



Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.

A Matter of Time

Digest

Ronnie Littlejohn, “The Hebrew Concept of Time,” *Biblical Illustrator* (Winter 1999-2000).

Editorial Note: The following digest is drawn from an article entitled “The Hebrew Concept of Time.” The author, Ronnie Littlejohn, is Professor of Philosophy at Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Reprise

Thus far we have addressed the One-and-Only God as Creator and Covenant-Maker. We have noted that, in the Genesis account, “Adam” and “Eve” constituted covenantal human personhood through the self-limiting, self-emptying, self-giving presence of the loving God as the “Third Voice” or “Authoritative Other.” In order to assure that such covenantal personhood was *relational* rather than *possessional*, God inaugurated what we regard as time (“evening and . . . morning”), space (“firmament of the heavens,” etc.), and interactive motion (see Genesis 1, RSV). Relationality involves communion and distinction or “otherness” in time and space. Ronnie Littlejohn’s remarks concern the fundamental differences between Hebrew and Greek concepts of time.

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What Is Time?

“ . . . [W]e have all been struck by the importance of time and by its elusive, puzzling character. We wonder whether we will have ‘enough time’ to do everything we want to do with our lives. And we complain that time ‘drags by’ when we are bored. Myth and poetry often personify time. The figure of Father Time is familiar to us.

“When early philosophers asked about time, they sensed that it had something to do with change. But how can something change? How can something be one way at one time and some other way at another time, yet still be the same time? They wondered whether the past could be changed or the future predicted? . . .

“The Book of Ecclesiastes is unique among books of the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, in presenting anything like a direct statement on time (Eccl. 3:1-8). But though this familiar passage says there is a season and a time for everything under heaven, it certainly does not tell us what the nature of time is, nor does it respond to the other questions philosophers in Western history have advanced.

Time in Hebrew and Greek Thought

“Why is this? The answer lies in a deep difference between the way the Hebrews understood time and the way the Greeks thought about it. The Hebrew mind thought in concrete terms and did not engage in the sort of abstract speculation we know so well from the Greeks. Just as the Hebrews did not speculate about famous Greek questions such as What is truth? or What is justice? neither did they offer arguments or theories about the question What is time?

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“When we study the Old Testament, we find that time is derivative for the Hebrews. That is, the understanding of time in the Old Testament came from how it described the events of human life and God’s interaction with people. For example, time was measured from harvest and agricultural occurrences. Ruth and Naomi arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:22). Or, time was referenced to the sacred events of God’s interaction in Israel’s history. Time was related to an event that took place and how that event was related to something else that had occurred. Time was not an abstract something over and above events. Herein lay the basic difference between the Hebrews and Greeks.

“This difference may be seen by correcting our language. The Greeks might say, ‘Time is the medium for God’s saving acts.’ The Hebrews might say, ‘Time is the sequence of God’s saving acts.’ For the Hebrews, there was no time that existed as a substance or force or dimension, as the Greek sentence implies. There were only real events that occurred, and men measured and marked life by their relationships to these. . . . Time was not a thing or object for the Hebrews of the Old Testament.

“The Old Testament has no general word for ‘time’ in the abstract sense at all. Neither does it have special terms for past, present, and future. The most common word for ‘time’ means the moment or point at which something happened, or will happen, for example, ‘Behold, about this time tomorrow, I will send a very heavy hail’ (Ex. 9:18, NASB).

Time and Western Thought

“We cannot understand the Hebrew notion of time if we carry over our Western scientific or philosophical interpretations and questions. The Hebrews simply did not ask the same questions or make the sort of speculations the heirs to the Greeks advanced.

“Actually, the Greek notion of time still leads us down many philosophical dead ends and into many practical problems as well. Time has been the subject of some real arguments lately. Stephen Hawking, the Cambridge cosmologist, posed a paradox when he entitled his best-selling book *A Brief*

“To the Hebrews . . . things did not happen ‘in time.’ Things happened, and the happenings were time.”

History of Time. By definition, the word *history* refers to something that has endured for some period in time. This implies that time has endured in time, which has endured in time, which has endured in time, and so on. This is going down a dead end. Such a paradox would not occur to the Hebrews because, for them, things did not happen ‘in time.’ Things happened, and the happenings were time. . . .

“The Hebrews [also] did not speculate about duration — as in How long is the present? Many Western philosophers out of the Greek tradition found this question troubling. It occupied philosophers from Augustine to Henri Bergson. But the Hebrews avoided such fruitless speculations even though they definitely used temporal concepts. First Kings 11:4 refers to the time ‘when Solomon was old,’ but the writer did not wonder about when it was that Solomon started to *become old*, or at what point he became old, as though he was not old the day previous and then suddenly he was old. The Hebrews were not interested in all this theorizing. I do not mean that this lack was a deficiency, only that it was a difference. We certainly should not think that the Hebrew idea of time is necessarily inferior to the Greek simply because the Greek was more concrete.

Time and Life

“Another way of seeing this difference is to notice that the Hebrews developed no idea of eternity as timelessness. This was a Greek notion. The Hebrews had no idea that there could be life and experience without time. For them, life was time, or better ‘to live was time.’ There was no time where there were no life events, and no life events where there was no time. In the Old Testament, life was humanity’s form of existence (Job 1:21; Ps. 90:3-12), and this was time. . . .

“The Hebrews were impressed by the weightiness or significance of things and people, not by how many ticks on a clock went by while doing something. This explains

why when scholars study the Old Testament, matters that are revealed by their research to be widely separated with reference to time (our definition) can, if their content coincides, be identified and regarded as simultaneous by the Old Testament (because of their view of time). The worshiper experienced past acts of salvation, such as the exodus, as contemporary and happening right then, even if the exodus occurred in the past. . . .

“The Hebrews were impressed by the weightiness or significance of things and people, not by how many ticks on a clock went by while doing something.”

“Time for the Hebrews was about effort and achievement. People did things. They wrote, played, traveled, slept, dreamed, performed ceremonies, went to war, and prayed. God did things too. Time consisted of the story of these events, and it had no existence beyond these. To make the most of time probably meant something like living your life so that others mark their lives and tell their stories in reference to your actions. In the Hebrew mind, the real question was not, ‘What is the best use of my time . . . ?’ but rather, ‘What is the best use of my life . . . ?’”¹

Conclusion

For the Hebrews, therefore, time was not so much the successive movements of a shadow, the ticking of a clock, the swinging of a pendulum, or the rotation of the earth. Nor was time the medium or container that possessed actions and events, as the Greeks understood time. Rather, relational actions, the procession or sequence of such actions, and the consequences of such relational actions and events *constituted time*.

Endnote

1. Ronnie Littlejohn, “The Hebrew Concept of Time,” *Biblical Illustrator* (Winter 1999-2000): 53-56. See “The Complexities of Time,” at www.ldolphin.org/time.html.

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