieth century scholars often came to the conclusion that the dualistic system of thought which they encountered in the Gospel of John would be “unintelligible to... the Jewish outlook derived from a study of the Law and the prophets.”³¹ Writing in the year 1954, Lucetta Mowry commented that she found the dualism of the Johannine tradition to be entirely contradictory to the holistic perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures which maintain that reality “is one and unified.”³² This conclusion led Mowry, and others, to assert that “the Hebraic system of

³⁰ Nonetheless, we should acknowledge that while we will be demonstrating that the Gospel of John does not show any evidence of *direct* influence from outside philosophies, including Hellenism, it can be observed that the Second Temple Judaism of the first century had itself been thoroughly Hellenized. The Hellenization of Judaism followed the conquest of Judea by Alexander the Great in the 4th C BCE. New Testament scholar Oskar Skarsaune comments that during the intertestamental period, “Judaism was able to absorb Hellenistic ideas without losing its own identity or compromising its essential principles.” (Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 38) More specifically, although the Hasmonean dynasty was founded by the leaders of the Maccabean revolt, which was resisting the violent Hellenization of Jerusalem, nonetheless, the Hasmoneans were profoundly influenced by Hellenism. However, this “was a Hellenism of a different sort – a Hellenism adjusted so as not to contradict the fundamental truths of Judaism. At the same time as the Maccabees secured political freedom for Judea, their religious supporters – the forerunners of the Pharisees – were able to integrate important elements of Hellenistic culture into Judaism in such a way that it was no longer felt as a threat, but an enrichment.” (Ibid.)

³¹ Mowry, “Dead Sea Scrolls,” 79.

³² Ibid.

thought does not provide us with an appropriate world view for the background of the Fourth Gospel.”³³

As a result, Mowry, and before her, Rudolf Bultmann and others, had treated the dualistic symbolism of John as a “riddle” to be solved by identifying the outside philosophy or religious view that was closest to the dualism of the Johannine worldview.³⁴ Many possibilities were identified. As mentioned previously, Meeks considered the first three quarters of the twentieth century to have been caught up in vigorous debate between the array of conflicting hypotheses, which ranged from Greek speculative dualism,³⁵ to Philonic syncretism,³⁶ Gnostic influences,³⁷ Zoroastrianism,³⁸ etc.

Rather than specifically address the weaknesses of each of these various hypothetical influences, we will simply assert that it is unnecessary to posit any significant *direct* external philosophical influence on the Johannine tradition. Scholars had been slow to recognize the immense diversity which already existed *within* first century Judaism. Because they had

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 80.

³⁵ Reed comments that prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, speculation concerning Hellenistic influence was rampant. One example is found in the area of Johannine Christology: “curiosity swarmed about John’s use of *ho logos* – or the Divine Word. Surely this was some abstract term autochthonous to the world of Stoicism and Greek philosophical thought.” (Reed, “How Semitic was John?”, 709) This theory did not retain much lasting support, in part because Greek speculative thinking does not conceive of the material world as being ethically tainted, as does the dualism of the Johannine and Essene traditions (Mowry, “Dead Sea Scrolls,” 80).

³⁶ Philonic dualism had attempted to fuse the Greek speculative approach to reality with the Hebraic. This remains a viable hypothesis. However, since Philo was located in Alexandria, some mechanism of transmission must be hypothesized for how Philonic influence could have reached the Johannine community in Jerusalem.

³⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971). Mowry comments that among Bultmann’s critics, Albright and Kuhn were particularly convincing in their argument that “the conceptual imagery and background of ideas reflected in the Gospel were not Gnostic but at best proto-Gnostic.” (Mowry, “Dead Sea Scrolls,” 80) While Bultmann’s influence in the earlier part of the twentieth century was significant, his “Mandean Gnostic source theory for the origins of the FG never achieved consensus among Johannine scholars.” (Yong, “The Light Shines in the Darkness,” 43).

³⁸ Kuhn and Albright attributed the dualism of the Essenes to Zoroastrian influence (Mowry, “Dead Sea Scrolls,” 82).

simplistically viewed first century Judaism as a unified, monolithic entity (for reasons we explored in some detail in chapter three), scholars have often found it necessary to look outside of Judaism to identify the dualistic elements of the Fourth Gospel. However, in recent decades the majority view is moving towards consensus. Now it is generally accepted that the Judaism of the first century CE “was not homogeneous but a complex, diversified phenomenon.”³⁹ This includes significant Hellenistic influence within Judaism, during the intertestamental period.⁴⁰

The Jewish tradition at the time of the writing of the New Testament had been gradually influenced by Hellenism and other outside perspectives, during the centuries after Judea was conquered by Alexander the Great, under the rule of the Seleucid empire.⁴¹ Nonetheless, there is no good reason to posit unnecessarily complicated theories of influence on the Fourth Gospel which require direct outside influence. Amos Yong captures the emerging consensus on this topic when he writes that

What a previous generation of researchers had suggested were features of Gnosticism—for example, the dualisms of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, and life and death—have more recently come to be seen as characteristics of a pervasive first-century Jewish-Hellenistic milieu that included the dualism of Qumran and other Jewish apocalyptic texts...⁴²

In this way, the Johannine tradition is seen to be a legitimate expression of the first century CE Judeo-Christian tradition. This would refute the suggestions by Bultmann and others who

³⁹ Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15.

⁴⁰ Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*. The nature of that influence will be discussed shortly.

⁴¹ The influence from outside cultures was nothing new. Old Testament scholars like Victor H. Matthews have long observed the many similarities that exist between the Creation and Flood accounts, covenants, and various aspects of the Mosaic Law, which collectively show significant influence from the traditions of surrounding cultures like the Egyptians and Canaanites (Victor H. Matthew, *Old Testament Themes* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000)). Nonetheless, it is helpful to remember that the material adapted from Israel’s polytheistic neighbors was always radically transformed in such a way as to blend perfectly into the monotheistic religious context of the (developing) Israelite worldview.

⁴² Yong, “The Light Shines in the Darkness,” 44.

suggested that the Gospel of John is a chimera-like syncretism of Christianity and Gnosticism.

Once the dualistic symbolism of the Johannine corpus was recognized to most closely resemble the dualistic element of the texts originating in the Essene community at Qumran, then there remains little reason to suggest direct influence from outside traditions, especially since those external traditions are seen to be much less similar to John's dualism than are first-century Jewish texts like the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Therefore it would appear that the worldview of the Fourth Gospel has its philosophical origins squarely within the Palestinian tradition. The reason it appears different in tone from the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament is that during the intertestamental period the Jewish culture had been Hellenized to varying degrees.⁴³ In contrast, when scholars assert *direct* foreign

⁴³ One of Reed's suggestions which strongly supports the conclusion of this study is that the *Logos* doctrine of the Fourth Gospel, which had previously been identified with Hellenistic philosophy, can also be observed in the ancient Egyptian tradition. It is significant that an incipient *logos* doctrine had been developed by the Egyptians several millennia previous to the Greek tradition's articulation of the Logos principle. In fact, the Egyptian Logos principle might be the source of both the Jewish notion of Yahweh speaking the world into existence in Genesis 1, as well as also being the source of the later Greek Logos principle. Reed comments, "Egyptologists have long been aware of the presence of a Logos doctrine in the text known as 'The Memphite Theology of Creation.' In its extant form it dates to approximately 700 B.C.E., but is likely a derivation from an original text sometime in the third millennium B.C.E." (Reed, "How Semitic Was John?", 721) This leads to the observation that the philosophical traditions of the entire Near East seem to be so thoroughly interwoven that it is difficult for us to discern influences in a linear or sequential manner. What is most relevant to our discussion here is that during the intertestamental period, the Logos principle from Egyptian and/or Greek philosophy had become intertwined with the biblical concepts of Torah and Wisdom, in the apocryphal texts of Second Temple Judaism. As a result, the Prologue of John is perhaps best interpreted as communicating that Jesus was the Torah/Logos/Wisdom made flesh. This challenges the standard interpretation, which tends to read the Prologue to John within a Hellenistic philosophical context. This may be entirely an assumption on our part. Reed provides compelling textual evidence for this assertion, noting that the "Greek *logos* has a connection with the Hebrew Torah (or in Greek *nomos*). Several times the LXX uses *logos* (word) to refer to the Torah either literally or in an abstract form... [Therefore, it is evident that] word (*logos*), wisdom (*Sophia*), and law (*nomos*) are interchangeable and synonymous [in the first century apocryphal literature]... The biblical canon originally understood wisdom as being in existence prior to the creation of the world, and the later writers of the apocryphal texts expanded wisdom to include the word and the law... This is not a new observation – few things are – for several scholars, such as Raymond Brown and C.K. Barrett, observed this line of thought in the last few decades of the twentieth century. [Therefore,] what John is proclaiming is unique: The Torah became flesh and the Torah *dwelt* among us." (Reed, "How Semitic Was John?", 718-719, 726). Furthermore, it is most significant that "the word for 'dwelt' in Greek (*skene*) can also mean 'a tent' or 'a tabernacle.' John's Logos, now perhaps understood properly as the Torah, did not so much 'dwell with humanity' as it 'tabernacled' with us for a bit." (Reed, "How Semitic Was John?", 726) Commenting on this point, N.T. Wright has suggested that John's prologue takes the two most important incarnational symbols of Judaism, the Torah and the Tabernacle (or Temple), and applies them to Jesus. (N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 110, and N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 405-407, 411)

influence on the Fourth Gospel at the time of its writing, then what is being asserted is that the Fourth Gospel is a syncretistic composition, a blend of Christianity and a foreign, non-Jewish philosophical or religious tradition. The difference between direct and indirect influence may appear subtle at first glance, but it is a most significant distinction.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that there are various types of dualism. There is a profound difference between the primarily *ethical* dualism of the Fourth Gospel (which contrasts the ethical categories of good and evil / light and dark / God and Satan) with the primarily *metaphysical* dualism of the Gnostic systems (which contrasts spirit and matter / light and darkness / a good creator God and an evil demiurge named Yahweh, etc.).⁴⁴ Although both systems are dualistic and use the theological motif of light and darkness, they operate out of radically different cosmological paradigms.

Furthermore, we should also note that while the dualistic worldview of the Essenes is much closer to the Johannine position. Nonetheless, the two are seen to diverge in very significant ways. For example, Amos Yong asserts that generally speaking, whereas the dualism of the Dead Sea Scrolls is both cosmic and metaphysical, the Johannine dualism, “while not excepting these features—including the blanket claims regarding the world being in darkness and in bondage to the devil (12:31, 14:30, 16:11)—is more straightforwardly soteriological and ethical, especially in terms of requiring moral decisions and personal commitments of its readers (and community members).”⁴⁵

Thus while there is some basic similarity between the Johannine tradition and Qumran (since both share a similar ethical dualism), nonetheless, most scholars consider it unlikely that

⁴⁴ See Capper, “Light from Essene History,” 5 and Mowry, “Dead Sea Scrolls,” 84.

⁴⁵ Yong, “The Light Shines in the Darkness,” 44.

there is any direct influence between the two groups. This move away from the conclusions of Mowry, and others, is due to the insight provided by the important volume *John and Qumran*⁴⁶, published in 1972. This collection of essays edited by J.H. Charlesworth and Raymond Brown convinced most scholars that while the connection between John and Qumran is “by no means one of bald assimilation, nonetheless the Fourth Gospel stands in a peculiar proximity to Qumran within the writings of the New Testament.”⁴⁷ Capper comments that the relation between Qumran and the Johannine community’s theology is close enough to suggest “a definite, albeit modified and perhaps indirect, influence.”⁴⁸

Brian Capper has performed a careful historical and archaeological study of the most likely mode of influence of the Essene community on the theology of the Johannine tradition.⁴⁹ It is admittedly speculative, as are all such hypotheses made two millennia after the fact using fragmentary archaeological and textual evidence. Nonetheless, his historical reconstruction is quite compelling, and is worth exploring here.

Capper comments that a link between the Johannine tradition and John the Baptist becomes clear from the fact that the Fourth Gospel tradition is the only one to describe the overlap of Jesus’ ministry with John the Baptist’s (John 1:1-4:3). The Gospel of John is also unique in mentioning the transfer of John’s disciples’ allegiance to Jesus (John 1:19-42).⁵⁰

Capper’s hypothesis builds on the archaeological evidence which points towards a Qumran-influenced, mystically-oriented monastic sect which was housed on the southwest hill in

⁴⁶ J.H. Charlesworth and Raymond Brown, ed., *John and Qumran* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972).

⁴⁷ Capper, “Light from Essene History,” 5-6.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1-55.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 6.

Jerusalem, near what the ancient historians Josephus and Eusebius have referred to as the “Essene Gate.”⁵¹ He suggests that previous to the time of Jesus and John the Baptist, a shift had taken place in the relationship between the previously politically influential Essene community in Jerusalem and the Sadducean political powers. That resulted in the majority of the Essene community relocating to Qumran, where they took up a more oppositional stance towards the Sadducean Temple administration. Capper then hypothesizes, on the basis of archaeological evidence, that a small group of Essenes probably remained in Jerusalem where they gradually severed ties with the more reactionary Qumran community. Sociologically, it would make sense for the isolated Essene community in Jerusalem to have become more inwardly and ascetically oriented. Capper suggests that it seems likely that this mystically and ascetically oriented group would have responded to the ministry of John the Baptist, given their particular theological disposition. It seems reasonable that some of them would later become followers of Jesus, including the Beloved Disciple, who Capper posits to have been the leader of their celibate monastic movement, based on further evidence we cannot elaborate on here.⁵²

The full details of Capper’s thesis are too extensive to duplicate adequately here. Though it is a speculative argument, it is very compelling in the way it neatly ties together the various historical, archaeological, and textual evidence, as well as giving insight into the distinctive theological orientation of the Fourth Gospel, which many commentators have described as “mystical.”⁵³ Thus, Capper concludes that the reason for the distinctive ‘spiritual’ fashioning of

⁵¹ Ibid., 19-36. In brief, Capper’s hypothesis regarding authorship is that “the Beloved Disciple was a member of the ascetic quarter on the southwest hill... [This presents him] as a plausible historical figure, a priestly leader of an ascetic, celibate quarter in Jerusalem, towards which evidence from the side of both the Synoptic tradition and the Fourth Gospel points.” (Ibid., 54)

⁵² Ibid., 6-7.

⁵³ The Fourth Gospel’s “mystical” themes are most apparent in the teachings on the indwelling Deity and the commandment to abide in Christ, which are found in John chapters 17 and 15, respectively.

the tradition about Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is because the Beloved Disciple had been “a longstanding member of a community of ascetics who were devoted to a life of permanent worship and religious contemplation. The Beloved Disciple’s habitual life of religious discipline, study, and contemplation was the lens through which his theological vision of the story of Jesus was formed.”⁵⁴ The significance of Capper’s conclusions is that they suggest a compelling reason for the distinctive character of the Johannine tradition, which Capper attributes to “its conception in a distinctive, intensely contemplative, virtually *monastic* spirituality?”⁵⁵

Thus Capper would view the Beloved Disciple himself as being the principal source of a theological inheritance from Qumran into a sector of early Christianity, whose distinctive perspective influenced the final form of the Fourth Gospel.⁵⁶ This suggestion is compelling, and it is in agreement with Brown, who suggests that it may have been the Johannine community’s unique background which is responsible for the distinctive quality of the Fourth Gospel.⁵⁷ If Capper’s theoretical reconstruction is correct, then as former members of the Essene community who later became disciples of John the Baptist, it would make sense that the Johannine community would have resonated with different aspects of Jesus’ teachings than did many of his other followers, whose memory and understanding of Jesus is communicated in the Synoptic Gospels.⁵⁸

Furthermore, highlighting the diverse nature of first-century Judaism, Brown points out that if Qumran exemplifies “a wider range of thought, Jesus could well have been familiar with

⁵⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Intro to the New Testament*, 373.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

its vocabulary and ideas; for the Word-made-flesh spoke the language of his time.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, Brown suggests that the followers of Christ who would later come to form the Johannine community may well have had a special affection for this characteristically dualistic style of thought, and the symbolism with which he communicated it. Therefore they “would have been more attentive in preserving it.”⁶⁰ The plausibility of this hypothetical scenario is strengthened by the fact that similarly dualistic language is found sprinkled throughout the Synoptic gospels and the Pauline and Petrine epistles,⁶¹ suggesting that the dualistic teaching which is most distinctive to the Gospel of John is in fact derived from the historical teachings of Jesus himself.

This scenario worked out by Brown and Capper is worthy of attention simply for the fact that it presents a compelling explanation for how the Gospel of John can be seen to have accurately and authentically communicated the historical teachings of Jesus. In contrast, many of the alternative explanations make a highly reductionistic methodological presupposition, concluding *a priori* that the message of the Gospel of John is nothing more than a fabrication by the Johannine community.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ See for instance Mt 4:16, Lk 1:78-79, Ac 26:17-18, 2 Cor 6:14, Eph 5:8, Col 1:13, 1 Th 5:4-5, 1 Pt 2:9. These texts are discussed briefly in the following section of this study. See Yong, “The Light Shines in the Darkness,” 31-32.

⁶² An earlier example of this approach is found in Meeks’ 1972 article, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 no 1 (Mar 1972): 44-72. Although attribution of Gnostic influences to the Johannine tradition has *not* been upheld by subsequent scholarship, nonetheless, socio-scientific studies of sectarian tendencies within the Johannine tradition continue to be quite influential. For example, Yong’s article “The Light Shines in the Darkness” explores the significance of the Fourth Gospel’s sectarian theological paradigm for contemporary interreligious dialogue. We would comment that there is certainly some validity to Meeks’ and Yong’s approach, which explores how sectarian influence might have affected the form of the theology of the Gospel of John. However, our concern with that approach is that it tends to reduce the gospel message in such a way that it becomes merely a reflection of the historical circumstances of the community who composed the text. Similar to the conundrum faced in particle physics, as epitomized in the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, there is a

The plausibility of this scenario is reinforced by Brown's observation that some characteristically Johannine expressions have a faint echo in the Synoptics. Examples include the "hour," mentioned in Mark 14:35, and the solemn "I am" of Mark 6:50 and 14:62.⁶³ Furthermore, we would point out that ethical dualism expressed in the symbolism of light and darkness is certainly most common in the Johannine corpus, but it is also encountered throughout the New Testament, and the Old, for that matter. A few noteworthy examples of ethical dualism in the New Testament are as follows: "...I am sending you to them to open their eyes so that they may turn from *darkness* to *light* and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:17-18); "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between *light* and *darkness*?" (2 Cor. 6:14); "For once you were *darkness*, but now in the Lord you are *light*" (Eph. 5:8); "But you, beloved, are not in *darkness*, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of *light* and children of the day; we are not of the night or of *darkness*" (1 Thess. 5:4-5).⁶⁴ Yong points out other examples as well, such as Col. 1:13, 1 Pet. 2:9, Matt. 4:16 (which is a citation of Isa 9:1-2), and Luke 1:78-79 (Zechariah's prophecy, which draws on the messianic metaphor of the coming of the dawn, cf. Numbers 24:17 in LXX).⁶⁵ It is important to remember that all of these texts were composed in their final forms earlier than the writing of the Johannine corpus. While the ethical

sense in which researchers seem to be forced to *either* focus their scholarly attention on the gospel message as proclaimed in Scripture, *or* they can use the text as a source with which to investigate the communities which formed the text. It is extraordinarily difficult to do both, at least not using consistent assumptions and hermeneutics. Depending on the assumptions we make, we can choose to view the text as source material for interpreting Jesus' message, or it can be perceived as a representation of the theology of the author. Scholarly investigation tends to reduce the text to raw material for reconstruction of either one or the other (Jesus' teaching, or the perception of it by human authors). This is an epistemological and hermeneutic challenge which contemporary biblical studies scholarship has not yet solved. In fact, it is not clear that most practitioners are even aware of the problem.

⁶³ Brown, *Intro to the New Testament*, 373.

⁶⁴ These examples of ethical dualism communicated in the symbolism of light and darkness are all from Yong's article, "The Light Shines in the Darkness," 31-32.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

dualism of the New Testament is seen to be especially pronounced in the Gospel of John, it is in no way unique to the Fourth Gospel.

Concluding Comments

In this appendix we have examined some of the evidence for claims made by Bultmann and others who have asserted that Hellenism and/or Gnosticism *directly* shaped the formation of the theological distinctives of the Gospel of John. If a significant New Testament text like the Gospel of John were in fact gnostic in origin, that would weaken the argument established in the preceding chapters of our study. For that reason, we have chosen to explore this issue in some detail.

If the New Testament had been a syncretistic product of gnostic influence, this would not prove fatal to our argument, because our conclusions rest specifically on the characteristically Hebraic nature of the *biblical anthropology* of both testaments. However, one would presume that gnostic texts would have gnostic anthropologies, so we have chosen to explore this subtopic in some detail. We decided it was important to carefully explore the assertions of gnostic influence on the Gospel of John. Those assertions have been largely refuted in recent decades. Unfortunately, the news of the demise of the gnostic-influence hypothesis on the New Testament has been slow to spread beyond the small group of scholars specializing in this particular area of research. Because of the complex nature of theological research, misunderstandings in one subdiscipline tend to have a ripple effect in other areas. Misunderstandings in New Testament studies can easily lead us astray in a seemingly unrelated discipline like theological anthropology. This further demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary analysis, both within the theological disciplines, and beyond.

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