

## Hebrew Thought: Its Implications for Christian Education

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The centrality of the Word of God in the Christian educational endeavor is a *sine qua non*. However, there are some misconceptions in understanding the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Some of its concepts and statements are “both attributed to and viewed from a western perspective.”<sup>2</sup> This is especially true in Asia. Since Christianity came to Asia from the West, there is a tendency to look at the Bible as a Western book.<sup>3</sup> Such a perspective arises when one overlooks the original setting of the Scriptures, which is basically Near Eastern.

By saying that the original setting of the Bible is Near Eastern, I mean the predominant biblical thought is Hebraic. Our Christian Bible expresses a certain concept of reality that is essentially Hebraic. Hebrew thoughts, concepts, and culture are evident throughout the Bible.<sup>4</sup> A renewed understanding of Hebrew thought offers a number of insights applicable to a Christian philosophy of edu-

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<sup>1</sup> R. K. Harrison notes, “Since modern occidental methods of historical interpretation may present decided problems when imposed upon oriental cultures, particularly those of antiquity, it is probably wise to consider the historical outlook and methods of compilation of the Near Eastern cultures on their own terms also, lest the historiographical attempts of antiquity unwittingly be assessed in terms of the scientific methods of more recent times, with equally unfortunate results.” *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 295.

<sup>2</sup> Zdravko Stefanovic, “For the Asian First and Then for the Westerners,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 4 (1990): 413.

<sup>3</sup> “A common error of most Bible readers is to put into the Scriptures Western manners and customs instead of interpreting them from the Eastern point of view.” Merrill T. Gilbertson, *The Way It Was In Bible Times* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), 2.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Stefanovic, 412-13, where some of the examples in the OT and NT which are Eastern or Asian in concept and practice are enumerated. See also Ferdinand O. Regalado, “The Old Testament as One of the Resources for Doing Theology in Asia,” *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 2 (1999): 41-50, for the same treatment, although restricted to the OT only and its implications for “doing theology in Asia.”

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caution. In this essay, we shall see what implications the Hebrews, with their wholistic outlook, their concrete and dynamic thinking, and their concept of group or community, may have for us.

### The Wholistic Thought of the Hebrews

The Hebrew word *“bōdâ”* supports the idea that the Hebrew people view their life as a dynamic unity. Interestingly, this word is translated as both “work”<sup>5</sup> and “worship.”<sup>6</sup> Thus for the Hebrews, study *is* worship. Abraham Heschel, in a similar vein, poignantly noted: “Genuine reverence for the sanctity of study is bound to invoke in the pupils the awareness that study is not an ordeal but an act of edification; that the school is a sanctuary, not a factory; that study is a form of worship.”<sup>7</sup> The idea of “studying as a form of worship” is a great motivation in learning. Such motivation in learning would make a Christian scholar different from a non-Christian scholar. The Christian scholar is different in the sense that there is no room for “intellectual dishonesty” and mediocrity because she “believes that in all that she does intellectually, socially, or artistically, she is handling God’s creation and that is sacred.”<sup>8</sup> Today, learning and education are viewed as purely secular pursuits. The Hebrews view such pursuits differently. Indeed, there are neither secular occupations nor sacred ones; Hebrews view their “God-given vocation—whether it be that of farmer, herdsman, fisherman, tax collector, teacher or scribe—as a means of bringing glory to God by the very privilege of work itself.”<sup>9</sup>

The wholistic thought of the Hebrews is also seen in their sacred view of life. For them everything is theocentric or God-centered. There is no distinction between the secular and religious area of life. This aspect of Hebrew thought is clearly stated in the words of the psalmist: “I have set the LORD always before me” (Ps 16:8).<sup>10</sup> Thus, to modern Jews, “blessings are recited over some of the most mundane items, such as upon seeing lightning, hearing thunder, and even after using the washroom.”<sup>11</sup> The totality of existence embraces the whole way of life. This kind of wholistic thinking can be seen in the Bible. In the midst of

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<sup>5</sup> There are many instances where *“bōdâ”* is translated as “work.” See, e.g., Gen 29:27; Exod 1:14; Lev 23:7-8; Num 28:18, 25-26; Ps 104:23; 1 Chron 27:26.

<sup>6</sup> See Walter C. Kaiser, “*“bad,”* *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:639.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 42.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 48.

<sup>9</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, “Hebrew Thought in the Life of the Church,” in *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, ed. Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood (Winoona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 131.

<sup>10</sup> All scriptural references cited in this paper are from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup> Yechiel Eckstein, *What Christians Should Know About the Jews and Judaism* (Waco: Word, 1984), 70.

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his tragic experience, Job still blesses the name of the Lord, whether God gives or takes away (Job 1:21). It is with the same Hebraic frame of mind that Joseph, before he dies, utters these words to his brothers who have betrayed him: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good”(Gen 50:20). We see here that even in some mysterious reversals of life, God is still recognized as the one who providentially overrules such circumstances. Romans 8:28 adds the same thought: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Finding the divine in the commonplace characterizes the wholistic thought of the Hebrews. Paul reminds us, in Hebraic idiom, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). He expresses a similar thought on another occasion, saying, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col 3:17). For Paul, therefore, every aspect of life, including study, is to be viewed as, in a sense, worship.

The wholistic thought of the Hebrews covers all aspects of life. They see all of it in relation to God. The purpose of their celebration of different festivals is primarily spiritual or God-centered. “To the Israelite the seasons were the work of the creator for the benefit of man. They manifested the beneficence of God towards His creatures. By these feasts, man not only acknowledged God as his Provider but recorded the Lord’s unbounded and free favour to a chosen people whom he delivered, by personal intervention in this world.”<sup>12</sup>

Both their civil New Year (which starts at the month of Tishri) and religious New Year (which starts at the month of Nisan) are viewed as theological. The civil New Year festival, or *Rosh Hashanah*, signalled by a blowing of trumpets, was treated as religious due to the concept that “God had created an orderly world”<sup>13</sup> by the appearance of a new moon on that month. Although the religious New Year was based on the barley harvest, it was seen from a theocentric perspective, a reminder of “God’s constant provision for them,”<sup>14</sup> the abundant harvest being a gift of God.

Related to this wholistic thought is the emphasis on the totality of a person’s being. The body itself is materially different from, but not essentially separate from, the soul. The individual is viewed as a dynamic unity. The Hebrew word for “soul” (*nepeš*), which is commonly understood by many today as something a person has, is in fact referring to the whole person and implies “all the functions of man, spiritual, mental, emotional, as well as physical.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Deut 6:5

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<sup>12</sup> D. Freeman, “Feasts,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. J. D. Douglas et al (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1982), 374.

<sup>13</sup> Pat Alexander, ed., *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible*, new rev. ed. (Tring, Herts: Lion, 1986), 122.

<sup>14</sup> David and Pat Alexander, eds., *The Lion Handbook of the Bible* (Tring, Herts: Lion, 1973), 180.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1993), 210.

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enjoins every human being to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” It is a call to serve and love God passionately, with one’s whole being. What significance would such a passage have for us as Christian educators? One reality is that we should treat our students wholly, not only as intellectual persons but also as emotional, physical, and spiritual beings. In fact, the Hebrews “were interested in producing what Jewish psychiatrists and educators today call a *mensch* (a Yiddish word for one who has his *total life* put together in an exemplary way).”<sup>16</sup>

Greek thought, on the other hand, is dualistic in its view of persons: human beings are viewed in dualistic terms of soul and body. We can see such influence in most of our modern education. Thus, the strengthening of the mind alone is emphasized to the neglect of the physical and the spiritual needs of students. At times the situation is reversed, with spirituality emphasized rather extremely, as in some kinds of ascetic or monastic spirituality. Looking at the earthly life of Jesus, we see that He exemplified the true meaning of spirituality. His life was not spent only in remote places, but between the mountain and the multitude—a combination of a solitary and social life.

Part of the wholistic thinking of the Hebrews is clearly seen in their view of illness. For them, sickness is linked to sin. Disease is the result of man’s disobedience to God. Thus, many biblical texts describe obedience to God and His laws as conditions of good health. Let me cite some selected texts.

If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you. (Exod 15:26)

If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name—the LORD your God—the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses. He will bring upon you all the diseases of Egypt that you dreaded, and they will cling to you. The LORD will also bring on you every kind of sickness and disaster not recorded in this Book of the Law, until you are destroyed. (Deut 28:58-61)

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers. . . . He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you. (Deut 7:12, 15)

Christ also points to the spiritual dimension of health and disease. After healing the woman who has been crippled for many years, and after reproving the synagogue ruler who questions his healing on the Sabbath day, Jesus speaks

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 131; emphasis mine.

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of “this woman whom Satan has bound for eighteen years” (Luke 13:16). D. H. Trapnell, who discusses disease as one of the causes of suffering, makes a good point in his analysis of the case of Job’s suffering.

The book of Job shows that the real issue is man’s relationship to God rather than his attitude to his own suffering. It is the principal OT refutation of the view, put forward with great skill by Job’s “comforters,” that there is an inevitable link between individual sin and individual suffering. . . . It is important to realize that the biblical picture is not a mere dualism. Rather, suffering is presented in the light of eternity and in relation to a God who is sovereign, but who is nevertheless forbearing in his dealings with the world because of his love for men (2 Pet 3:9). Conscious of the sorrow and pain round about them, the NT writers look forward to the final consummation when suffering shall be no more (Rom 8:18; Rev 21:4).<sup>17</sup>

Reflecting on such wholistic thinking of the Hebrews, one could derive significant implications for Christian education. There is a noticeable tendency to dichotomize or compartmentalize the whole educational program and experience, even in a Christian setting. The secular and the spiritual activities are being separated, conducted and operated in their own spheres. John Wesley Taylor V illustrates this point well:

Those that operate under the “spiritual” designator include a brief devotional at the beginning of the day, the “Bible” class, chapel period, the Week of Prayer, and church services on weekends. Once these are over, however, we must “get on with business.” And we carry on the academic enterprise with a decidedly secular orientation.<sup>18</sup>

After stressing the danger of such a dichotomy in a Christian institution, Taylor forcefully states, “we must think Christianly about the totality of life and learning”<sup>19</sup> in the whole educational programs and experiences.

#### **Concrete and Dynamic Thinking of the Hebrew People**

The structure of the Hebrew sentence gives us an idea of the manner in which the Hebrews think. The word order of the English language is different from that of Hebrew. The structure of the English language is analytic,<sup>20</sup> meaning that the sense of the sentence is determined through its word order. It places the noun or the subject before the verb (the action word). For example, “the king judged.” However, the word order of the Hebrew language “is normally reversed. That is, the verb most often comes first in the clause, then the noun;

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<sup>17</sup> D. H. Trapnell, “Health, Disease and Healing,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 464.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley Taylor V, “A Biblical Foundation for the Integration of Faith and Learning,” a paper presented at the 27<sup>th</sup> International Seminar on the Integration of Faith and Learning, Mission College, Muak Lek, Thailand, 3-15 December 2000, 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3d rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 5.

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thus, 'He judged, (namely) the king.' In Hebrew grammar, the position of emphasis is usually the beginning of the clause."<sup>21</sup> This kind of emphasis on the verb suggests that the Hebrews are action-centered people. Moreover, the root of all Hebrew words is derived from the verb.<sup>22</sup> They seldom used adjectives in their sentences,<sup>23</sup> indicating that their thinking is concrete rather than abstract. They are not like their Greek counterparts, who are philosophical and abstract in thinking. A person's or student's intelligence is usually measured by the ability to do abstract and philosophical reasoning. The role of a teacher is transferring intellectual knowledge. For the Hebrews, however, truth is something to do and not only to think, something to live out, to apply, and not just theorize. This is why the Hebrew Bible is more a record of action, the record of God's salvific act in history, than a "summary exposition of a theological system."<sup>24</sup> Its emphasis is more on events and people, and not so much on abstract ideas or concepts. So in Christian education, truth or ideas should be not only a theory or philosophy, but something lived out and done. Ultimately, what is most important is the godly and Christian life of a teacher who effects changes in the students' lives.

The root of the Hebrew word is one of the indications of their frame of mind. For example, "the root word *dbr* means 'to speak' and 'to act.' The word is the act."<sup>25</sup> This is clearly seen in Isa 55:11, where God acts as he speaks: "So is my word [Heb. *dābār*] that goes out from my mouth...[it] will accomplish [*āsāh*] what I desire."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, this Hebrew word means both "event" and "word."<sup>27</sup> So the event (or the action) of the person is understood as his or her word.<sup>28</sup> Any word must have the corresponding concrete action. We will better understand then the words in Prov 14:23 that "mere talk [literally in Hebrew "words of lip"] leads only to poverty." It emphasizes also that words are not cheap to the Hebrews. This thought reinforces that

[T]he Jews were pragmatists. They were never interested in making education a game of storing up abstract concepts or theoretical principles. Education had to be useful in meeting the challenges and needs of this world. To know something was to experience it rather than merely to intellectualize it. In short, to "know" was to "do" and learning was life. The whole person was engaged in what John, a NT Jewish writer, calls "doing the truth" (1 John 1:16).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Wilson, "Hebrew Thought," 137.

<sup>22</sup> Doukhan, 192.

<sup>23</sup> Robert L. Cate, *How to Interpret the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983), 67, 68.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Doukhan, 195.

<sup>26</sup> See also Psalm 33:6, 9; 12:1ff; 148:5; Gen 24:66; 1 Kings 11:41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 131.

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Being an action-oriented people, the Hebrews are concrete in their thinking. They use few abstract terms. The Bible gives us many examples to illustrate this point. “‘Look’ is ‘lift up the eyes’ (Gen 22:4); ‘be angry’ is ‘burn in one’s nostrils’ (Exod 4:14); ‘disclose something to another’ or ‘reveal’ is ‘unstop someone’s ears’ (Ruth 4:4); ‘no compassion’ is ‘hard-heartedness’ (1 Sam 6:6); ‘stubborn’ is ‘stiff-necked’ (2 Chron 30:8; cf. Acts 7:51); ‘get ready’ is ‘gird up the loins’ (Jer 1:17); and ‘to be determined to go’ is ‘set one’s face to go’ (Jer 42:15, 17; cf. Luke 9:51),”<sup>30</sup> to mention a few. Such concrete ways of describing ideas and concepts signifies that “the Hebrews were mainly a doing and feeling people.”<sup>31</sup>

Another example of the concreteness of the Hebrew thinking is the Hebrew word *’ahav* [or *’ahav*], which we translate as “love.” The word love is often associated with emotion or feeling. Today, it is a common understanding that “to love” means “to feel love.” But an interesting study by Abraham Malamat<sup>32</sup> of the Hebrew nuances of the word love makes this emotive and abstract concept of love concrete. According to him, *’ahav* may also mean to be useful or beneficial or helpful. Hence, he translated the love commandment in Lev 19:18 as follows: “You should be beneficial or helpful to your neighbor as you would be to yourself.” Then he concludes, “the Bible is not commanding us to *feel* something—love—but to *do* something—to be useful or beneficial to help your neighbor.”<sup>33</sup> The concrete and dynamic thinking of the Hebrew people implies that they are pragmatic. They want not only to think about truth but to experience it, and knowing the truth means doing and living it. Is there a message in all this for Christian education?

Significantly, the Hebrew seat of intelligence is in the ears.<sup>34</sup> In Psalm 78:1, it says: “Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth” (KJV). You will find many examples in the Bible where the term ears is used both in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge, concepts, and ideas.<sup>35</sup> Intelligence for them is the ability to listen.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, this concept supports the idea that knowledge to the Hebrew people is not intrinsic but something coming from outside—something to be received.<sup>37</sup> It is devoid of any

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> See his shorter article, “‘Love Your Neighbor as Yourself’: What it Really Means,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16 (July/August 1990): 50-51, which is an adaptation of his article with full scholarly apparatus in the *Festschrift Rolf Rendtorff*, ed. E. Blum (Nuekirchen-Vleryu).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 51; emphasis his.

<sup>34</sup> Doukhan, 194.

<sup>35</sup> See also e.g., Job 13:1, Exod 17:14, 1 Sam 9:15, Rev 2:7; 3:22.

<sup>36</sup> Doukhan, 194.

<sup>37</sup> See for example Ps 119:125, 144; Job 32:8.

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form of that humanism—where human beings are considered as the measure of all things—which characterizes many secular universities and colleges today.<sup>38</sup>

We can see then the significant role of “revelation” in Hebrew education. The revelation of God is the source of all wisdom and knowledge. The discovery of true knowledge depends on divine revelation.<sup>39</sup>

This same principle can be applied to Christian education. We need to reiterate the importance of the Word of God and biblical revelation in the quest of wisdom and truth. If we will not do this, Prov 29:18 reminds us that “where there is no revelation, people perish.” After all, the goal of education is to have a practical knowledge of God for salvation.

As we have pointed out throughout this paper, there is a considerable difference between the Hebrews and the Greeks in their view of life. Norman Snaith correctly summarizes this difference, as seen in the acquisition of knowledge and its source.

The object and aim of the Hebrew system is *da'ath elohim* (Knowledge of God). The object and aim of the Greek system is *gnothi seauton* (Know thyself). Between these two there is the widest possible difference. There is no compromise between the two on anything like equal terms. They are poles apart in attitude and method. The Hebrew system starts with God. The only true wisdom is Knowledge of God. “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” The corollary is that man can never know himself, what he is and his relation to the world, unless first he learns of God and is submissive to God’s sovereign will. The Greek system, on the contrary, starts from the knowledge of man, and seeks to rise to an understanding of the ways and Nature of God through the knowledge of what is called “man’s higher nature.” According to the Bible, man has no higher nature except he be born of the Spirit.

We find this approach of the Greeks nowhere in the Bible. The whole Bible, the New Testament as well as the Old Testament, is based on the Hebrew attitude and approach.<sup>40</sup>

### **Hebraic Concept of Group or Community**

The Hebraic concept of community is reflected in their idea of “corporate personality.”<sup>41</sup> This term denotes that “the individual was always thought of in

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<sup>38</sup> The prevailing “humanism” and other “isms” in secular universities has been emphasized by Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 23-36, in the chapter entitled “The Anti-Christian Roots of the University.”

<sup>39</sup> See [P. Gerard Damsteegt], *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, DC: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), 18.

<sup>40</sup> Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 184-85.

<sup>41</sup>H. Wheeler Robinson used the expression “corporate personality.” “Hebrew Psychology,” *The People and the Book*, ed. A. S. Peake, 353-82; idem, “The Hebrew Conception of the Corporate



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the collective (family, tribe, nation) and the collective in the individual. This corporate solidarity was further reinforced by the fact that the entire community (past ancestors and future members) was viewed as one personality.<sup>42</sup> This idea of corporate personality is stressed even in the modern Jewish community, where at the celebration of the “Passover each Jew is obligated to regard himself as if he personally had come out of Egypt, not simply his ancestors.”<sup>43</sup> In the NT times, the idea of “one family” is underscored by Jesus, who teaches his disciples to pray to “Our Father in heaven” (Matt 6:9), signifying that the Father in heaven is not just the Father of an individual but the Father of the community. Today, “most Jewish prayer employs the plural ‘we,’ not ‘I.’ It expresses the cry of the whole community.”<sup>44</sup>

Relative to this Hebraic notion of group or community is the idea of social unity and brotherhood. This is reflected in the idea of *mišpāḥâ* (clan or family). This term covers the whole clan, including uncles, aunts, and even remote cousins. Each *mišpāḥâ* sees itself as part of a single worldwide Jewish family.<sup>45</sup> Johannes Pedersen notes that “the city-community is a *mišpāḥâ*, and consequently the fellow-citizen becomes a brother.”<sup>46</sup> So the question being asked of Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” was “not so easy to answer in ancient Israel because the neighbor, the fellow citizen, is the one with whom one lives in community.”<sup>47</sup>

Levirate custom points out the Near Eastern concept of family or community. The term levirate is “derived from Latin *levir*, meaning ‘husband brother’.”<sup>48</sup> This is a custom of the Israelites that “when a married man died without a child, his brother was expected to take his wife,”<sup>49</sup> and “the children of the marriage counted as the first children of the first husband.”<sup>50</sup> This kind of regulation might be strange to our modern society, but this was established with the permission of God (Gen 38:8-10; Deut 5:5-10) to protect the lineage of a family and to emphasize the sacredness of life. In the Mishnah we read, “He who destroys a single life is considered as if he had destroyed the whole world, and he who saves a single life is considered as having saved the whole world”

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Personality,” *Werden und Wesen des Alten Testaments*, ed. J. Hempel (‘Beihefte zur ZAW,’ 66), 49-62. Quoted in Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: Norton, 1960), 70, n. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 133-34.

<sup>43</sup> I. Breuer, *Concepts of Judaism*, ed. J. S. Levinger (Jerusalem: Israel UP, 1974), 296, quoted in Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 134. See also Exod 13:3-16.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 133.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 188.

<sup>46</sup> Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford UP, 1926; Copenhagen: Branner og Korch, 1926), 1:59.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>48</sup> J. S. Wright and J. A. Thompson, “Marriage,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 743.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

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(*m. Sanh.* 4:5).<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the purpose of this seemingly anomalous law “was to prevent the family from dying out.”<sup>52</sup> “This institution accordingly had an ethical foundation. The relative who married the widow did not profit financially.”<sup>53</sup> So the *levir* is actually sacrificing himself if he would agree to be one, for the sake of preserving the family. We can see that to the Hebrews, sacrificing oneself is not that important as long as it is for the betterment of the whole family.

Connected with the Hebrew concept of group and community is the idea of mutual responsibility and accountability. This is visible in the kinsman-redeemer practice of the biblical Hebrews. All Israelites, through this practice, “are mutually accountable for one another and mutually participate in the life of one another.”<sup>54</sup> In Leviticus 25, this practice is fully illustrated. It describes how property and personal freedom can be redeemed.

Land that was sold in time of need could be repurchased by the original owner or by a relative of his (Lev 25:25-27). If a man became poor and had to sell himself into slavery, he or a relative had the right to purchase his freedom (Lev 25:48-53).<sup>55</sup> A good and true kinsman-redeemer is responsible for such repurchase and restitution if the original owner could not afford.<sup>56</sup>

How does this concept of solidarity apply to the philosophy of Christian education? Portland Adventist Academy in Oregon incorporated this *brother's keeper* concept as one of the principles of its character development program. This concept suggests “that individuals are connected and are accountable to everyone whose lives they touch.” Greg Madson, chaplain of that Academy, testifies that on many occasions “students, taking the principle of brother's keeper seriously, have sought his help for friends who are involved in self-destructive behavior.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the concept of solidarity and mutual respon-

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 134. In Jacob Neusner's *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), the comment restricts this to destroying or saving an “Israelite.”

<sup>52</sup> Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. William G. Heidt (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1955), 204.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 134.

<sup>55</sup> See Herbert Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 24. Another practice, recorded in Num 35, emphasizing mutual responsibility is the “blood-revenge”(or “redeemer of blood”) system. Since many Middle Eastern people are living in some remote desert place, far from any civil government, this kind of justice system is practiced. This is one way of surviving in a harsh desert society, where most people barely live. “All males are obliged to defend and avenge each other, just as they are all liable to suffer revenge for the misdeeds of one. For an individual does not exist in his own right, but only as the extension of his clan” (Clinton Bailey, “How Desert Culture Helps Us Understand the Bible: Bedouin Law Explains Reaction to Rape of Dinah,” *Bible Review* 7 [August 1991]: 20).

<sup>56</sup> R. Laird Harris, “*gā'al*,” *TWOT*, 1:144.

<sup>57</sup> Greg Madson, “The Christ-Centered, Character-Driven School,” *Journal of Adventist Education*, 62 (October/November 1999): 38.

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sibility implies that our pursuit of learning is not an individual work but a collective and corporate one. The true meaning of education can only be found by the members of the community in their relationship to each other.

However, there is too much emphasis on rugged individualism<sup>58</sup> in our modern society, where the sense of accountability is losing and excessive self-interest is reigning. Christian institutions are facing the same danger of individualism. Remember that the biblical concept of “the priesthood of the believers means that each Christian functions as a priest not only unto God, but also unto his neighbor.”<sup>59</sup>

It is interesting to note that teachers in Old Testament times regarded their pupils as their sons (Heb. *bānîm*). Archaeologists have discovered ancient schoolrooms which give us an idea of how instruction was carried out and about the relationships between teachers and students. For example, in the place called Mari of the Sumerian civilization, “school staff included the professor, often called ‘the school father,’ with pupils called the ‘school sons,’ an assistant who prepared the daily exercises, specialist teachers, and others responsible for discipline were called ‘big brother.’”<sup>60</sup> Here we will notice that even in the ancient Near Eastern school setting, there is a prevailing concept of “family” which may have influenced the Hebrew people or vice versa. “In the Hebrew Bible, teachers (priests) are called ‘father’ (Judg 17:10; 18:19), and the relationship between teacher and student (e.g., Elijah and Elisha) is expressed by ‘father’ and ‘son’ (2 Kgs 2:3, 12). In addition, in the opening chapters of the book of Proverbs, the sage regularly addresses his student as ‘my son.’”<sup>61</sup> This emphasis on “relationships” in education challenges today’s growing technological type of education, where students can get a degree on-line without attending any formal classes and without any contact at all with the teacher—just with the computer at home or in the work place.<sup>62</sup> Applying this Hebrew concept of “family” suggests that healthy relational contact between students and teachers is still profoundly important because the teacher can be an effective living textbook. After all, “it is

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<sup>58</sup> According to Lourdes Morales-Gudmundsson, American individualism was born out of “Protestant understanding of individual responsibility in personal salvation.” She continues, “Americans admire the self-reliant, self-made person who overcomes obstacles to achieve success. Success, in turn, is measured by the individual’s ability to earn money (ideally by dint of hard, honest labor, and clever money management) or to acquire high levels of education.” “Building Community out of Diversity,” *Journal of Adventist Education*, 60 (October/November 1997): 15.

<sup>59</sup> Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 135.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander, *Encyclopedia*, 245.

<sup>61</sup> Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 280.

<sup>62</sup> I have nothing against the “on-line learning” or “distributed learning” program per se, although I have some reservations where there is *no contact at all* between on-line students and on-line teachers.

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the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text they will never forget.”<sup>63</sup>

Since Israel had no system of formal schooling in its earliest years, learning commonly took place at home. Home was the center of education and the main source of learning. The father and mother in the home played an important role in the instruction of their children, not only about practical things in life, but most importantly about God.<sup>64</sup> “Abraham is to instruct not only his children, but his entire household in the way of the Lord (Gen 18:19). At an early age, children were trained in the everyday duties of the family, such as the pasturing of sheep (e.g., 1 Sam 16:11) and the work of the fields (2 Kings 4:18). Girls learned household crafts, such as baking (2 Sam 13:8), spinning, and weaving (Exod 35:25-26).”<sup>65</sup> Knowledge then was transmitted from person to person, from parents to children and on. Children were trained by their parents’ example in the home. But because of the crushing experiences that the nation of Israel had gone through, “home life had been disrupted and parents themselves often needed instruction. To remedy this situation schools were established with scribes as teachers.”<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that the home is still an ideal center of learning.<sup>67</sup> Consider the positive result of Hannah’s teaching her son Samuel during his formative years (1 Sam 1:21-23). Look also at the kind of home education that Jesus received. Although he did not attend rabbinical school (John 7:15), “his character and ethics as a man on earth were far superior to anything the schools might have given Him.”<sup>68</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Clearly then, the Biblical Hebraic wholistic thinking, its dynamic and concrete thought, and its concept of “community” offer many profound insights for Christian education. If we want the Christian educational process to remain authentically biblical, we must never lose sight of these significant implications of Hebrew thought for the formulation of the philosophy, methodology, or cur-

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<sup>63</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, “The Spirit of Jewish Education,” *Jewish Education* 24/2 (Fall 1953): 19. Quoted in Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 280.

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., Exod 10:2; 12:26-27.

<sup>65</sup> Kaster, 30.

<sup>66</sup> “The Jews of the First Christian Century,” in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1956-1980), 5:58.

<sup>67</sup> The home as an ideal center of learning and training for children was changed, according to Steve Farrar, because of the Industrial Revolution, especially in America. He notes, “When factories became the source of income, men had to leave home, thus greatly diminishing their ability to influence their sons. . . . Work now separated father from son, when for generations they had worked together in the master/apprentice relationship. Men stopped raising their boys because they weren’t present to lead their boys. And as the years have gone by, that all-important male role model has eroded even further”(Steve Farrar, *Point Man: How a Man Can Lead His Family* [N.p.: Multnomah Books, 1990], 40).

<sup>68</sup> “The Jews of the First Christian Century,” *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 5:59.

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riculum of Christian education. I think it is appropriate to quote the words of Marvin Wilson to conclude this paper: “Truth must be incarnate in each member of the community. Quality education from a Biblical point of view is concerned with integrating learning with faith and living. This is the Hebrew model, and it is the lifelong task to which each Christian must continually address himself.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 131.