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Ancient ethics

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SOMETIME between the twelfth and tenth millennia BCE (Before the Common Era, the universal designation replacing BC, 'Before Christ'), human life patterns in the ancient Near East began to change from migratory existence or dwelling in caves to habitation in settled communities. In this new setting, humans produced their own food, developed skills in pottery making and the building of permanent structures, all the while moving from hamlet and town environments to cities and city-state organizations. By the end of the fourth millennium BCE, the two great river civilizations, Mesopotamia and Egypt, had invented and were using writing. This essay utilizes some of the surviving written materials from the ancient Near East, including stories about heroes who exemplified virtues most admired, legal codes that defined acceptable and non-acceptable conduct and instructional formulations, all of which inform us about the nature of ethics as it first developed into something sufficiently explicit to be the subject of reflection and discussion. As we shall see, later Western ethics has its roots in these ancient approaches to the problems of regulating a settled society. (For discussion of early ethical writings in India and China, see Article 4, INDIAN ETHICS, and Article 6, CLASSICAL CHINESE ETHICS.)

i Ethics in ancient Mesopotamia

Although the exposition of ethical principles as such was not of primary concern in the ancient Near East, value concepts can be discerned from commercial documents, law codes, wisdom sayings, hero stories and myths. Many of the earliest known textual materials from Mesopotamia relate to business and are little more than 'laundry lists' dealing with land sales, contracts or explaining that so-and-so brought his beast as an offering to such-and-such a temple where it was received by priest so-and-so. The greatest number of recovered texts is from the early second millennium, but from earlier records, beginning in the late fourth millennium BCE, we learn that societies in the Tigris-Euphrates valleys were organized along bureaucratic lines.

Royal archives provide the boasts of monarchs who conquered and often devastated neighbouring territories. Obviously, no universal declaration of human rights protected vanquished people. Personal property became booty and men, women, and children were chattels. Oaths of fealty were demanded and given,

and the conquered territory, now governed by vassals, became part of an expanding empire.

Mesopotamian legal texts and codes reflect monarchical and temple-state settings which reveal the union of church and state for control of the land and the people. Territorial boundaries provided citizen identity. Temples to various deities abounded within the cities but each city-state had its own ruling deity and, ideally, the land belonged to him. The local ruler, as the god's personally chosen steward, controlled the divine estate. The people were deemed to be in the service of the gods to keep them at ease – a notion that is specifically stated in the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma elish* (Speiser, 1958; Pritchard, 1958, vi. 33–6; 131). The king governed according to a code which was supposed to have been revealed to him by the chief deity but which, in each instance, is clearly a projection of current social ethics and practice. Regulations were presented as case laws reading 'If a man . . .' Of course the god could be consulted for guidance on immediate problems by way of temple omens – a system that vested tremendous power in the temple priesthood.

The temple functioned much in the manner of a modern city hall, and was the centre for the administration of justice. Violations of divinely revealed codes were interpreted as offences against the gods. Cases were heard at the temple gate but when opponents or witnesses were required to swear oaths in the name of the god, the case was moved indoors to the temple proper.

Despite the temple-state control of the land, secularization and privatization of property did occur. Different social classes were recognized, and local economy rested largely on slave labour. Most slaves were acquired by conquest, others were natives who had fallen on hard times. Such individuals became property to be bought and sold, bequeathed or given away.

One of the earliest monarchs in ancient Sumer, Gilgamesh, the third-millennium BCE king of Uruk, posthumously assumed legendary status and was said to be the product of the union of a high priest and the goddess Ninsun. The epic story of his life reveals much about the values of ancient Sumer. In the fragmentary contemporary textual references to him there is no indication that this legend was current during his lifetime. A contemporary incantation text characterized him as one who did 'inquire, examine, judge, perceive and lead aright' (Heidel, 1949).

In the legend that portrayed him as a semi-divine hero, he was introduced as a brutal tyrant who ignored human rights and who, by virtue of rank and strength, sought meaning through unbridled power as he bullied men and possessed virgins prior to marriage (Pritchard, 1958; I, ii, 23–27). When the people complained to the gods, a companion named Enkidu was formed and Gilgamesh's antisocial behaviour was modified. Instead of using his authority and strength against his own subjects, he redirected his energies into heroic exploits involving the conquest of territory beyond Uruk. This value system faltered when Enkidu and Gilgamesh violated sacred precincts and offended the gods. Enkidu was condemned to die. Now Gilgamesh became aware of his personal mortality. Never doubting the validity of an ethic based on strength and authority, he determined to defeat death. As he began his venture, he paused for refreshments at an ale-house where

the barmaid commented on the folly of his quest and suggested a different value system:

Gilgamesh, where are you running?
You won't find the immortal life you are seeking.
When the gods created humankind
They ordained death for humans
And retained immortality for themselves.
So Gilgamesh, let your belly be full.
Be merry every day and night.
Make each day a day of joy.
Dance, play, by day and by night.
Wear clean clothes.
Let your head be washed and your body bathed with water.
Cherish the little child who grasps your hand.
Let your wife rejoice in your arms
For this is the destiny of mankind . . .

Gilgamesh ignored her logic. An ethical system that developed out of the recognition that one's lifetime was limited and that proposed that life best be spent in companionship, love and enjoyment did not coincide with his quest.

Ultimately, he met with his ancestor Utnapishtim who had preserved all life during the flood and who had, unlike his biblical counterpart Noah, been granted immortality by the gods. Gilgamesh received instruction concerning the impermanence of human life and accomplishments and learned that despite his power as a semi-divine king, he, like all mortals, would die. As compensation, Utnapishtim directed him to a magic plant that grew at the bottom of the sea which, when eaten, would make 'the old man become as the young man'. Gilgamesh obtained the plant with the rejuvenating power, but decided to delay eating it. As he was bathing, the plant was consumed by a snake, which explains why the snake sheds its skin and renews itself while humans are destined to wrinkle and age. Gilgamesh returned to Uruk to become the great king, a shepherd to his people and the builder of the ancient walls.

The Gilgamesh legend, which was known throughout the ancient Near East, presented, in the adventures of the monarch, a commentary on finding meaning in life. If an ethic that ignored the rights of others or exhausted itself in heroics failed when performed by a semi-divine king, obviously such an ethic would fail for ordinary humans. Even the simple, hedonistic, day-by-day joy in living and loving recommended by the barmaid was rejected. If neither immortality nor the secret of rejuvenation were available to humans and only the grave lay ahead, how should one live?

The ethical stance that gave meaning and purpose to Gilgamesh's life was not stated but implied. He built the walls of Uruk that provided security for his people. He refurbished the temples of Anu, the patron god of the city, which would secure divine blessing for the people, and also those of Ishtar, the goddess of love and fertility, which would promote amicable relationships and fecundity of crops, flocks, herds and families. In other words, he lived up to the responsibilities of his

divinely appointed task to be king in charge of the god's people and estates. The ethic that emerges from the story is the familiar work ethic. One fulfils one's destiny through service and through fidelity to whatsoever becomes one's responsibility. Each reader was encouraged, implicitly, to build his own walls of Uruk.

The law code of the Semitic King Lipit-Ishtar of the city of Isin, composed during the early nineteenth century BCE, is one of several early royal prescriptions recovered by archaeologists. The prologues in these codes are alike in that each ruler declared that he was divinely chosen for office, thereby linking earthly rule to divine wishes. Lipit-Ishtar claimed to have been selected by the sky god, Anu, and the wind or storm god, Enlil,

to establish justice in the land, to rectify complaints, to eliminate hostility and armed insurrection and to bring peace to the Sumerians and Akkadians.

Royal hymns exalt the period of peace. The focus on family law reflected concern for family values and stability by providing guidelines for the rights of, and the inheritance of property by, children produced by a legal wife or wives, a female slave or a harlot. There was no recognition of equality among men or sexes. Some men and women were affluent estate owners, other were slaves to be bought, sold or traded although freedom could be earned. Other laws in the damaged text dealt with business ethics. Lipit-Ishtar appears to have remitted debts, established business controls to prevent social injustice and to have tried to put ceilings on accumulated private wealth. In an epilogue, the king boasted that he had eliminated enmity, rebellion, weeping and lamentations, and had brought righteousness and truth to his kingdom.

The most famous Mesopotamian law code, that of Hammurabi of Babylon (1728–1646 BCE) echoes much that appeared in earlier codes. He was divinely appointed to promote the welfare of his subjects by ensuring justice through the elimination of evil and the wicked so that the 'strong might not oppress the weak'. Justice, which meant 'the straight thing', referred primarily to economic justice (Saggs, 1962, p. 198ff) and many of the laws dealt with property, law suits, business practice and contracts. Justice was not blindfolded and distinctions were made between social classes and family members. Personal injuries to members of the aristocracy called for the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye. For injury to freemen and slaves, fines sufficed and, in the case of injury to a slave, the fine was paid to the master as recompense for damage to property. Family law established the primacy of the father. If a member of the aristocracy encountered financial difficulties, he could sell his wife and children into slavery for a four year period. A wife acquired without a contract had no legal standing. Rape of a betrothed virgin of aristocratic standing resulted in the death of the rapist. Women accused of infidelity were thrown into the river where, it was assumed, the river god would attest to innocence or guilt.

False accusations were harshly dealt with and to accuse another falsely of murder resulted in the death penalty for the accuser. Careless or inefficient behaviour could result in payment for damages but a surgeon who operated with a bronze lancet on a man of standing and caused his death or opened up his eye-

socket and caused blindness had his hand cut off. If the operation was successful, the doctor was paid ten shekels of silver. If the patient was a slave, the physician replaced a slave for the dead slave and for the loss of a slave's eye, paid the owner one-half the value of the slave. If the slave recovered, the physicians received two shekels of silver. If a man struck the pregnant daughter of a freeman causing her to miscarry, he paid ten silver shekels for the loss of the fetus. Should his blow cause the woman to die, the striker's daughter was killed. Should the woman be of a lower class or a slave, the killer paid a fine. The laws protected the male over the female, the aristocrat over the freeman and slave.

ii Ethics in ancient Egypt

As ethical patterns were developing in Mesopotamia, an ethical emphasis that both differed from, and at times paralleled, Mesopotamian thought, was emerging in Egypt. At the heart of the Egyptian ethic was *ma'at*, a word that signified justice, balance, the norm, order, truth, what is correct and right action, all of which were established in the beginning by the gods and were presently guaranteed by the pharaoh. From the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2450–2300 BCE) onward, public officials appointed by the king to deal with legal matters were called 'priests of *ma'at*' (Morenz, 1973, pp. 12ff). No law codes defining *ma'at* have been recovered and the concept appears to have functioned as a basic value providing the foundation for moral behaviour and judgement. It is clear that there must have been commonly accepted regulations based on *ma'at* which could be augmented from time to time by pharaonic edicts. Justice and truth were not vague concepts, they were to be spoken and lived. In courts of law, justices were to manifest *ma'at* in what they said and in how they determined cases (Morenz, 1973, p. 125). Individual Egyptians were expected to operate in harmony with *ma'at*, not in terms of prescribed legal precepts, but rather broadly and freely, although in later times, the tendency was to conform to rules (Wilson, 1958).

Ethical norms that sustained *ma'at* were taught in scribal schools by wise men. Schoolboy copies of the aphorisms, maxims and advice, some from around 2000 BCE, have been found. They stress the importance of following precepts for success in business, governing, holding administrative and state offices. The reasons given for adherence to the ethical norms were essentially practical: to ignore them was to court failure, to violate them was to invite punishment and social disaster (Larue, 1988, pp. 70–73).

Pupils were encouraged to marry. The basic social unit was the family, including the father, one or more wives and their children. Incestuous marriages were accepted as normal. Property was inherited through families and when a mother died, the father stood to lose because the daughter assumed control of the property. To keep holdings within the family, it was not uncommon for a father to marry his daughter or for a brother to marry his sister. There can be no doubt that many of these unions were formal arrangements, designed purely to protect property; however, there is some debate as to whether or not such marriages were ever sexually consummated. The term 'sister-wife' is often mentioned in

inscriptions and it is possible that some incestuous marriages reflect genuine love and affection between siblings. 'The gods Osiris and Set married their sisters Isis and Nephthys respectively, and Osiris begat Horus by Isis and Set begat Anubis by Nephthys; therefore the marriage of brothers and sisters was sanctioned by the gods, and there is no doubt that they existed in the earliest times in Egypt' (Budge, 1977, p. 23). Manchef White points out that 'To safeguard the purity of succession it was advisable that the king should procreate as many children as possible within what is called the forbidden degree. To this end he not infrequently married his own daughters' (White, 1970, p. 15).

Regarding non-incestuous marriage, pupils were advised to choose a wife carefully, to provide her with food, clothing and ornaments to keep her content, because she was the source of children, in particular sons who would inherit the father's office and carry on the family name. The husband was cautioned to avoid legal disputes with his wife and to avoid other men's wives. Because of inheritance laws, women in Egypt enjoyed a status and a freedom denied them elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

Rebellion against parental authority was discouraged. A son should be humble, willing to accept counsel, should avoid dishonest or fraudulent acts and develop good manners. According to the wise vizier, Ptah-hotep (twenty-fifth century BCE), filial misbehaviour could be the basis for disowning the son. The wise teacher, Amen-em-opet, (fourteenth century BCE) counselled against greed for power and wealth through theft, fraud or dishonesty in business, urged his pupils to think before speaking and warned against association with disruptive or quarrelsome persons. His ideal was the temperate man who performed good deeds and kindly acts, who did not mock the deformed or the elderly, who would assist an elderly drunk rather than strike him and who, when reproached by an elder, accepted the abuse and kept his composure.

Some dimensions of Egyptian ethics are related to their belief in an afterlife. 'No other nation of the ancient world made so determined an effort to vanquish death and win eternal life' (Lichtheim, 1975, I, p. 119). The mode was through preservation of the body and the use of magic combined with a concept of ethical judgement. Chapter 125 of 'The Book of the Dead' contains a negative confession in which the deceased recited before a panel of 42 divine judges a list of 42 sins not committed. The crimes included mistreatment of persons or animals, blasphemy, theft, maligning a servant to his master, causing pain or tears or suffering, killing another, theft, illicit sex or masturbation, cheating in business, and so forth. The protest ended with the repeated affirmation 'I am pure!' In an additional statement made in the Hall of Ma'at, the deceased claimed to have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked and river transportation to the man without a boat (Budge, 1913, p. 587). Clearly, one of the most powerful forces motivating adherence to accepted social values was fear of judgement in the afterlife.

The prohibition of cruelty to animals, which represents an unusual ethical stance in the ancient world, rests in part on the Egyptian belief that when Ptah, the creator god of Memphis, brought life into being by his spoken word, all

creatures were manifestation of the divine. All that was, including the other gods, were projections of Ptah. Thus, Egyptians could imagine the creatures of the world welcoming and praising the rising sun as it was reborn each day, just as each Egyptian would do. Moreover, some gods assumed animal form. For example, Thoth could be either a baboon or an ibis, the sacred animal of the goddess Bast was the cat, Tauret was a hippopotamus goddess, Sebek a crocodile and so on. The list of sacred animals was extensive and included the vulture, hawks, swallows, turtles, scorpions, serpents, and so forth. Despite the respect and veneration given to these creatures (some were mummified), Egyptians did not hesitate to use them for food, but because the animals were valuable and also because of the Egyptian veneration of life, humans were expected to treat other creatures with respect and, in the case of domestic animals, with kindness, for in the afterlife the treatment of animals would be included in actions to be judged.

Of course there were those who were sceptical of the promise of afterlife. Entertainment at Egyptian feasts was furnished, in part, by a harpist who encouraged the guests 'to surrender themselves to pleasure, because they can have no certainty that earthly diligence will lead to eternal bliss' (Wilson, 1958, p. 467). The harpist noted that the pyramidal graves of the divine Pharaohs and their nobles had been violated, and it was as if they had never existed. He pointed out that no one ever returned from the grave to assure the living of immortality. Like the barmaid who counselled Gilgamesh, the harpist advised his audience:

Follow your desires as long as you live.
Put myrrh on your head and wear fine linen . . .
Don't hesitate to seek personal pleasures and your own good.
Satisfy your earthly needs as your heart desires
Until your day of mourning comes.

He added that one can't take one's goods with one, that mourning and wailing won't save one from the grave from which there is no return.

So far as the world outside Egypt was concerned, Egyptian notions of their own superiority were obvious. Egyptians saw themselves as humans as distinct from gods and above animals. The term for foreigner suggested a category not up to the Egyptian category of human, for according to Egyptian thinking foreign influence was responsible for social breakdown. Foreigners, living in the outlands away from the bounty of the Nile and the normality of life in Egypt (*ma'at*), were even grouped in some literature together with animals. However, should a foreigner make his home in Egypt, that person joined the ranks of humans.

iii Ethics in the Hebrew Scriptures

When the Hebrews entered Canaan, probably in the late thirteenth century BCE, the land was controlled by local monarchies that paid tribute to Egypt. According to biblical legend, the Hebrew kingship, like that of Mesopotamia, was established in the tenth century BCE through divine choice by the Hebrew god, Yahweh. Saul was selected and then rejected (1 Sam. 10: 17-25; 13: 13-14). David was chosen

and established the Judean line of rulers (1 Sam. 16: 1-13; 2 Sam. 7: 5-17). The king was protector of Yahweh's kingdom (1 Sam. 8: 20), a shepherd to Yahweh's people (2 Sam. 5: 2; 2 Kings 11:17), a participant in some of the cultic rites (1 Kings 3: 4, 8: 62, etc.), and in some instances was involved in the judicial process (2 Sam. 12: 1-6) but was not entirely above the law (2 Sam. 12: 7-14; 1 Kings 21).

Biblical law echoes motifs found in Mesopotamian legislation. Yahweh's rules were revealed to his chosen vassal, Moses, in a personal encounter on Mount Sinai (Horeb). The Torah, which represents a compilation of prescriptions – some borrowed and some original – developed between the tenth and the fifth centuries BCE. Like Mesopotamian law, it provided an identity for worshippers as a chosen people bound to their deity in a binding convenantal and legal relationship (Deut. 14:2). Even after the sixth century BCE, when Yahweh was presented as a universal, rather than a territorial, god, the Jews retained a particularism within the universalist expression (Isa., Chs. 40-55). The convenantal sign, circumcision, was uniquely male, and non-circumcision or any attempt to obscure the sign was tantamount to abandonment of the covenant (1 Maccabees 1:15).

The aim of the law was *sedeq* which is usually interpreted as 'justice' or 'righteousness' and which signifies 'the right way' or that which is normal. The Deuteronomist wrote:

Sedeq, sedeq you shall pursue so that you may live and inherit the land which Yahweh, your god, gives to you. (Deut. 16:20)

Sedeq as expressed in biblical law came in both casuistic (case law) and apodictic (thou shalt/not) form. When the law was sanctified as holy and adequate for all time and all generations, it assumed the binding, inflexible form of 'rule book ethics'.

The relationship between deity and people was based on a *do ut des* (I give so that thou mayest give) principle by which Yahweh promised rich blessings in proportion to obedience to his rules, which covered everything from acceptable food, clothing, and sexual practices to offerings and ritual enactments. In other words, obedience earned rewards, disobedience caused punishment, so that when an individual or group suffered pain or loss it could be attributed to unethical behaviour (Deut. 7:12-14; 28).

The cohesive nature of the family produced a concept that has been labelled 'corporate personality' (Robinson, 1936). Evil done in one generation could be punished in another (Deut. 5:9). Thus, an unethical ancestor might escape punishment and a good descendant might suffer misfortune. This belief, which reflected a defective sense of individualism, was challenged in Ezekiel where each person was held responsible for personal evil (Ezek. 18).

The relationship between sin and punishment was challenged in the story of Job. The hero, a righteous individual who had faithfully observed all the rules, suffered not because of his or another's sin but because of a wager made in heaven. Since Job could not know the reason for his misery and because traditional theories did not explain his circumstance, questions were implied concerning the proper

way to live. The answer in Job was that one should unquestionably obey the revealed rules whether or not the consequences made sense. A different response was given in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes echoes themes familiar from Gilgamesh and the songs of the harpist in Egypt. The author, posing as Solomon, assumed the title Qoheleth (teacher). His opening cry is that life is meaningless. By virtue of status, wealth and power (as Solomon), he could indulge his every whim, from participation in the ways of wisdom to pleasure (wine, women and song), from accumulation of wealth and investment in building projects to madness and folly. All were void of significance. Indeed, the fate of humans, whether wise or foolish, good or evil, was perceived to be no different from that of other living creatures (Eccl. 2: 14-16; 3: 18-21; 7:15; 8:8). The mystery of what life was all about remained hidden (8:17). How then should one live? Qoheleth recommended acceptance of whatever lot was given to humans and, like the barmaid in the Gilgamesh legend, advised his pupils:

Go then, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Wear white garments and anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with the woman you love, all the fleeting days of your meaningless life span, because that is your lot in life as you toil at your tasks beneath the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for in Sheol (the grave), where you will be going, there is neither work nor thought nor knowledge nor wisdom. (Eccl. 9: 7-10)

Qoheleth's ethic suggested a one-day-at-a-time approach to life. Unlike the Egyptians, he had no belief in judgement in an afterlife. This life was all there is. The work ethic remained at the core of his teaching and the significance of the responsible life with joy in existence was not ignored. Some things are better than others: wisdom is preferred to stupidity, decency to indecency, life rather than death, but ultimately, when death comes, whatever one has chosen is meaningless.

Hebrew wisdom teachings (Proverbs) recognized two classes of men: the wise who adhered to the divine law and who were good citizens, discreet, prudent, reliable, honest, of gentle speech, humble, conforming, industrious, and impartial in judgement, and the evil who were stupid and ignored the law. There were two classes of women: the good who were ideal wives whose major concerns were the welfare of family and husband and who worked diligently as home managers and astute business women (Prov. 31: 10-31), and the evil who were wanton adventuresses representing the way of folly and disaster (Prov. 7: 6-27; 9: 13-18). The reason for following the teaching was practical – one way led to success, the other to failure and trouble.

Despite the regulation in Exodus 12: 49 'You shall have but one law for the home-born and for the outsider who lives among you', distinctions were made. There were citizens and there were slaves, sojourners who passed through the land and resident aliens, and there were men and there were women. All were not equal. Social concern was expressed for orphans and widows and sojourners (Deut. 10: 18-19). Enslaved Hebrews were to be released after six years and treated generously (Deut. 15: 12-18). Intermarriage with outsiders was forbidden (Deut. 7: 3-4); Neh. 13: 23-27). Social and political inequities were accepted.

FAMILIAL ETHICS AND THE ROOTS

Familial ethics emphasized the significance of the male family line. There was no belief in an afterlife and 'immortality' consisted in the continuance of identity through male offspring.

Of course *sedeq* was ignored by some. Prophetic protests decry the violation of the rights of the poor and of widows and orphans by the rich and powerful. Micah, in the eighth century BCE, called upon the people to 'do justice, to love kindness and to walk in humility with your God' (6: 8). The prophetic threat of disaster made to the nation during that same period might have terrified some but was ignored and mocked by others (Isa. 28: 14-22).

By the close of the sixth century BCE, the threatened disasters had occurred: Jerusalem had been destroyed, Jewish leaders and skilled artisans had been taken to Babylon as exiles, and Cyrus of Persia had, in turn, conquered Babylon. Persian policy permitted Jewish exiles to return and rebuild the ruined city of Jerusalem and the temple. In the fifth century BCE, powerful Jewish leaders emerged, including Ezra and Nehemiah, who sought to establish Jewish identity, not only through the physical restoration of the city and temple, but also on the basis of a faith system. During this period, final additions were made to the Torah. This law code, which comprises the first five books of the Bible, became the basis for a covenantal ethic, based on a relationship between deity and the people – a relationship which tradition traced back through Moses to Abraham. Nehemiah's and Ezra's interpretation of this covenant demanded the separation of Jews from all others, forbade intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews (Neh. 10: 30) and even went so far as to insist that intermarriages already consummated be dissolved (Ezra 10: 18-19). These two leaders were convinced that intermarriage not only polluted the purity of Judaism (Neh. 13: 23-26) but violated scriptural prescriptions (Neh. 13: 1-3) and provoked divine anger (Ezra 10: 14).

Not everyone agreed with the separationist policy. The author of the book of Ruth, which was composed in the late fourth century BCE, noted that King David was descended from a Moabite-Hebrew marriage. The novella Jonah made clear the concern of the Jewish deity for other people and hence the responsibility of the Jew for foreigners – even the despised Assyrians (Jonah 4: 11)

While the struggle concerning separationist ethics was in progress, another element influenced Jewish thought. It stemmed from the Persian religion of the prophet Zoroaster and introduced into Judaism the Aryan notion of cosmic dualism. Zoroastrian theology taught that Ahura Mazda, the all-knowing creator and sustainer of the world of good, truth, purity, and light was pitted against Angra Mainyu, the epitome of evil, the lie and darkness. Each human was endowed with free choice and each could choose whether to follow light or darkness. Within this bipolarity, Zoroastrianism envisaged history as moving toward an end-time, a final epoch in which truth and goodness would triumph. In the *eschaton*, each human soul now united with its body would approach a Bridge of Separation over which the righteous would pass to paradise and from which the wicked would be turned away. Ultimately, both wicked and righteous would be tested by passing through a stream of molten metal. To the righteous it would be like taking a warm bath, for the evil it would mean extinction. The eschatological ethics were

concerned with the problem of theodicy, the righteousness of God. If the deity was good and righteous and all powerful, how could evil be so prevalent and successful in the world? The response was that evil was the result of the activity of Angra Mainyu (who foreshadowed the devil), and although evil seemed to triumph in this world, balance would be restored in the world to come when right behaviour would be rewarded and evil punished. The focus was on the individual whose good behaviour would earn eternal paradise.

These concepts entered into Jewish ethics. They form the central teachings of the book of Daniel, written about 168 BCE when persecution of the Jews by the Seleucid Greeks was most intense and vicious (see 1 Maccabees 1; 2 Maccabees 6-7; Josephus, *Antiquities* XII. v, vi). Daniel provided the Jews with a new answer to the problem of theodicy: if the righteous suffer on earth despite their goodness and fidelity to the Law, they will be rewarded in the afterlife. Should evil people seem to prosper and grow in power and wealth and authority, the pious knew that in the afterlife they would be punished in proportion to their evil deeds, for all the power, wealth and authority gained in this life mattered nothing in the world to come. The righteous knew that the end was at hand, they had only to hang on to their faith despite persecution, torture and death. Yahweh was an ethical deity, his regulations represented a positive ethic, and his obedient followers knew they were living according to the highest ethic, a divinely revealed code of behaviour.

The book of Daniel symbolized a failure of nerve. The good life, the decent life, the ethical life was no longer important for the creation of an ethical society. That was impossible among humans, for evil was dominant and besides, the end was at hand. Only in the afterlife, when the kingdom of the righteous came into being, could the full ethical society emerge. To be part of that idealized society, one must focus on individual righteousness in this life. Whereas Judaism had taught that ethical behaviour in this life could be recognized as fulfilling the covenant regulations and thereby earned rewards in divine blessing for the individual and the nation, now the emphasis was upon personal reward and punishment.

Some Jewish sects, including the Pharisees and the monks who lived by the Dead Sea (who are believed to have been Essenes) accepted the eschatological teachings; it may have been through these sects that this view of the world became part of Christianity and Christian ethics.

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Further reading

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