

# World Religions In A Thematic Perspective

With Supplementary Readings From World Scriptures

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Comparative Religions

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# I. God, Gods, and the Supernatural

# 1. Shamanism and Divination

## *Controlling our Cosmos*

Human beings live in a harsh and hostile world. To be sure, we do not experience it that way today, but that is only because of the astonishing level of prosperity generated by industrialism and modern science. We have a rather good idea about how nature works, and our apparent mastery over natural forces is accelerating—not only growing, but growing faster.

It was not always that way. Only 200 years ago—1820— 94% of people lived on less than \$2 a day, defined as “absolute poverty”. We didn’t know about germs. There was no penicillin. In the 1700s, it is estimated that the death rate for women giving birth, every time she gave birth, was between 1% and 1.5%. In order to have two adult children, a woman had to endure six to eight pregnancies. And perhaps half of those babies would not make it to adulthood. Over a lifetime of going through 4 to 8 pregnancies, it is estimated that 3 or 4 out of 100 women died.

Long before we understood the law of gravity, or could consistently manipulate chemicals and predict how they would work, we needed to control our environment. We didn’t know about barometric pressure, and that such and such a configuration of phenomena meant a storm was coming, but we needed to protect ourselves from disease, bad weather, social chaos, and ensure a productive hunt or harvest.

Our distant ancestors didn’t know about scientific laws, or the forces of nature, but they recognized that the world seemed to be alive. Environmentalists complain that we are using the world as a dead thing, as an object rather than a living thing with which we have relationships. But that is the price of science—it kills nature, and thereby masters it.

However, ancient humans *did* see the world as alive. It was full of spirits—sun, moon, stars; animals, especially those that were important to the lives of a particular community; trees, flowers, water, wind. These natural entities were alive. How did they know?

Today we call this understanding of the cosmos, the world, the forces of nature, **animism**. Animism says that all things are full of life—let’s call it life-force—energy and power. Just think of animals, but recognize that this life-force is in everything. So we can say that all natural phenomena, anything that changes—is full of soul, or spirit. And the solution to success and well-being—controlling the weather, finding a herd to hunt, healing a disease—is to figure out of each soul works and inducing it to do your bidding.

Many of the northern indigenous Americans would talk to a bear as they were about to kill it. ““I am thankful that I found you and sorry that I am obliged to kill you,” is one prayer documented. The killer will promise the spirit of the beast a sacrifice of maple sugar or berries. They will ask the bear not to take revenge: ‘Do not leave an evil thought against us because we have killed thee. Thou hast intelligence, thou seest that our children are suffering from hunger. They love thee and wish thee to enter into their bodies. Is it not a glorious thing for thee to be eaten by the children of captains’.” In summary, the bear is seen as another person, who can understand the sacrifice it must make.

But these “souls” are mysterious, hidden. We see the results—say when we watch two bucks attack each other for the chance to mate with a doe in heat. But without the aid of scientific

knowledge, we wouldn't understand why the bucks did it. So we'd say, "their souls or spirits made them do it."

### *The Shaman*

Therefore, it takes a special person with special knowledge to deal with these souls. In ancient cultures, this person was a shaman [pronounce either shah-man or shay-man]. This word is derived from terminology used among tribes that existed in central and northern Asia, especially what we now call Siberia. Since in prehistoric times some of these peoples made their way to the Americas, the spiritual leaders of indigenous Americans brought with them the practices and skills of these Siberian shamans.

The spirits the shaman is attempting to contact and influence in another realm. The shaman must enter this realm and interact with the spirits. He must communicate the needs and problems of his community to the spirits—maybe a child is deathly ill—and persuade the spirit to give relief or aid.

But this spiritual realm is very difficult to get to. We live in a mundane world of sensation, physical action. I'm hungry, I eat. I feel a discomfort at the bottom of my torso, and I relieve it by urinating or defecating.

To enter this spiritual realm, the would-be shaman had to first die to his ordinary physical awareness. He might have felt what we would call depressed. The world no longer satisfied him. He experienced mental or psychological discomfort, an unexplainable unhappiness. He might have gone through a complete physical and spiritual collapse. In some cases, he appeared completely insane—feed on the bark of trees, or cut himself. Somewhere in his anguish, he received a new sense of the meaning of life. Sometimes it was spontaneous. But often it had to be generated. The man would go away from the community for solitude and fasting.

### *Sensory Deprivation, Ecstasy, and the Séance*

This technique of seeking a spiritual realm through solitude and self-denial is called sensory deprivation. For a modern version of sensory deprivation, and of its apparent effects, see the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeqmKwsvM58>.

The shaman might have made use of hallucinogenic substances or techniques: psychoactive drugs, drumming, dancing and/or chanting. Eventually the ordinary world fell away, and he entered an alternative reality, a realm where he experienced and interacted with these souls or spirits. This state is **ecstasy**: to stand outside of one's mental and physical boundaries.

The shaman then was someone who has experienced this ecstasy and was now capable of recreating it. He could heal and help others to access spiritual power, because he himself had been healed. In other words, his power was charismatic: it was the result of a *gift*, of gaining personal mastery over the spiritual powers of the world. It was not simply a matter of routine, or getting a training in some skill—nursing, welding, truck driving, or even teaching. (Most religious authority today is routinized: for example, a Roman Catholic priest does not need to prove he has magical power in order to turn the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. He does it because, by the sacrament of "holy orders," he is authorized to do it.)

In this altered state, he would act out, or mime entering the spirit realm. Among some Siberian expressions, the shaman actually would climb a post or tree set up in the middle of the tent, to act out ascending to the spirit realm. This event is the *séance*. In the *séance*, he would be possessed by a spirit, or feel as if he was in direct contact with a spirit. He needed to find out why the spirits were angry—usually manifested by some failure of nature. Perhaps a disease was destroying the animal population that the tribe needed for food. Or a child was sick. Some of these spirits were destructive: by definition demons. The shaman would then bring back an explanation of the sacrifices required to “feed” the demon responsible, and save the tribe from the disease or pathology afflicting the community.

He would then return with knowledge (say, a herd to be hunted) or the ability to carry out the necessary healing. The shaman was a person of personal spiritual power (charisma), who had learned to make use of those powers and energies—to contact the spirits that made things happen to people—and then either persuade or manipulate the spirits to solve whatever problems the people faced.

### *Divination and Oracles*

Divination is an ancient technique for gaining access to knowledge beyond the range of normal human awareness. Its most basic meaning is to determine the will of the gods. Primitive human beings were simply trying to survive. But as society became more prosperous, people had more “free time,” the range of possible decisions became wider. This was especially true for leaders: going to battle was an especially important issue for the Romans. A general was expected to consult a flight of birds—sometimes by opening up a cage—to determine the advisability of fighting. Other modes of divination included killing an animal and examining certain body parts, especially the liver.

The Greeks used primarily oracles, which required some form of spirit possession. The best known example was the oracle at Delphi, which lasted for a 1000 years. A priestess would sit on a stool, go into a trance, and provide answers to questions.

So an oracle is a message that claims to give knowledge about or insight into situations that are otherwise uncertain. Some oracles used written techniques, e.g., in China. (The instructor will show you pictures of oracle bones, as well as modern Chinese oracles.) Questions would be written on the bones or tortoise shells, and then cast into a fire. The fire would crack the bones, and then the cracks would be “read” to give the answers to the questions. One king wanted to know: “if the king goes hunting in such a place, will it rain?” These could be collected, and the (in)accuracy of the results could then make a record that would help make future predications.

Just as the shaman attempted to contact the spirits, a person engaged in divination attempted to gain knowledge of the future, or insight in the workings of the world. We would simply look at a weather forecast. But in a world without scientific knowledge, people needed other sources of knowledge.

## 2. Vedic Hinduism and the Gods



Hinduism is many different things. As you read about it, you may find it hard to understand what it “really” is. The simplest definition of Hinduism is that it is the religion of the Indian people. That is why it is so complicated. The Indian people believe that there are many different ways of being religious. They have practiced and believed in these ways for at least 3000 years.

Hinduism teaches us the importance of giving some structure to the different hopes and aspirations found in every community. This is why Hinduism takes so many different forms. It tries to find a place for many different ways of being religious.

Since there are so many different kinds of Hinduism, it says that there are many roads to one ultimate reality. The roads may look different, but they finally end up at the same place.

### *Rig Vedic Religion*

The earliest stage of Hinduism is “Vedic” religion. This is the religion expressed in the most ancient and holiest texts of the Hindu canon,<sup>1</sup> the Rig Veda. Let’s read some texts that praise two important gods.

#### *Indra*

- 1 INDRA, bring wealth that gives delight, the victor's ever-conquering wealth,  
Most excellent, to be our aid;
- 2 By means of which we may repel our foes in battle hand to hand,  
By thee assisted with the car.
- 3 Aided by thee, the thunder-armed, Indra, may we lift up the bolt,  
And conquer all our foes in fight.
- 4 With thee, O India, for ally with missile-darting heroes, may  
We conquer our embattled foes.
- 5 Mighty is Indra, yea supreme; greatness be his, the Thunderer:  
Wide as the heaven extends his power
- 6 Which aideth those to win them sons, who come as heroes to the fight,  
Or singers loving holy thoughts.
- 7 His belly, drinking deepest draughts of Soma, like an ocean swells,  
Like wide streams from the cope of heaven.
- 8 So also is his excellence, great, vigorous, rich in cattle, like  
A ripe branch to the worshipper.

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<sup>1</sup> A “canon” is an authoritative body of religious texts. “The Bible” is the canon of Christianity. It includes the Hebrew Scriptures, which itself is the canon of Judaism, (and which Christians call the “Old Testament”) and the early writings of the first generations of Christians (the “New Testament”). Different religions may understand the exact meaning of the canon’s “authority” differently.

9 For verily thy mighty powers, Indra, are saving helps at once  
Unto a worshipper like me.

10 So are his lovely gifts; let lauds and praises be to Indra sung,  
That he may drink the Soma juice.<sup>2</sup>

### *Varuna*

1 WHATEVER law of thine, O God, O Varuṇa, as we are men,  
Day after day we violate.

2 give us not as a prey to death, to be destroyed by thee in wrath,  
To thy fierce anger when displeased.

3 To gain thy mercy, Varuṇa, with hymns we bind thy heart, as binds  
The charioteer his tethered horse.

...

7 He knows the path of birds that fly through heaven, and, Sovran [sovereign] of the sea,  
He knows the ships that are thereon.

8 True to his holy law, he knows the twelve moons with their progeny:  
He knows the moon of later birth.

9 He knows the pathway of the wind, the spreading, high, and mighty wind:  
He knows the Gods who dwell above.

10 Varuṇa, true to holy law, sits down among his people; he,  
Most wise, sits there to govern all.

11 From thence [perceiving](#) he beholds all wondrous things, both what hath been,  
And what hereafter will be done.

12 May that Āditya, very wise, make fair paths for us all our days:  
May he prolong our lives for us.

...

16 Yearning for the wide-seeing One, my thoughts move onward unto him,  
As kine unto their pastures move.

17 Once more together let us speak, because my meath is brought: priest-like  
Thou eatest what is dear to thee.

18 Now saw I him whom all may see, I saw his car above the earth:  
He hath accepted these my songs.

19 Varuṇa, hear this call of mine: be gracious unto us this day  
Longing for help I cried to thee.

20 Thou, O wise God, art Lord of all, thou art the King of earth and heaven  
Hear, as thou goest on thy way.<sup>3</sup>

The Aryans worshipped these gods (among many others) with *animal sacrifices*. The Rig Veda consists of poems that were recited during the sacrifices in which animals and other food stuffs

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<sup>2</sup> *Rig-Veda* VIII, trans. Ralph T. H. Griffith (1896) at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv01008.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, XXV at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv01025.htm>.

(butter or vegetables, for example) were burned. The primary victim of the ritual was usually a goat.

*Libations*<sup>4</sup> of milk would be poured into the fire. Another liquid used in the rituals was soma, the juice from the stems of a high mountain plant. Although we are not certain of the origin of its effect, it was probably hallucinogenic.<sup>5</sup> Under the influence of soma, the priests believed that they became like the gods, and could praise them more effectively and powerfully.

I have tasted the sweet drink of life, knowing that it inspires good thoughts and joyous expansiveness to the extreme, that all the gods and mortals seek it together calling it honey.

We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently, soma put the priests into an ecstatic state where their words seemed to have special power. “Turned-on” by the soma, their sacrificial rituals expressed and created an unearthly energy that sustained the world, and kept order in the cosmos, in people’s lives, and in the community.

Let us, always dear to Soma, speak as men of power in the sacrificial gathering.  
Soma, you give us the force of life on every side. Enter into us, finding the sunlight, watching over men.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of the sacrifices was to feed the gods, so that the gods might in turn feed the humans with all sort of material blessings.

Inflame me like a fire kindled by friction; make us see far; make us richer, better. For when I am intoxicated with you, Soma, I think myself rich. Draw near and make us thrive.<sup>8</sup>

The means by which the gods were fed was the fire that burnt the sacrifices and transformed material food into spiritual food. In terms borrowed from contemporary science fiction (the “transporter” of *Star Trek* fame), the food was “dematerialized” and changed into “energy.” This “energy” was the power of the rituals to sustain society and create prosperity.

Fire was personified as the god Agni. Agni was a divine priest — the heavenly extension of the earthly priest that directed the sacrifice. Agni brought the gods down to the people who prayed.

<sup>4</sup> A “libation” is the sacrifice of a liquid substance to a god or gods. The sacrifice would take place by pouring out the liquid, sometimes onto the ground, and sometimes into the fire itself.

<sup>5</sup> That is, it would create hallucinations, like peyote (which we will have discussed earlier in the course) used by some native Americans in their rituals. These hallucinations were believed to show some special spiritual realm not perceivable by the five senses.

<sup>6</sup> *Rig Veda: An Anthology*, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, transl. and ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 134 [8.48: 1, 3].

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136 [8:48:14, 15].

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135 [8:48:6].

I pray to Agni, the household priest who is the god of the sacrifice, the one who chants and invokes and brings most treasure. Agni...will bring the gods here. Through Agni one may win wealth, and growth from day to day, glorious and most abounding in heroic sons.<sup>9</sup>

Only through Agni would the sacrifice reach the gods and thus please them and give them the gifts and “food” they desired.

Agni, the sacrificial ritual that you encompass on all sides—only that one goes to the gods.<sup>10</sup>

So the primary goal of the religious practices of the Rig Veda was earthly wealth and power. As long as people fed the gods, they believed that the gods would feed them. The “good life” was a result of having properly carried out the rituals and sacrifices. Suffering or loss of material goods resulted from some short-coming in one’s religious activities.

As long as prosperity seemed to come easily, this view of life, the nature of life, and the gods made sense. But by about 500 B.C.E., India was no longer a society that consisted of loose-knit tribes that created wealth through cattle, goat and sheep herds.

They did not doubt that the sacrifices could bring the wealth they promised. But people did begin to doubt that material prosperity was a worthy goal. We will discuss the problems this doubt creates in Hinduism in “Religion and Society in Hinduism” (below, 8).

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 99 [1.1.1-3].

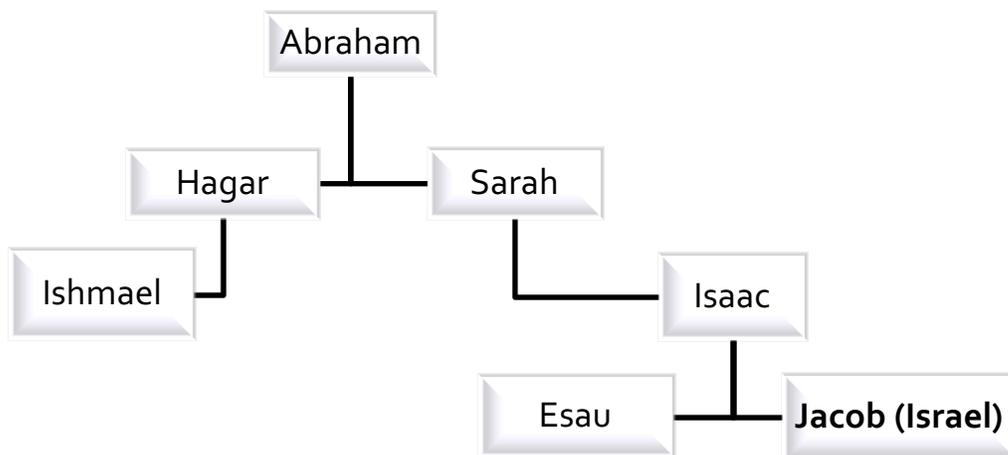
<sup>10</sup> Ibid. [1.1.4].

### 3. The Originating Story of Monotheistic Religions

According to ancient stories, “one upon a time” there lived a man named Abram. He lived in “Ur of the Chaldees.” His god told him “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1)<sup>11</sup> God promised Abram that he would be “a father of many nations.” “Abram” was changed to “Abraham.” (Gen. 17:5) Abram and Sarai (changed to Sarah) were already old. Sarai laughed at God. But they had a son Isaac.

Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the first-born son, and under ancient custom had certain rights. Jacob deceived Esau into surrendering those rights. He then tricked his father into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau. The blessing was the ancient equivalent of inheriting one’s father’s wealth. (The following diagram will be explained in the lectures.)

**The Family Tree of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**



Jacob was not a very nice character. He cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance—*twice!* But Abraham’s god chose him to continue Abraham’s line. Once again, he changed a name: “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.” (Gen. 32:28, see below p. 14) The struggle of Jacob/Israel with his god stood for the long struggle of the Hebrew people with their god.

The descendants “of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” went to Egypt to escape famine in Canaan. There they were enslaved and put to work on construction projects for Pharaoh. The story goes that when the Pharaoh began to fear the growing numbers of the Hebrew people, he ordered all male infants killed at birth. When a Hebrew baby by the name of Moses was born, his mother set him adrift on the Nile, where he was found and rescued by the Pharaoh’s daughter.

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<sup>11</sup>Annotations with the preceding form refer to texts of either the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures, in the form, book chapter: verse.

Moses was raised in the Egyptian court (“Moses” itself is an Egyptian name). But he became aware of the oppression of his people. He killed an Egyptian overseer, and had to flee. While in exile in the desert he received a divine call to deliver his people.

He returned to Egypt. In a dramatic confrontation with Pharaoh, he brought ten devastating plagues on Egypt. Finally the Pharaoh released the Hebrew slaves and Moses led them out. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, this escape from slavery in Egypt is known as “the Exodus.” As the people traveled from Egypt to Canaan, Moses delivered their god’s “Torah” (“teaching”) to the Hebrews, traditionally at Mt. Sinai.

### *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*

There are two different names for God used in these stories. The deity referred to in the Abraham story was called “the LORD.” There were no vowels in the original Hebrew writings, only consonants. The letters in the Hebrew text are YHWH.

In Christian Bibles translated in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, this name is sometimes translated “Jehovah.” But the name “Jehovah” never really existed. It is based on a mistake by early Protestant scholars. The mistake happened in the following way. Jews came to believe that the name YHWH was too sacred to be pronounced.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the sacred name was read as “Adonai,” “Lord.”

In the middle ages, Jewish scholars added vowels to the consonants in their Hebrew Bibles. They needed to signal the reader that he was not to read “YHWH” but “Adonai.” To do so, they placed the vowels for *Adonai* (“Lord”) above the consonants YHWH in the Hebrew scriptures.

The Protestant scholars who read the “Old Testament” (as they called it) in the original Hebrew didn’t know about these special signals. They read the letters exactly as they were written. The sound “Y” can be read as a “J” and “W” as “V.” So if you combine JHVH with the vowels for *Adonai* (a–o–ai), you get “JaHoVaiH,” or “Jehovah.” But the real name was probably “Yahweh.”

The second name for the deity in these writings was “Elohim.” “Elohim” was the plural form of “El.” Originally “El” was worshipped by Canaanites, people who lived in city–states in Canaan (present day Israel, western Jordan, and Lebanon). “El” was like the Greek god Zeus or the Roman Jupiter: the father and king of the gods.<sup>13</sup> “Elohim” meant the whole group of divine beings the Canaanites worshipped.

For reasons that we will discuss in the next section, the Canaanite god(s) “Elohim” became identified with YHWH. This is why the Hebrew Bible (the Christian “Old Testament”) refers to the “LORD God.” “Lord” translates YHWH and “God” translates “Elohim.” So the full name for God was “YHWH Elohim.”

The Hebrews knew that different peoples and nations each had their own gods. But they only obeyed one god (“YHWH Elohim”). This view of god is called *henotheism*. The henotheist believes there are other gods out there. Many gods exist. But the henotheist only worships the

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<sup>12</sup> To this day traditional Jews write “God” as “G–d” and “Lord” as “L–rd.” They leave out the vowels as a way of saying that they do not ever fully know who or what God is.

<sup>13</sup> *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v., “El.”

god of her or his own community or tribe. Only later would the Hebrews (or their descendants, the Jews) come to believe that only one god existed. (The belief that only one god exists is *monotheism*.)

### *Hebrew and Early Jewish Religion*

In most Asian religions, the supreme power in the universe was the infinite source of everything. It was beyond good and evil. It included life and death, creation and destruction, happiness and sadness. Such a god could not be good, since it included all the sadness and heartache that humans experience. This sort of divinity was an “it,” not a “he” (or “she”). It was not a personal being. Such a divinity was not really concerned about human beings — their hopes, fears, joys, or sorrows. One could not pray to such a god nor seek its help.

In contrast, the religions of the “west”, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, believe that god is personal. God cares about his people. Since this god desires good things for those who followed him, god is himself “good.” He is “righteous” and expected those who served him to be righteous.

This belief was based on the traditions about Abraham. Abraham believed that his god had called him to a new land, where the god would bless him. This is why the people who claimed to be Abraham’s descendants, the Jews (at first called “Hebrews”) were called “the chosen people.” God selected them. He guided them, and they were to serve him. They prayed to him and asked his help and guidance. He would ultimately make everything work out for their “good.”

The Jews also experienced God at work among other nations. He intervened in the affairs of other countries and peoples to help the Jews. So the Jewish god was not only the god of the Jews, but the god of *everyone*. He was not simply powerful among the Jews, he was *all-powerful*.

The special insight of early Jewish religion was that god is both great *and* good. He was both “almighty” *and* personally concerned with people. Since he was good towards human beings, he wanted human beings to be good toward each other. He was a *moral* God. He was concerned about how people treat each other.

### *God calls Abraham (Genesis 17, World English Bible)*

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, Yhwh appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty. Walk before me, and be blameless. I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.”

Abram fell on his face. God talked with him, saying, “As for me, behold, my covenant is with you. You will be the father of a multitude of nations. Neither will your name any more be called Abram, but your name will be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made you. I will make you exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of you. Kings will come out of you. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you. I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land where you are traveling, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. I will be their God.”

God said to Abraham, “As for you, you will keep my covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin. It will be a token of a covenant between me and you. He who is

eight days old will be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he who is born in the house, or bought with money of any foreigner who is not of your seed. He who is born in your house, and he who is bought with your money, must be circumcised. My covenant will be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. The uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.”

God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but her name will be Sarah. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. Yes, I will bless her, and she will be a mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her.”

Then Abraham fell on his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to him who is one hundred years old? Will Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?” Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”

God said, “No, but Sarah, your wife, will bear you a son. You shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He will become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this set time in the next year.”

### *Jacob wrestles with “God” (Genesis 32, World English Bible)*

He rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two handmaids, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford of the Jabbok. He took them, and sent them over the stream, and sent over that which he had. Jacob was left alone, and wrestled with a man there until the breaking of the day. When he saw that he didn’t prevail against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was strained, as he wrestled. The man said, “Let me go, for the day breaks.” Jacob said, “I won’t let you go, unless you bless me.”

He said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” He said, “Your name will no longer be called ‘Jacob,’ but, ‘Israel,’ for you have fought with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” He said, “Why is it that you ask what my name is?” He blessed him there.

### *God reveals his name to Moses (Exodus 3:13–15 World English Bible)*

Moses said to God, “Behold, when I come to the children of Israel, and tell them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you;’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ What should I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM,” [*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*] and he said, “You shall tell the children of Israel this: ‘I AM [*Ehyeh*] has sent me to you.’” God said moreover to Moses, “You shall tell the children of Israel this, ‘Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and this is my memorial to all generations.

## 4. Israel and the Covenant

Who were these Hebrews? Where did they come from? We know that the stories about Abraham, Jacob, and Moses are oral traditions. They were written down long after the events they report. But they contain kernels of historical fact. The Hebrew people were a mixture of different races and ethnic groups. The Exodus story tells us that when the Hebrews escaped from Egypt, “a mixed multitude” of Egyptians (probably other slaves or lower classes) joined them (Exodus 12:38 New Jewish Publication Society [NJPS]).<sup>14</sup>

Some of the Hebrews were originally Canaanites. (This will be explained in the lectures.)

Other Hebrews were probably nomads. They came out of the harsh, unproductive, and unforgiving desert. The settled communities had prosperity the nomads desired. The Hebrew scriptures (or, “the Bible”<sup>15</sup>) called Canaan “a land flowing with milk and honey” and “the promised land.” How could these two different groups be joined together?

In the ancient Middle East, a covenant (*berîth*) was a solemn pact between two parties. The parties were someone in a position of authority (such as a king) and someone who was subservient (such as a vassal prince). The covenant stated the obligations of the vassal to serve and be faithful to the king.

The “covenant” of the Bible was a pact between the Hebrew people and YHWH. They obeyed and acknowledged him alone; he protected and guided them. From a political point of view, the covenant was also the agreement the different groups made to live, work, and fight together. Canaanites and nomads came together to create a new people. This agreement created the nation known as “Israel,” after the legendary<sup>16</sup> ancestor of the Hebrews (also known as Jacob).

The biblical story says that after Moses died the Israelites were led by Joshua. Joshua led a swift invasion that destroyed the Canaanite city–states. Archeology does not seem to support this story. Only a few cities were destroyed in this time (about 1350 to 1020 B.C.E.).<sup>17</sup> Those that were destroyed were not immediately rebuilt and occupied (as they would have been if the Israelites had conquered them).

<sup>14</sup>See also Numbers 11:4, and the commentary in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, W. Gunther Plaut, ed. (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), pp. 462, 1091.

<sup>15</sup> “The Hebrew scriptures” are the history, beliefs, and literature of the Hebrew people and the nations they founded in Canaan — “Israel” and “Judah.” Christians call it the “Old Testament” (these ancient writings make up about the first three–fourths of what is commonly known as the “Bible”). But that suggests that they have been superseded by the “New Testament” (the early Christian writings). That is why we will call it “the Hebrew scriptures” or “the Hebrew Bible.”

<sup>16</sup> The word “legendary” is not meant to imply that Israel/Jacob didn’t exist. It only is a reminder that whatever we know about Israel/Jacob is based on very old stories that were passed down by word of mouth. We don’t know how much of these stories are based on historical fact.

Keep one more thing in mind. Ancient stories are about *identity*. They *retold* these stories in such a way as to say: “This is who we are.”

<sup>17</sup> On the dates, see John Carmody, et. al., *Exploring the Hebrew Bible* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1988), p. 11.

As reconstructed by archeologists, Israel was started *in* Canaan by native peasants. They created independent farming settlements in the hills of central Canaan. They were already experienced at farming. This tells us that the first “Hebrews” were natives rather than nomads.<sup>18</sup>

Israel was in the rocky, barren land of the hill country. They were held together by their commitment to the god YHWH. “Judges” (in the Hebrew scriptures) says as long as they were faithful to this commitment or “covenant,” they were successful against the Canaanites in the central hill-country. When they failed to honor the covenant, they were likely to be overrun. And they were never able to totally expel the Canaanites from the fertile coastal areas.

### *The Israelite State*

By about 1200 B.C.E., Israel had created a community of tribes in the hill country in the middle of Canaan. Then it encountered its most formidable foe. The coastland of southern Canaan was invaded by a people known as Philistines.

They are known to us from other records of the time as “Peoples of the Sea.” They attacked the entire eastern end of the Mediterranean. They tried to conquer Egypt, but failed. From there they turned towards Canaan. The Philistines were technologically advanced. They possessed a virtual monopoly on iron weapons. This gave them a significant advantage over the Israelites, who were still using bronze weapons.

The organization that ruled Israel was unable to cope. It was fundamentally “democratic” and decentralized. The Israelites were ruled through their tribal structure. If they were threatened, a charismatic war-lord would rise up. The war-lord, or “judge,” called the Israelites together to face their common foe. The judge’s authority only lasted as long as the danger. Once the tribes were no longer threatened, their unity would dissolve. The war-lord returned to his or her everyday tasks.

This temporary leadership preserved the freedom-loving character of the Israelites. But it could not meet the technologically advanced military threat from the Philistines. If the emerging Israelite nation was to survive, it needed a lasting, central authority.

In that day and age, the way to do that was to create a monarchy. Some tribal leaders viewed a monarchy as a betrayal of YHWH. They trusted in him to liberate them from oppressors and invaders. Samuel, a judge and prophet, warned the Israelite people that a king would bring taxes, a military draft, luxury and a class of the rich and powerful. But the need for leadership was too strong.

Biblical tradition tells us that the first great king of the Jews was David. The golden age of Israel only lasted through the lifetimes of David and his heir Solomon. Solomon used the military achievements of David to create an economic empire. But the cost of Solomon’s economic power was too high for the Israelite people. It led to all the luxuries the old judge Samuel had warned against. Solomon used forced labor and high taxes for a building program. David had

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<sup>18</sup> This presentation is based on the summary in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1992, s.v. “Israel, History of (Premonarchic Period), (Archeology and the “Conquest”).”

come to power in about 1012 B.C.E. Solomon died about 931 B.C.E. So the “golden age” of Israel only lasted 80 or 85 years.

The old tribal independence reasserted itself. The northern tribes rebelled against Solomon’s son and created their own kingdom. The northern kingdom became known as “Israel” and the southern kingdom was called “Judah” (later “Judea”).

### *The Rise of the “Prophets”*

Until about 800 B.C.E., most Israelites and Judahites were farmers or shepherds. The farmers were dominated by a small class of “aristocrats” who controlled the land. As poor farmers struggled to make a living, they borrowed money from the wealthy landowners. When the rains didn’t come, their crops failed. Since they couldn’t pay off their debts, they lost their land. Since they no longer owned land, they became servants of the landowners. The rich became richer and the poor became poorer.

A group of people spoke up against this situation. They were called “prophets.” Most kings in the ancient middle east had prophets “on their payroll.” The kings wanted to know things like when to go to war. The prophets claimed to be able to speak the will of the gods. They believed the gods could tell them.

The earlier Hebrew prophets spoke the will of their god in a trance. They went into a trance with the help of dance and music. They literally went “out of their minds.” They were “possessed” by their god (in this case, YHWH Elohim). God then “answered” whatever questions people might put to them. An example of how these early prophets worked can be found in the story of Saul:

...you [Saul] will meet a band of prophets coming down from the shrine with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre playing in front of them; they will be in a prophetic frenzy. Then the spirit of the LORD [YHWH] will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person. (1 Samuel 10: 5b-6, New Revised Standard Version [NRSV])

### *The Warnings of the Prophets*

Later prophets lost the ability to go into this trance. They were no longer “possessed” by the “spirit of the LORD.” But they still experienced an intense urge that they called “the word of the LORD [YHWH].” Sometimes, like Jeremiah, they didn’t want to speak. But they were compelled to deliver a terrible message:<sup>19</sup>

For whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
I must shout, “Violence and destruction!”

.....  
If I say, “I will not mention him [the LORD],  
or speak any more in his name,”

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<sup>19</sup> For this writer, a persuasive explanation of the phenomenon of prophecy and of the changes that took place can be found in Julian Jaynes, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), Ch. 6. See esp. pp. 295–300, 310–313.

then within me there is something like a burning fire  
 shut up in my bones;  
 I am weary with holding it in,  
 and I cannot. (Jeremiah 20: 8a, 9 NRSV)

The prophets saw violence and lawlessness all around them. People only wanted to get rich and live easy lives. They acted as if nothing bad would happen to them.

...you...put far away the evil day,  
 and bring near a reign of violence[.]

.....  
 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,  
 and lounge on their couches,  
 and eat lambs from the flock,  
 and calves from the stall;  
 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,  
 and like David improvise on instruments of music;  
 and drink wine from bowls,  
 and anoint themselves with the finest oils,  
 but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:3-6 NRSV)

It was bad enough that the rich people didn't care about the poor. It was even worse that they "ripped off" the poor.

Alas for those who devise wickedness  
 and evil deeds on their beds!  
 When the morning dawns, they perform it,  
 because it is in their power.  
 They covet fields, and seize them;  
 houses, and take them away;.... (Micah 2:1-2a NRSV)

The rich and powerful used their free time to figure out how to steal the land and houses of the poor. The prophets predicted that the LORD would respond to the violence of the powerful with his own dreadful and violent judgment.

Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—  
 a day of darkness and gloom,.... (Joel 2: 1b-2a NRSV)

The agent of judgment would be "a great and powerful army" that destroyed everything in its path (v. 2b). But ultimately the destruction was cosmic: "The sun and the moon are darkened... (v. 10b)."

### *The Religious and Moral Reform of the Prophets*

People pretended that nothing would happen to them. After all, they were good, religious people. They regularly offered to God the sacrifices of young cows, rams (male sheep) and olive oil required in their ancient laws.

With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil? (Micah 6:6-7a NRSV)

“No!,” Micah, Amos, and the other prophets responded. YHWH, “the LORD God,” didn’t want “food.” God didn’t need to be fed. God didn’t want all this attention paid to *him*. The best way that the Israelites could show their concern for God was to show their concern for *other people*. What God wanted was justice and kindness.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

Religion had to be more than external ritual. It wasn’t enough to “be religious.” True religion was a humble attitude towards God. God didn’t need people. People couldn’t use ritual to “please” God. Nor could they use religion as a “crutch.” Religion wasn’t a substitute for caring for others.

We can summarize the warnings and reforms of the prophets in the following points:

- the prophet has a “word of the Lord” or *message* from God;
- the message is that *judgment* is coming. Our comfortable lives are about to shattered;
- if we are to avoid judgment, God *commands* us to live new lives;
- the new lives should be lives of *justice* and true religion. Ritual alone won’t do.

### *Exile and Return*

The warnings of the prophets didn’t do much good. The judgment and destruction came. The northern kingdom, Israel, was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E. Its inhabitants and their descendants disappeared from history. Judah survived longer partly because it was south of Israel. By the time Assyria reached Judah, it was worn out. Assyria fell to the Babylonians before it could capture Judah. Judah lasted 150 years longer than Israel. But no amount of military or political unity could withstand the juggernaut of Mesopotamian militarism. Judah finally fell, in 586 B.C.E., to the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

During its “Babylonian Captivity,” the Israelites from Judah began to collect Hebrew literature and history. It kept the memories of the good old days alive. They especially remembered the capital city, Jerusalem, also known as Zion.

By the rivers of Babylon,  
there we sat,

sat and wept,  
 as we thought of Zion.  
 There on the poplars  
 we hung up our lyres,  
 for our captors asked us there for songs,  
 our tormentors, for amusement,  
 "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."  
 How can we sing a song of the Lord  
 on alien soil?  
 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
 let my right hand wither;  
 let my tongue stick to my palate  
 if I cease to think of you,  
 if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory  
 even at my happiest hour. (Psalms 137:1-6, NJPS)

But now the great buildings in Jerusalem were gone. The Israelites especially remembered the great temple. Solomon had built their center of worship about 400 years earlier. It had been burnt and its wonderful furnishings taken away to Babylon. How were the Hebrews to keep their beliefs and religious practices alive?

They gathered laws, rituals, and legends that had been written down. But most were in peoples' memories. They had heard their father or grandfather tell tales of their ancestors. This oral literature was written down. This process of writing down old stories and collecting them into a recognizable shape would continue for about three hundred years. When finished, it became the Hebrew scriptures.

Another way these Israelites might have kept their identity intact was to emphasize and maintain unique customs. We cannot know what these customs were, since the writings about this period were written later. They might actually be talking about later customs. But certain practices would have given the people a distinct identity from the other ethnic groups in the empire.

### *"One" God*

One change took place during this time. The Israelites and their descendants in exile encountered other religions. They began to wonder about the relationship of "their" god to all the other gods. Remember, previously they believed that there were many gods. Each community or ethnic group had its own deity. But the Israelites believed that they were to worship only one god (YHWH). To make a long story short, they came to the conclusion that there was only one god, instead of many different gods. That one true god was their god, YHWH.

The instructor will explain this process in more detail in the lectures.

#### **[The realization that God "goes" everywhere (Psalm 139, World English Bible)]**

Yhwh, you have searched me, And you know me.  
 You know my sitting down and my rising up.  
 You perceive my thoughts from afar.  
 You search out my path and my lying down,  
 And are acquainted with all my ways.

For there is not a word on my tongue,  
 But, behold, Yhwh, you know it altogether.  
 You hem me in behind and before.  
 You laid your hand on me.  
 This knowledge is beyond me.  
 It's lofty. I can't attain it.  
 Where could I go from your Spirit?  
 Or where could I flee from your presence?  
 If I ascend up into heaven, you are there.  
 If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there!  
 If I take the wings of the dawn,  
 And settle in the uttermost parts of the sea;  
 Even there your hand will lead me,  
 And your right hand will hold me.  
 If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me;  
 The light around me will be night;"  
 Even the darkness doesn't hide from you,  
 But the night shines as the day.  
 The darkness is like light to you.

### *Sanctification and Holiness*

About seventy years after the exile, Babylon was captured by Cyrus, leader of a coalition of Persians and Medes. In order to earn the favor of the many different gods of his empire, Cyrus encouraged different ethnic groups to return to their homelands. Among those who did so were the descendants of the inhabitants of Judah in 538 B.C.E. "Judah" became "Judea," and the Israelites became "Jews." These Jews would create both Judaism and Christianity.

At first, the community was tiny, and stayed inside the ruins of the capital Jerusalem. In the countryside, there were other Israelites. At the time of the exile, their ancestors had been poor. The Babylonians didn't bother taking them away. They were allowed to stay and continue growing grain, herding cattle, sheep, or goats, or cultivating grapes, olives, or almonds.

As a way of discouraging rebellion, the Babylonians had imported non-Israelite ethnic groups. The Israelites who had stayed mixed with and married the non-Israelites. These native inhabitants of Judea continued to worship YHWH in ways passed down from their ancestors.

The returning exiles and the Judean natives both worshipped YHWH. But the religion of the exiles had changed in Babylon. The exiles believed that the worship of the natives was not good enough. Their own version of Hebrew religion was purer, they thought. They rejected the practice of intermarriage with other ethnic groups. They criticized the natives for trading goods on the Sabbath instead of keeping it as a day of rest. They insisted that true worship of YHWH required strict separation from other ethnic groups and their alien way of life.

This idea of rigorous separation developed into a central idea of Judaism and (indirectly) Christianity: sanctification. "Sanctification" means to be "set apart." Originally, this meant that YHWH required his followers to be distinct from other ethnic groups. It was intended to keep Jews separate from alien religious customs.

But the Jews rapidly transformed it into the idea that their god, the true God, required purity and holiness in all of life. They were dedicated to God and set apart for his purposes and his plans. They served him in everything they did — food, dress, social roles, and on and on. They developed an increasingly complex set of guidelines to help them “sanctify” life.

“Sanctification” was the practice of showing how all of life was set apart in the service of God.

This was the origin of the well-known Jewish practice of *kasher* (more popularly known as “kosher”). *Kasher* means “pure” food. Later Judaism developed guidelines that included the prohibition against eating pork, keeping meat and milk products separate, and rules for the efficient and humane slaughtering of animals.

These specific guidelines did not come into being at this time. But the basic distinction between “pure” and “impure” was developed. It was the distinction between the “spiritual” and the “physical” (as in “animal”). Certain activities remind us of our animal side — eating, sex, death, and so on. Religions set apart certain activities as “pure” to remind humans that they were more than simply animals. They were also spiritual beings and moral beings. They could restrain their animals want and needs. They could discipline their instincts and develop their character.

At first, these purity regulations were especially important in the rituals of the temple. A priest could not sacrifice the animal to God unless he was “ritually pure.” Purity here did not mean physically “clean.” It meant *spiritually* clean. A priest was mentally and emotionally prepared to carry out the sacred actions. The person who gave the sacrifice was ready to “meet” God and share in the holy ceremony.

### *God as Creator and Holy: Readings*

#### **[Creation: Genesis 1 World English Bible]**

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep and God’s Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters.

God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw the light, and saw that it was good. God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light “day”, and the darkness he called “night”. There was evening and there was morning, the first day.

[In the next four days, God (day 2) separates the sky and the earth, (day 3) separates land from water and makes plant life, (day 4) sun and moon (day 5) creates sea animals and birds, (day 6) land animals. Continuing on day 6...]

God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” God created man in his own image. In God’s image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them. God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” God said, “Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree, which bears fruit yielding seed. It will be your food. To every animal of the earth, and to every bird of the sky, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food;” and it was so.

God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. There was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.

Yhwh God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it.

**[Genesis 2 and 3 (World English Bible: Evil comes into the World)]**

Yhwh God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die."

[ch. 3] Now the serpent was more subtle than any animal of the field which Yahweh God had made. He said to the woman, "Has God really said, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees of the garden, but not the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden. God has said, 'You shall not eat of it. You shall not touch it, lest you die.'"

The serpent said to the woman, "You won't surely die, for God knows that in the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took some of its fruit, and ate; and she gave some to her husband with her, and he ate it, too. Their eyes were opened, and they both knew that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together, and made coverings for themselves. They heard Yhwh God's voice walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Yhwh God among the trees of the garden.

Yhwh God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

The man said, "I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

...

Yhwh God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand, and also take of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever..." Therefore Yhwh God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed cherubim\* at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

*The Rulers of Judea Under Persia and Alexander the Great*

Jews returned to Jerusalem and Judea under the protection of the Persian rulers. Over the next century, they rebuilt their holy temple and Jerusalem.

The Persian Empire that supported Judea was attacked by Alexander the Great. Alexander was from Macedon, a semi-barbaric Greek people northeast of the great Greek cities of Athens and Sparta. He conquered the more civilized Greeks, and defeated the Persians in two great battles in 333 and 331 B.C.E.. After going all the way to modern India, he died in a drunken stupor in 323.

The Greeks called themselves "Hellenes." Alexander tried to combine the Greek ("Hellenic") way of life with the ancient eastern cultures of Mesopotamia (Babylon and Persia) and Egypt. Historians call this combination of the Greek and eastern ways of life "Hellenistic" culture.

Greek language soon became the standard language of business and learning throughout Alexander's empire.

The center of the Greek way of life was the city–state, called the *polis*. (This word is the origin of “politics.”) The greatest Greek city–states were Athens and Sparta. The crucial buildings of the polis included the gymnasium and the theater.

The gymnasium was the place where men practiced athletics. Because every man of importance could be found in the gymnasium, it was much like a fancy restaurant or resort. It was the place men went to develop business connections or friendships. (In Greece, many of these friendships were homosexual relationships.) It was also the place that young men who aspired to become part of the elite were educated.

Greek theater originated as a way to tell the stories of the Greek gods. The dramas introduced ideas that were very different from the ancient religious beliefs of the Jews.

### *The Hellenization of Judea*

The rulers of the empire encouraged cities in the middle east to become *poleis* (the plural of *polis*). By adopting Greek culture, the leaders of the cities could take advantage of the opportunities for wealth and power in the empire. Some of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem wanted to adopt most of Hellenism. These were men who stood to benefit from the new business ties.

But many of the leaders in the countryside believed that the acceptance of Hellenism compromised Jewish religion and culture. One example will illustrate why they thought this was so. At the gymnasium, men practiced in the nude. (“Gymnasium” comes from a Greek word that means “to exercise naked.”)

Jewish men were circumcised. Greeks considered circumcision an ugly mutilation of the male body. Jews were unsophisticated newcomers, like country boys who go to Harvard or Yale. Hellenists mocked these uncivilized folk who thought they could fit in with the elite. Thanks to the gymnasium, there was no way for Jews to hide their ethnic identity. Some Jews went so far as to have circumcision surgically reversed.

The Greek ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, came to the support of the Jews who wanted to adopt Hellenistic culture. As opposition increased, his repression of traditional Judaism became more intense. Finally, he prohibited the most important Jewish practices: circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, learning the Torah, and sacrifices.

But some Jews, *hasidim* (“the faithful”), were willing to die for their way of life. This created a major problem. Ancient Israelites had believed that if they sacrificed to YHWH and followed God’s Torah, they were rewarded with long life, prosperity, and many sons. (This was much like the ancient Indian Vedas and early Chinese religion.)

In contrast to this ancient belief, now the *hasidim* were dying *for* their faithfulness. Service of God was not bringing long, prosperous life. It resulted in horrible death. How could they continue to believe in a god who expected such sacrifices? The only answer Jews found was that their reward would come in life *after death*. God would raise his faithful servants to a new life. They would receive their just reward, not in this life, but in a new realm where God ruled. The first clear evidence for the Jewish belief in the resurrection and an afterlife comes from this period.

The *hasidim* were willing to die for the Torah. But Antiochus was determined to enforce the prohibition against sacrifice. In 167 B.C.E., he sacrificed pigs in the temple. This was a triple

blasphemy to Jews. He was sacrificing to pagan gods, in the temple dedicated to YHWH. To make matters worse, Jews considered pigs to be “unclean.”

Antiochus tried to make all Jews sacrifice in the manner he prescribed. But an old country priest, Mattathias, refused. He and his sons fled to the mountains, from where they organized a revolt. When he died, his son Judah took over. In 164 B.C.E., Judah, known as “the Maccabee,” captured Jerusalem and purified the temple of its pagan sacrifices. (“Hanukkah [Chanukah],” the Jewish celebration that occurs close to the Christian Christmas, is a celebration of Judah’s victory.)

What started as a religious revolt became an attempt by Judas’ family and its descendants to create an empire. They conquered a larger area than any Israelite king since Solomon (the son of David), and created the *Hasmonean* dynasty. The Hasmonean kingdom was a “theocracy.” It was supposed to be ruled by God through the “high priest.” The high priest was the religious leader of the Jews, who was responsible for the temple and its sacrificial rituals. He was also the political leader.

However, many high priests/rulers were more interested in politics than in being devoted religious leaders. The *hasidim* were willing to die for their ancient traditions. But many were not willing to die for the political ambitions of the Hasmoneans. One high priest was pelted with fruit because of his sloppy performance of religious rituals!

There were also conflicts within the Hasmonean family. Roman armies had been capturing more and more of the old Hellenistic empire. Eventually, civil war between two Hasmonean heirs gave Rome a pretext to intervene. In 63 B.C.E., Rome captured Jerusalem. From then on, the high priest would rule under Roman supervision. Jerusalem would not be under Jewish control for another 2000 years.

## 5. The Qur'an and the Beginnings of Islam



### *Arabia Before Islam*

Around 550 C.E., Arabia was inhabited by Bedouin tribes. To the north were the Persians (in present day Iran). It was officially Zoroastrian (a monotheistic religion similar to, and older than, Judaism). To the west was the Eastern Roman (or, Byzantine) Empire. It was Christian.

The Bedouin tribes shared a common ethnic identity—Arabian. They spoke many different dialects. But they did have one language in common. One of the great loves of the Arabic peoples was poetry. They gathered for great poetry competitions. The language used in these competitions was a common Arabic language.

They competed to see who could compose the most eloquent and moving poetry. The Arabs believed that the poets were possessed and inspired by spiritual powers called *jinni* (the origin of our “genie”). *Jinni* were something like the sprites or elves in the English and Irish traditions.

Poetry drew the Arabs together. But more often they were fighting each other. The purpose of their battles was to steal other tribes’ cattle and possessions. In other words, war was a way of getting rich. Bloodshed was kept at a minimum. These battles were called “raids” (*razzia*).

Like many ancient nations, the pagan Arabs worshipped many gods. (They were “polytheists.”) They believed in a supreme god called “Allah.” However, Allah didn’t have much influence in their everyday lives. If an Arab needed help, he or she would pray to one of the lesser gods, not to Allah.

Arabs also worshipped a mysterious black rock. They believed that it came from the gods. In other words, it was a meteor. This rock was called the Kaaba (sometimes spelled “Ka’ba” or “Ka’bah”). Arabs made pilgrimages—religious journeys—to see it at the city of Mecca.

Mecca was the great trading center of Arabia.<sup>1</sup> Many people earned a living by importing goods from distant lands. People came to Mecca to swap their own products for these foreign goods.

### *“In the Name of God Recite”*

One of these traders was a young man by the name of Muhammad. Muhammad was born around 570 C.E. He was orphaned at a young age, and taken in by his uncle. He went to work for a wealthy trader who was also a widow.

Muhammad apparently worked hard for his employer, Khadija. He also must have been a likable young man. Although she was ten or fifteen years older than he, she proposed marriage to him. He agreed. So at the age of twenty-five or so, Muhammad became independently wealthy.

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars dispute this traditional view. As in the stories of the Israelites, we are describing “legends” that give us insight into a group’s self-identity. In this case, we are telling the traditional history of Islam.

Khadija's wealth gave Muhammad plenty of time to think about life. He must have been a sensitive person (perhaps as a result of being orphaned). He spent more of his time going off into the barren mountains and caves of Arabia to be alone, meditate, and pray.

After about fifteen years of these times alone, Muhammad had an experience that (like Paul's conversion to Jesus) changed the world. While meditating he heard a voice:

Recite, in the Name of Your Lord who created,  
Created man from a sperm-cell.  
Recite, how altogether gracious is your Lord,  
who taught by the pen, taught man what he knows not...<sup>2</sup>

Muhammad left his place of meditation confused and frightened. Would people think him insane? But Khadija (his wife) supported him and helped him to believe that the revelations were real and that they came from God.

According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad himself could not read or write. So he repeated ("recited") the revelations to others, who wrote them down. Once all of Muhammad's revelations were written down, they were collected in the Qur'an.

### *The Miracle of the Qur'an*

The appropriate response to Muhammad's recitation of God's words should have been repentance and grateful submission. But many of his listeners mocked him. Maybe his supernatural messages were magic. The recitations responded:

By the star and its setting, your kinsman (Muhammad) has not been led astray, nor is he under delusion. He does not speak by some whim of his own. This is nothing else than a revelation imparted to him.<sup>3</sup>

As we have seen, pagan Arabs already believed in *jinni* who inspired their poets. Maybe Muhammad was possessed by these *jinni*, like any other crazy poet.<sup>4</sup>

In the grace of your Lord, you are not jinn-possessed. Truly yours is a rightful reward and you have in hand a great undertaking. You will see — as they will too — which of you it is who is demented.<sup>5</sup>

Those who opposed Muhammad were not convinced. They asked for miraculous signs from Muhammad. The voices refused.

They said: "Why have no attesting signs been enacted for him from above by his Lord?"  
Say: "Such signs are in God's hands. As for me, I am simply a bringer of plain warning."  
Has it not been enough for them that We have sent down upon the Book read to them?

<sup>2</sup> *Readings in the Qur'an*, Kenneth Cragg, ed. and trans. (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1988), p. 177 [Surah 96:1–5].

<sup>3</sup> *Readings in the Qur'an*, p. 178 [Surah 53:1–4].

<sup>4</sup> In the ancient world, insanity was considered a divine gift.

<sup>5</sup> *Readings in the Qur'an*, p. 180–181 [Surah 68:1–6].

That fact is indeed an act of mercy and a reminder for believing people.

Say: “God is all the witness I need between me and you. He knows all that is in the heavens and in the earth. Those who have put their faith in what is vain and have denied God they it is who are the losers.”<sup>6</sup>

Muhammad didn’t need any miracles or supernatural signs. The message was its own “proof.” If a person didn’t believe in God, then no miracles would be convincing. The person who *did* believe in God would immediately recognize the divine source of Muhammad’s messages.

In other words, the Qur’an was its own proof. Muhammad’s critics said that his recitations were invented by him. They were created in his own mind (like any other poetry or literary composition). The voices responded: in that case, let *them* produce something like it.

“Do they say: ‘He has invented it himself’? Indeed, they have no faith. Let them produce a scripture like it, if what they say be true!”<sup>7</sup>

To this day, believing Muslims regard the beauty and eloquence of the Qur’an as the highest proof of its inspiration. They say that nothing has ever been created like it. And (they say) nothing ever will be.

Like all great poetry, it is impossible to capture its beauty in translation. That is why it is always recited in its original Arabic. Those who have heard it say it is indeed beautiful. That is not surprising. The Arabic in which the Qur’an was written was originally the poetic Arabic used at the poetry competitions. Muhammad took that poetic Arabic and used it as the language of his prophecies.

But it would be just as accurate to say that the poetic Arabic *took Muhammad*. That is to say, Arabic “took hold” of Muhammad. “It” used Muhammad as the messenger for a religious and moral message to the Arabic peoples. Muhammad was only the *means* through which the prophecies came. He did not “invent” them.<sup>8</sup> The Qur’an transformed that poetic language into the single language of the Arabic people. The Qur’an created Arabic and Muslim civilization.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Readings in the Qur’an*, p. 183 [Surah 29:50–52].

<sup>7</sup> Surah 52:33–34, Dawood’s translation in van Voorst, *Anthology*, p. 306.

<sup>8</sup> Whether the prophecies are thereby “supernatural” or “divine” is a separate issue.

<sup>9</sup> This is similar to the way in which the King James Bible helped make the modern English language and Luther’s translation of the Bible into German laid the basis for German language and culture.

## 6. Christianity



### *The Kingdom of God*

The “good old days” of David and Solomon were a constant source of hope and desire for the Jewish people. They wanted to renew the glories of that brief, long–lost period in Israelite history. This hope emerged in the time of Zerubbabel (soon after the return from exile) and in the time of the Maccabees (the Hasmoneans).

After Rome took over the Hasmonean empire, these ambitions were frustrated. Rome called the area “Palestine.”<sup>10</sup> Since the Jews could not achieve freedom by human means, many began to look for divine deliverance.

### *The Christian Scriptures*

The story below will regularly refer to the writings of the early Christian communities and leaders. There are twenty–six “books” in the Christian scriptures. All together they are traditionally called the “New Testament.”

“New” implies an “Old” Testament. The “Old Testament” of Christianity is what we have been calling “the Hebrew Scriptures.” Together, the “New” and “Old” “Testaments” make up the Christian “Bible.”<sup>11</sup> Calling it the “New” Testament suggests that the “Old” Testament is in some sense out–of–date. Because of this pejorative implication, and its negative significance for Jews, this account will use “Christian scriptures” to refer to these 26 Christian writings.

First there are four “Gospels” (which means “good news”) — somewhat different accounts of Jesus’ life. Then there is a story of the early Christians in “Acts of the Apostles.” Next are twenty “epistles” or letters written from leaders to different churches. Thirteen are written by Paul (see below) or by one of his followers writing in his name. Finally there is “Revelations,” a mysterious vision about the end of time.

### *Jesus*

As in the case of ancient Israelite history, when we talk about Jesus and early Christianity we must distinguish between the story passed down in tradition, and the story as recreated by scholars. The *traditional* story of Jesus goes something like this:

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<sup>10</sup> The name was deliberately insulting. It was the Latin form of “Philistia,” the land of the Philistines. These were the arch–enemies of the ancient Israelites.

<sup>11</sup> The word “testament” means “a will,” a legal document that tells how to divide one’s wealth. “Testament” was the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew *berith* (“covenant”). The “Old Testament” of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians includes ancient Jewish writings that did not make it into the Hebrew Scriptures.

In a year that corresponds to 4 or 6 B.C.E.,<sup>12</sup> a boy was born in a barn in the little town of Bethlehem, near the capital city of Jerusalem. His Jewish family was from Galilee.<sup>13</sup> His destiny was heralded by many signs and wonders—angels that spoke to poor shepherds, stars that guided astrologers from Persia or Arabia, and a dream that warned of an attempt on the baby’s life by the suspicious ruler of Judea.

Jesus apparently lived a quiet childhood. Around the age of 30, he was “baptized” by John the Baptist, a prophet in the desert. Baptism was a sign of “repentance.” One was sorry for one’s past sins and wanted to get ready for the God’s coming kingdom. “The kingdom of God” meant a human community guided by God’s will and under his rule. At his baptism, Jesus received a heavenly sign that he was appointed to be a special messenger for God.<sup>14</sup>

In those days, John the Baptizer came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” ... Then people from Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him. They were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. . . .

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. But John would have hindered him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?” But Jesus, answering, said to him, “Allow it now, for this is the fitting way for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he allowed him. Jesus, when he was baptized, went up directly from the water: and behold, the heavens were opened to him. He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming on him. Behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3, *World English Bible*)

Inspired by this sign, Jesus began to travel around Galilee. Even scholars agree that Jesus was a healer and could exorcise “demons.” He said that his miracles were the signs that “God’s kingdom” was about to happen.

When he came down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him. Behold, a leper came to him and worshiped him, saying, “Lord, if you want to, you can make me clean.” Jesus stretched out his hand, and touched him, saying, “I want to. Be made clean.” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. ... When he came into Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking him, and saying, “Lord, my servant lies in the house paralyzed, grievously tormented.” Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.”

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<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, the beginning of the “common era” is dated from the birth of Jesus. But chronological years have never been precise solar years. A number of adjustments have been made to get the two measurements “in sync.” So the “actual” date of Jesus’ birth no longer corresponds to year “0.”

<sup>13</sup> Galilee was a northern province of Judea. It was captured by one of the Hasmonean rulers, settled by Jews, and forcibly converted to Judaism around 67 B.C.E. As a result of this history, inhabitants of Galilee were often considered second-class Jews.

<sup>14</sup> “Baptism” literally means “immersion.” Jesus and early Christians were probably immersed in water. Baptism was an external bath that symbolized internal spiritual or moral cleansing. Later on, it became a purely token sprinkling or pouring of water on the head of the recipient.

The centurion answered, "Lord, I'm not worthy for you to come under my roof. Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am also a man under authority, having under myself soldiers. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and tell another, 'Come,' and he comes; and tell my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard it, he marveled, and said to those who followed, "Most assuredly I tell you, I haven't found so great a faith, not even in Israel. ... Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way. Let it be done for you as you have believed." His servant was healed in that hour.

When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw his wife's mother lying sick with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her. She got up and served him. When evening came, they brought to him many possessed with demons. He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. (Matthew 8, *World English Bible*)

### *The Teachings of Jesus*

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into the time of trial, but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:9–13)

*[Forgive as you have been forgiven]*

Therefore the Kingdom of Heaven is like a certain king, who wanted to reconcile accounts with his servants. When he had begun to reconcile, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But because he couldn't pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, with his wife, his children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will repay you all!' The lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

"But that servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, who owed him one hundred denarii and he grabbed him, and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'

"So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you!' He would not, but went and cast him into prison, until he should pay back that which was due. So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were exceedingly sorry, and came and told to their lord all that was done. Then his lord called him in, and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt, because you begged me. Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, even as I had mercy on you?' His lord was angry, and delivered him to the tormentors, until he should pay all that was due to him. So my heavenly Father will also do to you, if you don't each forgive your brother from your hearts for his misdeeds." (Matthew 18:23–35 *World English Bible*)

*[See under "The First Christians"]*

### *The Death and Purported Resurrection of Jesus*

Jesus used several words that suggest a person of unusual power and authority. “Son of man” was one, “Messiah” was another. We don’t know what Jesus meant by these words. But the Jewish leaders didn’t accept Jesus’ miraculous powers or his claims to authority. They arrested him and turned him over to Pilate, the local representative of Roman rule. Some Gospels claim that Pilate desperately tried to release Jesus. But (the story goes), manipulated by the Jewish leaders, Pilate found Jesus guilty of treason (because he claimed to be a king) and executed him on a “cross.” Normally, crucifixion was a slow, agonizing death by exposure.

They brought him to the place called Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, “The place of a skull.” They offered him wine mixed with myrrh to drink, but he didn’t take it.

Crucifying him, they parted his garments among them, casting lots on them, what each should take. It was the third hour, and they crucified him. The superscription of his accusation was written over him, “THE KING OF THE JEWS.” With him they crucified two robbers; one on his right hand, and one on his left. The Scripture was fulfilled, which says, “He was numbered with transgressors.”

Those who passed by blasphemed him, wagging their heads, and saying, “Ha! You who destroy the temple, and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!”

Likewise, also the chief priests mocking among themselves with the scribes said, “He saved others. He can’t save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, that we may see and believe him.” Those who were crucified with him insulted him.

When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. At the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is, being interpreted, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” . . . Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and gave up the spirit. The veil of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. When the centurion, who stood by opposite him, saw that he cried out like this and breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:22–39 *World English Bible*)

On the Sunday morning after his death, some of his followers went to his tomb (a hole in a rock). To their astonishment, they found it empty. At first they were frightened and angry. But then Jesus appeared to his followers on numerous occasions. They became convinced that he had been raised from the dead.

[Mark’s version] When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, that they might come and anoint him. Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. They were saying among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?” for it was very big. Looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back.

Entering into the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were amazed. He said to them, “Don’t be amazed. You seek Jesus, the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen. He is not here. Behold, the place where they laid him! But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He goes before you into Galilee. There you will see him, as he said to you.’” (Mark 16:1–7, *World English Bible*)

[Luke's version] Behold, two of [Jesus' followers] were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was sixty stadia from Jerusalem. They talked with each other about all of these things which had happened. It happened, while they talked and questioned together, that Jesus himself came near, and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. [ . . . ] [After walking together and reaching the disciples' home:] They urged him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is almost evening, and the day is almost over." He went in to stay with them. It happened, that when he had sat down at the table with them, he took the bread and gave thanks. Breaking it, he gave to them. Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished out of their sight. (Luke 24:13–16, 29-31, *World English Bible*)

In other stories, Jesus appeared through walls and locked doors, and ate food with his followers. Motivated by intense joy, they began to spread the good news ("gospel") about Jesus. They believed that Jesus' "Spirit" was with them. This Spirit enabled them to do the same sort of miraculous healings and exorcisms that Jesus himself had done.

### *The First Christians*

The first "Christians" were Jews. They worshipped in the temple, kept the strict guidelines about "purity" (food laws and so on), and in general "kept Torah" (the ancient Jewish teachings about how to live). Indeed, they were so Jewish that they were not even called "Christians." Today scholars call them "Jewish Christians."<sup>15</sup>

Jewish Christians emphasized Jesus was a teacher and prophet. A later example of this viewpoint was recorded in the Gospel of St. Matthew. Jesus was interpreted as a "second Moses." Just like Moses gave Jews their Torah, Jesus gave a new Torah, a new way of life to the early Christian community. This new Torah is encapsulated in the "Sermon on the Mount."<sup>16</sup> It begins with the "Beatitudes:"

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in

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<sup>15</sup> One early label was "Nazarenes." Jesus was supposed to have grown up in the Galilean town of Nazareth. So these early Christians emphasized Jesus' human origin. They saw Jesus primarily as a human being rather than divine. He was a great teacher and a prophet sent from God.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 5–7. Just like Moses went up Mt. Sinai, Jesus went up a mountain.

heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.  
(Matthew 5: 3–11, NRSV)

Probably the first Jewish Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah. For some, “Messiah” meant that Jesus was the final and greatest prophet. For others, it meant a divine judge. Jesus would return soon to set up God’s kingdom. Sinners would be destroyed. But those who repented of their wrong ways and believed in Jesus would be “saved.”

This idea was based on a viewpoint that scholars call “apocalypticism.” Apocalypticism teaches that a radical break in history is coming. The “present age” is an age of sin and corruption. But history as we know it will come to an end in a great catastrophe. God will destroy evil and set up a rule of perfect justice and peace.

In all of this, Jewish Christians were only one tiny sect or distinct community within Judaism. There were many such groups within Judaism, somewhat like the many denominations in American Christianity. But Jewish Christianity did not win many converts among its fellow Jews. So how did Christianity become one of the great religions of the world?

### *Paul*

According to Christian scriptures, Paul began his life as a Jew named “Saul.” It also says he came from Tarsus, a Hellenistic city in the southeast corner of present-day Turkey. If that is true, then he grew up in a Hellenistic Jewish community, and spoke Greek. He was familiar with Greek culture and philosophy. He also saw first-hand the character and sexual practices of Gentiles. It disgusted this devout Jew.

Saul was a fanatic about Jewish purity. He persecuted other Jews that did not live up to his standards, especially the Jewish Christians. But somehow the “spirit” of Jesus spoke to Saul. He was to stop persecuting Jesus’ followers. He himself was to follow Jesus. “Saul” became “Paul.” This change in Saul/Paul also changed history.

Immediately Paul obeyed. All the zeal that he had earlier used to attack Christians he now used to teach about Jesus. He believed that soon Jesus would return to set up God’s kingdom on earth. The only way one could escape the destruction of the world (be “saved”) was to trust (“have faith”) in Jesus.

But Paul made two innovations in his understanding of Jesus. These two changes made the Christianity we know today possible. In the first place, Paul came to believe that the “good news” about Jesus was not only for Jews, but for Gentiles. Gentiles could be included with Jews in the coming kingdom of God (as ruled by Jesus).

Here Paul faced a problem. Most Jews assumed that to be in God’s kingdom one had to “keep Torah.” However, Paul believed that most Gentiles were not willing or able to “keep Torah.” So if Gentiles were going to be included in Jesus’ kingdom, Gentiles did not have to keep Torah. *Gentiles could be Christians without first becoming Jews.*

Scholars wonder what ideas might have led Paul to this conclusion. Sometimes he viciously attacked Judaism for trying to please God by “good deeds.” But Judaism didn’t say that. Jews didn’t have to “please God.” They were already God’s chosen people. Good deeds (Jewish *mitzvot*) were simply a way of showing God how grateful a Jew was for being one of God’s chosen people.

### *Union with Christ*

Also, what thought–process led Paul to this conclusion? One explanation can be found in Paul’s second innovation. Paul said that the expected kingdom that Jesus would set up was *already present*. The “Spirit of Jesus” (the “Holy Spirit”) was getting believers ready for the coming kingdom. This Spirit was already working in their lives, preparing them for the ultimate change they would experience when Jesus returned. Paul called this being “in Christ.”

...Christ is in you, [and] the body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him who raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised up Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. Romans 8:10–11, *World English Bible*)

“Christ” was the Greek translation of “Messiah.” It quickly became the title for Jesus among Gentile Christians. “Acts” reports that believers in Jesus were first called “Christians” in the Hellenistic city of Antioch. “Christians” can be interpreted as “partisans of Christ” or “those who follow Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

But for Paul, to be a Christian meant more than simply *following* Jesus. The same divine life that had raised Jesus from the dead was also present in his followers. “Christians” did not merely *obey* Jesus. They were *empowered* to live as Christ lived. Christians were “in” Christ because Christ was “in” them. His Spirit was guiding, directing, and enabling them to live as they ought to live.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace; because the mind of the flesh is hostile towards God; for it is not subject to God’s law, neither indeed can it be. Those who are in the flesh can’t please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if it is so that the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if any man doesn’t have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his. (Romans 8: 5-8 *World English Bible*)

This was a “mystical” understanding of the relation between Jesus and his followers. Paul believed that there was a mysterious “spiritual” union between Christ and the Christian. This union made it possible for the Christian to live as he or she ought.

This was probably at least one of the ideas that led Paul to say that Gentile Christians did not have to keep the Jewish Torah. A Gentile believer in Jesus did not “have to” obey Torah because he or she didn’t “need to.” God’s guidance was no longer a “teaching” (= Torah) but an internal spiritual power (the Spirit of Christ).

For what the law couldn’t do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.,.... (Romans 8: 3-4, *World English Bible*)

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<sup>17</sup> On the meaning of “Christian,” see the notes to Acts 11: 26 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.

Paul believed that people could not keep Torah in their own strength. Humans were morally weak. People found it difficult to follow rules. According to Paul, Jesus had the same “human nature” as everyone else. He even died like other humans. But he overcame sin. He rose from the dead. The power to be free from sin and death was found in Jesus and his Spirit. So Christians did not need to *try* to keep God’s “rules.” The Spirit *empowered* them to keep the rules.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and lusts. If we live by the Spirit, let’s also walk by the Spirit. (Galatians 5: 22-25, *World English Bible*)

### *The Christian Character*

According to Paul, Christians were given a new character. This character, or new “personality,” was the “person of Christ.” If one wants to understand the importance of Christianity for the western world, one must understand this character.

The powerful people in the Roman Empire were ambitious and often ruthless. Slaves, women, and children were used and misused in many ways. Life was the “struggle for survival.” Paul described the world around him this way:

. . . adultery, sexual immorality, uncleanness, lustfulness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, strife, jealousies, outbursts of anger, rivalries, divisions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these; of which I forewarn you, even as I also forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God. (Galatians 5: 19b-21, *World English Bible*)

Everybody was trying to get ahead in life. It didn’t matter who they hurt in the process. The purpose of life was to become as powerful as possible and have as much pleasure — food, booze, sex — as possible.

Christians said that life did not get meaning from being aggressive and “pushy.” Life’s meaning came from helping others. The weak and poor were just as important to God as the rich and strong.

This source of this new attitude was “love.” Christian love was concerned with the well-being of others. Love meant not trying to get ahead in life at the expense of others. Love meant that one stopped trying to have as much pleasure as possible.

This was what Paul meant by “humility.” Christians were not supposed to be self-centered. They were to control their desires for pleasure, success, or power. Paul believed that the Spirit of Jesus Christ made it possible.

But what if Christians lost out on “happiness?” Christians did not expect life to be “happy” or “fair.” The example of Jesus showed them that good people could expect to suffer.

However, this did not mean that Christians were unhappy. To the contrary, Christians were free to enjoy life’s goodness. They were freed from their selfishness. Life was worth living, in spite of its heartache and sorrow.

### *Christ and “the Law”*

You recall Paul said that Christians didn’t need to *try* to keep religious rules, since the Holy Spirit was helping them to keep the rules. Some of the people converted by Paul interpreted this to mean that Christians didn’t have to keep any rules at all. Paul fiercely blasted such views.

Shall we sin, because we are not under law, but under grace? May it never be! (Romans 6:15, *World English Bible*)

(Gentile) Christians were free from Torah. But they were not free to live any way they wanted. They were free to be guided by Christ and his Spirit. Jesus Christ was in charge of the believer. He was “the boss.” He was the “Lord.”

Because Jesus Christ was Lord, Christians were free from “law” (rules). But now they were guided by God’s “grace.” “Grace” meant God’s supernatural transforming power (experienced by being “in Christ”).

Christians didn’t have to change themselves since *God* was changing them. The Holy Spirit was acting in their lives, getting them ready for the final judgment.

This is what Paul meant by “salvation.” Like other Jewish Christians, salvation meant deliverance or safety when Jesus returned to destroy sin and evil. Instead of being destroyed at the end of time, Christians would be “saved.”

For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. . . . For we were saved in hope, but hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for that which he sees? But if we hope for that which we don’t see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8: 22, 24–25, *World English Bible*)

Christians were looking for salvation from this present world of pain and suffering. The Spirit was “the first of God’s gifts.” It was the first sign that they would be saved. But salvation was still something for which they “hoped.” It was in the future. But this hope was not simply wishful thinking. It was confirmed by the presence and activity of the Spirit in the present. God was working now to make this hope a reality.

### *“Catholic” Christianity*

Paul believed that Christians were spiritually united with Jesus Christ. Since all Christians were one with Christ, they were also one with the church. The church was united “in Christ.” The church that emphasized spiritual and organizational unity became known as the “catholic” church. “Catholic” means “universal” in the sense of being united and whole. There were two rituals that expressed the unity of Catholicism. They were baptism and eucharist.

Baptism was the Christian “initiation rite.” It brought the person into the church. The ritual of baptism had its beginnings in the baptism of Jesus. That baptism was primarily for “the forgiveness of sins.” As practiced by John the Baptist, it was a sign that a sign of repentance of past wrong acts. A person was renouncing the selfishness of one’s past and looking forward to God’s coming kingdom.

Under Paul’s influence, Christian baptism was given a new meaning. Baptism brought the new believer into “one-ness” with Christ and all other believers. Baptism was not just a symbol of a human decision. It created a new spiritual reality. It was something like plugging an appliance

into the electrical outlet: baptism “plugged” a believer into Christ. “In Christ” a person “died” and was made into a “new” person.

We were buried therefore with him through baptism to death, that just like Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6: 4, *World English Bible*)

If baptism “plugged” a person into Christ, then the eucharist kept the “juice” flowing. The eucharist was the community’s ritual in which bread and wine “became” the presence of Christ. Through rituals, prayers, and acts of praise, the church experienced its unity with and in Jesus Christ. The unity of Christ with the church meant that the people of the church were unified.

The cup of blessing which we bless, isn’t it a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, isn’t it a communion of the body of Christ? 17 Because we, who are many, are one bread, one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10: 16-17, *World’s English Bible*)

The eucharist means “thanksgiving.” One source of the eucharistic rituals was the Passover Seder in Judaism. The Passover was the celebration of the deliverance of the ancient Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The Seder was a meal, including bread and wine. Jews celebrated their freedom from slavery through God’s action. Likewise, Christians celebrated their freedom from sin through Jesus Christ.

But the Passover was only held once a year. Early Christian eucharists were held every Sunday. According to Christian tradition, Jesus had been raised from the dead on Sunday. Likewise, the risen Christ was “present” with the community each Sunday as it celebrated the eucharist.

One early Christian writer called the eucharist the “medicine of immortality.” As Christians ate the bread and drank the wine, they believed that the same supernatural power that raised Christ from the dead would also give them a immortal life. Jesus is reported to have said:

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him to life on the last day. ... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live in him. (John 6: 54, 56 TEV)

### *The Rule of Faith*

The basic beliefs of Catholic Christianity were summarized as “the rule of faith.” There were certain basic concepts that were necessary to being a Christian:

- one God, who created the world through “the Word;”
- this “Word” became man in Jesus Christ;
- after a life of doing miracles, Christ was crucified and then rose again;
- after returning to heaven, Christ sent his Spirit to direct believers;
- Christ will return “in glory” to give eternal life to believers in resurrected bodies and condemn evildoers to eternal death and judgment.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Based on Tertullian, *Prescriptions Against Heretics*, 13.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him. Without him was not anything made that has been made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it.

...

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own, and those who were his own didn't receive him. 12 But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, to those who believe in his name: 13 who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 The Word became flesh, and lived among us. We saw his glory, such glory as of the one and only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. [John 1:1–5, 10–14, *World's English Bible*]

Why this emphasis on ideas or concepts? “Theory” comes from *theoria*, meaning “spectator.” Theory attempts to intellectually “see” the structure of reality.

Christian thinkers said that only a revelation from God showed what reality was really like. People didn't know how to act. God had to show them the structure or the “logic” of life. “Logic” comes from *logos*, “the word.” In calling Jesus Christ “the Word,” Christians were saying that he was the “logic” or the explanation for the cosmos. People knew how to live only by living in accordance with the morality (the character) revealed in Christ.

One example will illustrate why theology was important for Christians. The central tenet of Christian teaching was the doctrine of the “Trinity”: God was a three-fold reality—Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. This seems like an obscure and nonsensical idea. But without it, it is impossible to describe Christianity. If one understands what it meant by this idea, one will understand essence of Christianity.

As we have seen, the eucharist was the means through which Christians experienced the presence of Jesus Christ. Christ was revealed to be a divine power—a more-than-human-being. As a result of this personal power, Christians experienced miracles, supernatural deliverance, and divine change in their lives.

Furthermore, this divine change was happening in the *present*. Jesus Christ was not someone who had lived hundreds of years before. In some sense he was present and active *now*. Christians believed this took place through “the Holy Spirit.”

So Christian experience was (1) the experience of a “god,” a divine being (2) who was identical with the man Jesus (3) as a spiritual reality. But there was only one God. So how could Jesus *also* be divine? And since Jesus had lived years before, what was the connection between that Jesus and the Spirit Christians experienced *now*?

Christians said that the one true God was revealed *in* Jesus *through* the Holy Spirit. Christ showed Christians *what God was like*. This showing, or “revelation” took place through the *activity* of the Spirit. So the doctrine of the “Trinity” was an attempt to *explain how Christian experience was possible*.

Christian theology was not simply an abstract intellectual game. It was the “theory” (the philosophical or intellectual explanation) of Christian “reality.”

## 7. Is the God of the Bible identical to “Allah”?

### *Muhammad: The Final Prophet*

Previously, we studied how an Arabic prophet named Muhammad began to hear a voice speaking to him. Muhammad recited these prophecies to his followers, who eventually wrote them down. The book of these collected prophecies is the Qur’an. The recitations claimed that god had warned many other generations and communities about the last judgment and the need to live thankfully and compassionately. God sent these messengers so that people wouldn’t have any excuse for not obeying him.<sup>19</sup>

We have granted revelation to you (s. [singular, meaning Muhammad]) as We gave revelation to Noah and the prophets who came after him. To Abraham also We gave revelation, and to Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, to Jesus and to Job, to Jonah, Aaron and Solomon. To David We brought the Psalms.

There are messengers whose story We have already made known to you and there are others whose history We have not told you. With Moses God spoke face to face. These were all bearers of good tidings and warning, messengers thanks to whose coming mankind could have no possible case against God, the God of infinite power and wisdom.<sup>20</sup>

According to Muhammad’s prophecies, he was simply the last in a long line of these “warners.” He was the last prophet that God would send. Muslims believe that Islam is the true religion because Muhammad has added to and completed the revelations God gave to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

But the Qur’an also claims that Islam was the *first* religion. All the Hebrew and Jewish prophets from Abraham to Jesus were really Muslims.

Abraham was not a Jew, nor was he a Christian. He was a man of pure worship (a *hanif*) and a Muslim: he was not one of those pagan idolaters. The people nearest to Abraham are those who followed him and this prophet [Muhammad] too and those who have believed. Believers are under God’s care.<sup>21</sup>

A *hanif* was an Arab before Muhammad who rejected polytheism.<sup>22</sup> The Qur’an believed that there was an ancient tradition of true belief in God. The true “people of Abraham” were not the Jews but those who followed his beliefs (which Muhammad believed were his own beliefs). In the same way the Qur’an said that the true followers of Jesus were not the people who had the

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<sup>19</sup> Cf., in the New Testament, Romans 2: 20c–21: “...men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, ... [New International Version]”

<sup>20</sup> *Readings in the Qur’an*, pp. 113–114 [Surah 4:163–5].

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121 [Surah 3:67–68]. For similar texts, see van Voorst, *Anthology*, pp. 317–318.

<sup>22</sup> They are often called “generic monotheists.” In other words, while they only believed in one true God, they didn’t accept any of the specific monotheistic religions (Judaism or Christianity).

name of “Christians.” People who truly understood Jesus would accept and follow Muhammad’s interpretation of Jesus’ teaching.

### *Helping the Poor*

Since God spoke so clearly, people were to stop hanging on to their wealth. After all, everything people had—money, jobs, health, family, a good name—came from God. They were to use these things to spread the revelation of God and to help others.

Have you thought of him that denies the Last Judgement? It is he who turns away the orphan and has no urge to feed the poor.

Woe to those who pray but are heedless in their prayer; who make a show of piety and give no alms to the destitute.<sup>23</sup>

The person who “denies the Last Judgement” was saying that this life was all there was. Such people might have well live for today. If they weren’t responsible to a higher authority. They didn’t have to worry about how they lived their life.

There were other people who pretended to be religious. They went through the motions. They said the right things. But according to Islam, the very essence of religion was the willingness to help the less fortunate. In that way one showed that one believed that all good things come from God.

If that was true, then wealth was a gift from God. Not everyone was so lucky in the lottery of life. Therefore one should use it to help others. It was revealed to Muhammad that his followers should pay a *zakat*, a religious “tax” to help the needy. Some of his followers complained when they didn’t receive any of it. A later revelation told Muhammad that they should have said:

“... God out of his goodness will supply us, and His messenger [Muhammad] will also. It is to God that our desire turns.”

Alms freely given are for the poor and the destitute...the ransoming of slaves, for debtors, for any endeavor in God’s cause, and the wayfarer.<sup>24</sup>

So the willingness to help others was a sign of trust in and dependence on God. Those who were well-off could freely give to the less fortunate. God would provide.

### *God’s Judgment*

However, the society Muhammad gave his prophecy to (like most societies) was too greedy. People worked hard and were successful. They felt that *they* should enjoy the “fruits of their labor.” They didn’t know that a judgment day was coming.

In gardens of Paradise they will ask the guilty sinners: “What has conveyed you into Saqar [hell]?” and they will say: “We never prayed, nor did we feed the destitute. We

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<sup>23</sup> Van Voorst, *Anthology*, p. 331 [Surah 107]; see *Readings in the Qur’an*, p. 330.

<sup>24</sup> *Readings in the Qur’an*, p. 300 [Surah 9:59b-60a]; see van Voorst, *Anthology*, p. 331.

took our fill with the rest and it was our habit to deny the Day of judgement, until the one certainty — death — overtook us.”<sup>25</sup>

Sinners were people who denied that life came from a higher power. They lived for themselves. They didn’t ask for help and guidance. But in the end, they died. Life came to an end. Then what was the good of a full belly? The riches that were gained had no value. The hours of luxury and pleasure were wasted and useless.

Death raises the question: what is one doing with life? What gives it meaning? Judgment isn’t a very old man with gray hair and a long beard, sending bad people to hell. It means that people face this question: at the end, will life have meaning?

Sometimes life goes well. Sometimes everything seems fine. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, life comes crashing down. Our hopes and dreams fall apart. Muhammad’s revelations warned people that there were mysterious forces in the world. His listeners never knew when their easy life would be destroyed.

By throes that overwhelm, by energies ever at work, by bouyancies borne in space, by precursors passing already, by forces disposing what must be — on the Day when the blast convulses the world and there follows a blast yet again, on that Day all hearts will be filled with agitation and all eyes with dread.<sup>26</sup>

“Agitation” and “dread” came from the fact that people did not control their ultimate destiny. They got comfortable, and wanted to hang on to their happiness. But there was always the “gut feeling” that life was not as easy as it seemed.

Muhammad’s revelation called people to an attitude of thankfulness and dependence. Life depended on some transcendent power. They didn’t control their earthly destiny. But still they took credit for their wealth and happiness.

Man — death take him! How thankless he is! From what has God created him? — from a drop of sperm He created him and ordered his being and made his way amendable. He brings him later to the experience of death and lays him in the grave. Thence, as He wills, He brings him anew to life. Yet, for all that, man does not fulfill what his Lord has commanded.

So let man look well at his sustenance. We have sent the rain in copious downpours and broken up channels in the ground, bringing forth grain there, grapes and vegetation, olives and date-palms, and orchards with dense foliage, fruits and pastures — glad provision for you and for your cattle.<sup>27</sup>

God gave them all these wonderful things. Yet they refused to be thankful.<sup>28</sup> They wouldn’t admit that their very lives depended on God. They thought that they were in charge. They

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 347 [Surah 74:40–47].

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 334 [Surah 79:1–9].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 110 [Surah 80:17–32].

<sup>28</sup> Compare, in the New Testament of the Bible, Romans 2: 18–21, esp. v. 21.

thought they could handle things. They thought that they were the source of their own life. They forgot that they were made from a “drop of sperm.” Whatever life they had came from God.

Ultimately, divine judgment happens at the end of time. A great trumpet blast will sound. The physical universe will be destroyed. Everyone will realize that God is truly in charge of the world. “The Book” will be opened. It will have a record of everyone’s life. Everyone will be judged.

Those who believe in God and his prophet Muhammad will enter Paradise. Paradise will be filled with wonderful gardens and beautiful servants, both male and female. All the sensual delights the believer gave up on earth will be returned in Paradise. Those who lived only for themselves will go to *Jahannam* (another name for hell). *Jahannam* is a place of eternal fire.<sup>29</sup>

### *Human Frailty and God’s Mercy*

However, according to the Qur’an, judgment was not just future. Divine judgment could happen at any time. Any event that destroyed humanity’s self-centered world was a judgment from God. According to Muhammad’s revelations, there were many societies before his time that had received warnings from prophets. But they refused to listen. So they were destroyed.

To Madyan We sent their brother, Shu’aib, who said: “My people, worship God and anticipate the last Day: do not behave perversely, working corruption in the land.” But they belied his words. An earthquake overwhelmed them and in the morning they lay lifeless in their dwellings.<sup>30</sup>

We cannot know the history behind this story. The point was that death and destruction can come at any time. It might be a hurricane, floods, or a killer disease. All of these things remind humans that life is fragile.

Probably none of us will be around for the “end of the world.” But *our* world can end at any instant. Our lives, our names, our wealth can disappear. It could be “as if we had never lived.” We began in a “drop of sperm” and ended in a handful of dust. *Because we will die we will all face this judgment*, this question: have we lived for ourselves? Or have we lived lives of humility, honesty, and concern for the less fortunate?

According to the Qur’an, only the mercy of God kept people alive. They had meaning in life only because God forgave those who repented and submitted to him. The first Surah (chapter) of Qur’an says:

In the Name of God, the merciful Lord of mercy.  
Praise be to God, the Lord of all being,  
The merciful Lord of mercy,  
Master of the Day of judgment.  
You alone we serve and to You alone

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<sup>29</sup> For representative texts, see *Readings in the Qur’an*, pp. 334, 336, 338; van Voorst, *Anthology*, pp. 320–323. Many of the details of this view of judgment and hell were picked up from Christianity.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137 [Surah 29:36–37].

come we for aid.  
 Guide us in the straight path,  
 The path of those whom You have blessed,  
 Not of those against whom there is displeasure,  
 Nor of those who go astray.<sup>31</sup>

God was an all-powerful judge. Yet he was also merciful. He didn't automatically send people to the judgment they deserved. He forgave those who repented and committed themselves to follow "the straight path."<sup>32</sup>

### *Predestination and Success*

The Qur'an teaches that God is both a judge and merciful. The only way to avoid his judgment and gain his mercy is to submit to him. Submission to God means complete acceptance of his will.

Most Muslims strongly believe in predestination. God is all-powerful. He decides who lives and who dies. He decides who will repent and gain paradise, and who will not.

Say: "O God, Lord of all sovereignty, to whom You will You give authority and whom You will You divest of it. Whom You will You exalt and whom You will abase. Good is in Your hand and Your power extends over all things."<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, human beings are still responsible to repent of their selfishness and greed. Those who surrender themselves into God's hands will ultimately be "winners." Those who refuse to obey God's commands will be among the "losers."

He who God guides is truly guided and those whom He leads astray are indeed the losers.<sup>34</sup>

In one sense "success" in Islam meant victory in battle and having a long and prosperous life. The Muslims were commanded to fight those who refused to accept Muhammad's prophecies. Their confident faith in God was expressed in their eagerness to fight in God's name.

Believers! Hold God in reverent awe and make it your desire to draw near to Him: give yourselves to the Jihad [the struggle for Islam] in the way of God. It may be you will have good success.<sup>35</sup>

But being on God's side didn't guarantee a long life and material success.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 84; van Voorst, *Anthology*, p. 329. The first line is the Islamic invocation of the Divine Name. A faithful Muslim says it before all religious or sacred activities (like the Roman Catholic might make the sign of the cross).

<sup>32</sup> Unlike Christianity, one does not have to *do* anything in order for one's past sins to be forgiven. Rather (like Judaism), one simply repents of past wrongs and resolves to follow "the straight path."

<sup>33</sup> *Readings in the Qur'an*, p. 87 [Surah 3:26]. Related readings can be found in van Voorst, *Anthology*, p. 312.

<sup>34</sup> *Readings in the Qur'an*, p. 173 [Surah 7:178]; see van Voorst, *Anthology*, p. 312.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 260 [Surah 5:35].

What if you are killed or you die in the cause of God? Forgiveness from God and mercy are better than all that men accumulate. Though you die or are killed, it is to God your ingathering will be.<sup>36</sup>

### *Submission to God's Will*

In other words, one might survive and go on to live a prosperous life. Or one might die in battle. In either case those who trust in God's mercy are "successful." Life has meaning. But why then should one fight? Because it is a sign of one's complete submission to God's will.

By fighting one throws one's self on God's mercy. The believer is saying: "whether I live or die I trust in God's will." That is why the essence of Islam is submission (or, "surrender") to God. "Islam" *means* "submission." A "Muslim" is "one who submits." In other words, to be a Muslim is to be completely surrendered to God. The Muslim accepts the will of God, whatever it might bring. For a Muslim, faith in God means that whatever God's will is, it is ultimately good.

For God has mastery over all things. Whatever mercy God extends to mankind there is none to hold it back: what God withholds there is none can then dispense. He is the all-strong, the all-wise.<sup>37</sup>

God is merciful. This not only means the mercy by which God forgives one's sins. It means the mercies of food, shelter, intelligence, work, and so on. Only God meets human needs. Without God humans have nothing. So why shouldn't humans submit to God and his will?

As we saw, an important sign of submission was the willingness to fight in God's battles. To fight against the divine will was unbelief and rebellion. Rebellion against God meant failure. In a simple sense, of course, such a life was a failure because one would be punished in hell.

But in a more profound sense, a self-centered life failed because it didn't last. One had banquets, power, money, and fame. But all of these things ceased to exist. And then one had nothing.

All that has come your way is merely the passing satisfaction of life in this present world. What is with God is better and more lasting....<sup>38</sup>

Submission to God gave ultimate meaning and eternal purpose to life. One's actions were more than simply what one did here and now. They were shaped by an eternal goal. They had consequences that reached far beyond one's own lifetime. So even if one died in battle, one's life still had *eternal* meaning. And that was far greater than any of "the passing satisfaction of life."

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 237 [Surah 3:157–158].

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 91 [Surah 35:1d–2].

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 303 [Surah 42:36].

### *Commentary on the Qur'an, Surahs 73-114*

The following reading is essential for the major essay on the topic, “Is the God of the Bible the same as ‘Allah’?” This commentary is based on and excerpted from the instructor’s complete commentary, posted at:

[http://www.davidwaynelaymanphd.com/uploads/9/6/0/5/9605300/quran\\_commentary.pdf](http://www.davidwaynelaymanphd.com/uploads/9/6/0/5/9605300/quran_commentary.pdf) .

In this last part of the Qur’an, a prophet (thought to be “Muhammad,” but never named) is given what he believes to be a revelation of imminent destruction. This revelation is triggered by the prophet’s horrified reaction to the pain and suffering of the weakest and poorest in his society. (I accept here the argument that there were economic dislocations within the Hijaz, presumably caused by the loss of trans-Arabian trade.) He is outraged, and his originally moral and humanitarian concerns twist into an angry attack on his community. He wants destruction. He wants doom.

I use the translation of Arberry,<sup>39</sup> for its literary qualities. In order to follow along, get some context, and consult alternative translations, the reader can go to <http://quran.com> . Type in the reference (e.g., 96:1-5, the first verses below) in the search bar at the top. One can select from six translations on the left hand side.<sup>40</sup>

I shall describe “The Book of Doom” under the following headings:

1. The prophet’s summons
2. The reasons for judgment
3. The signs of judgment
4. Deniers of the day of doom
5. The sentence: paradise and Gehenna.

#### **1. The prophet’s summons**

The Traditional Account gives the honor of the first surah (a section of the Qur’an) to **96**:

Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created,  
created Man of a blood-clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous,  
who taught by the Pen,  
taught Man that he knew not. (vv. 1-5)

But the prophet is already thinking about the book that is supposed to be “recited”. Since the revelations were originally communicated orally, it is unlikely that this was the very first revelation that he received.

<sup>39</sup> All translations in this section are from *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. A. J. Arberry (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> I recommend especially Pickthall and Yusuf Ali. Also, for clarity’s sake, *deselect* Arabic images.

Some western scholars prefer **Surah 74**:

O thou shrouded in thy mantle,  
 arise, and warn! Thy Lord magnify  
 thy robes purify  
 and defilement flee! Give not, thinking to gain greater  
 and be patient unto thy Lord. (vv. 1-7)

The prophet enclosed himself in his cloak to create a private place for prayer. It would also have created a cocoon of “sensory deprivation,” a fact significant in understanding the psychosomatic roots of his prophecies. He was told to purify himself, give without expecting reward, and wait patiently for “thy Lord.” The fact that he is urged to “be patient” suggests that it is not the very first.

I believe the most likely candidate for the first surah is **93**:

By the white forenoon  
 and the brooding night!  
 Thy Lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee  
 and the Last shall be better for thee than the First.  
 Thy Lord shall give thee, and thou shalt be satisfied.  
 Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee?  
 Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee?  
 Did He not find thee needy, and suffice thee?  
 As for the orphan, do not oppress him,  
 and as for the beggar, scold him not;  
 and as for thy Lord’s blessing, declare it.

The prophet had experienced some emotional trauma. The voice was assuring him of “thy Lord’s” presence. The words assume that the prophet was indeed an orphan. His own felt loss and presumably divine reassurance was then the basis of the central moral claim of the voice: **care for the poor**. For now, the “Lord” is the prophet’s specific spirit-guide. There is no hint of the absolute monotheism that emerges later.

The divine assurance is repeated in Surah 94:

Did We not expand thy breast for thee  
 and lift from thee thy burden,  
 the burden that weighted down thy back?  
 Did We not exalt thy fame?  
 So truly with hardship comes ease,  
 truly with hardship comes ease.  
 So when thou art empty, labour,  
 and let thy Lord be thy Quest.

The prophet hopes for some eventual divine reward in a life of “ease.”

The next step of the prophet’s aural revelations was the development of the belief in a judgment. His community didn’t accept his call for a more just economic order. Wealthy people in his community thought that they were protected from any loss, from the intrusion of any alien power

that would deprive them of the fruits of their labor (90:5-6). They hadn't realized "the steep" hard pathway to human flourishing:

"The freeing of a slave,  
or giving food upon a day of hunger  
to an orphan near of kin  
or a needy man in misery;.... (90:11-16)."

They would be divided among the "Companions of the Right Hand" and "Companions of the Left Hand"; the latter were "those who disbelieve in Our signs." Those who rejected the prophet's message would be sent to "the Fire" (90:18-20).

## 2. The reasons for judgment

Why would people be sent to hell?

"We were not of those who prayed,  
and we fed not the needy,  
and we plunged along with the plungers, and we cried lies to the Day of Doom,... (vv. 43-46)."

**Did not pray:** 74.43; 75.30. Prayer is reliance on "the Lord," the prophet's spirit-guide, now universalized as the one true God of justice and judgment

**Did not give to the needy:** 74.44; 76.8 (those who did give); 89.17-20; 90.11-17; 92.8; 93.9-11; 107.

Ingratitude for God's blessings and ill use of wealth: 74.10-25; 75.30-35;

77.23: God determines, not man;

80.17, 19-32: blessings of existence and life;

82.6-9: we are deceived about the origins of our lives, and thus fail to give proper thanks;

83.14: wealth has "rusted upon their hearts"

**Failure to trust God in the bad as well as the good:** 89.15-16; cf. 93.3 (The "Lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee")

**Would only do the right if there was some reward:** the "godfearing...confers no favour on anyman for recompense (92.19)"--i.e., the godfearing does not bribe

Rivalry (102.1), Backbiting and Slander (104.1); Arrogance and "Insolence": 75.30-35; 78.22; 96.6-7.

In summary, the indictment is the men are ungrateful, arrogant, and self-reliant, they rely too much on their wealth, they do not live rightly for its own sake, without some this-worldly reward, and they are constantly struggling to get ahead in life's game, at the expense of their fellows.

### 3. The signs of judgment

This is probably the strangest part of these surahs. Many of them include oaths, often at the beginning, that seem to claim to support the truth and veracity of the revelations. For example, the first one (in canonical order) is 74.32-35:

“Nay, by the moon  
and night when it retreats  
and the dawn when it is white,  
surely it [the Book] is one of the greatest things...”

The prophet is confronting a doubter, who says that the words of the prophet are “naught but a trumped-up sorcery (v. 24).” The prophet responds (in modern English), “I’ll see you in hell.” So he’s trying to prove the truth of his revelations. But how does the natural process of the moon do that? Everyone knows the moon comes out at night and disappears at daylight. But the prophet is using it as an oath to prove the truth of his words.

At the beginning of Surah 77, we read:

By the loosed ones successively  
storming tempestuously  
by the scatterers scattering  
and the severally severing  
and those hurling a reminder  
excusing or warning,  
Surely that which you are promised [the day of doom] is about to fall!

The prophet’s meaning is very obscure. Most translations give the idea of storms and (rain-) clouds, but obviously all such paraphrases are educated guesses. But once again, how does the fact of storms, and the mysterious nature of winds blowing, prove that the prophet’s words are not just made up?

Many of these oaths refer to astronomical phenomena (84:16-18; 86:1-3; 91:1-6; 85:1). Otherwise, they refer to events or phenomena of generally obscure, barely explainable, emotional power. The prophet seems to be saying: “there are amazing, astonishing, inexplicable things that happen in the world--and that’s what’s happening to me and in me and through these messages I bring.” The words themselves communicate *power* and *energy*, which is what the prophet is experiencing inside of himself.

Secondly, there is the awe we experience in the skies. A transcendent yearning rises within us, unnameable, surging like a great wave that both threatens to overwhelm us, yet comforts us with its stability and certainty.

Thirdly, the other events are **liminal** events. “Liminal” is a term applied by anthropologists to a particular kind of rituals. A **liminal ritual** is a ritual that is enacting a transition from one stage to another. However, the transition has not been completed. In our culture, weddings and funerals are the best examples: in the former, the couple is neither single or wedded; in the latter, the bereaved family has lost a loved one, but has not fully relinquished that one to the post-life state. In cultures where there are complex coming-of-age rituals, the young man or woman is no longer a child, and not yet an adult. Traditional cultures view such events as times of great danger, to be navigated with complex and carefully enacted ritual.

No! I swear by the slinkers,  
 the runners, the sinkers,  
 by the night swarming,  
 by the dawn sighing,  
 truly this is the word of a noble Messenger  
 having power, with the Lord of the Throne secure,  
 obeyed, moreover trusty. (81.15-18)

Note the energy and motion of the words (slink, run, sink). The night “swarms” (ever stared up in a night sky until your head swims?). The dawn “sighs” as the sun--not yet here--slowly rises.

All of these phenomena are phenomena or times of emotional tension. The old has gone, the new has not yet come. Indeed, the entirety of the Book of Doom is a liminal time: **Doom is coming, but not yet here.** Thus all the other liminal, emotionally charged, moments give evidence that *this* impending Day of Doom is real.

#### 4. Deniers of the day of doom

The prophet’s summons that the prophet’s prophetic mission began with a personal promise to him from his spirit-guide that he would take care of him. This promise was attached to the revealed declaration that people were to provide for the poor, needy and orphans, even as the spirit-guide was taking care of the prophet.

The prophet began to spread the message, but it was not well received. the prophet responded with bitter anger: “how dare you not respond to this divinely revealed message? God (actually, the prophet’s spirit-guide) will punish you.” This, I think, is the origin of both the prophet’s belief in a final judgment and in a single deity. The logic was:

The prophet was powerless to effect the revenge, therefore the spirit-guide must do it at some future point.

As resistance continued, and no resolution was in sight, the prophet’s expectation both hardened and was projected into an eschatological future: there would be a decisive judgment, at which those who resisted the teaching would receive a final and full punishment.

A final punishment required a single, unitary deity, otherwise some opposing deity (the jinni, among others) could counter the acts of the prophet’s spirit-guide.

Therefore, a judgment day was coming, and the judge would be the one true divinity of the universe. So now the prophet has added to his message the claim of the “Day of Doom.” But this was simply another assertion that needed to be substantiated against the nay-sayers.

**Surah 77** is largely devoted to attacking the “deniers of the day of doom,” and providing “evidence” for the reality of that day.

When the stars shall be extinguished,  
 when the heaven shall be split  
 when the mountains shall be scattered  
 and when the Messengers’ time is set,  
 to what day shall they be delayed?  
 To the Day of Decision.

And what shall teach thee what is the Day of Decision?  
Woe that day unto those who cry it lies! (vv. 8-15)

The text follows with what it regards as corroborating evidence for the “Day of Decision”:

- destruction of ancient peoples (vv. 16-19);
- gestation of the unborn in the womb, a place of “mean water” (water that is regarded as “impure” when expelled in the act of birth) (vv. 20-22);
- creation of earth with its mountains (vv. 25-27), see also ;
- ”sweetest water” (to drink, in apparent contrast to the “mean water” of the womb) (v. 27)

Other examples include:

- 78.5-15: earth, mountains, sleep, night and day, the “seven strong ones” (heavens?), sun, rain to “bring forth ...gardens luxuriant”;
- 86.11-12: the “returning rain” that gives rise to the “earth splitting with verdure, ...it is no merriment (apparently meaning, “it is no joke”);
- 87.4-5: God creates the “pasturage,” and then turns it into “a blackening wrack”;
- 88.17-20:

“do they not consider how the camel was created,  
how heaven was lifted up,  
how the mountains were hoisted,  
how the earth was outstretched?”

It is not clear what this evidence proves. Every pagan knew that the world was both wonderful in its created order, and yet terrible in the cycle of human order and destruction. Yet the prophet thought he was telling them something novel, that nature itself was proof of a final judgment and resurrection.

### **5. The sentence: paradise and Gehenna**

Behold, Gehenna has become an ambush,  
for the insolent a resort,  
therein to tarry for ages,  
tasting therein neither coolness nor any drink  
save boiling water and pus  
for a suitable recompense.  
They indeed hoped not for a reckoning,  
and they cried loud lies to Our signs; and everything We have numbered in a Book.  
“Taste! We shall increase you not save in chastisement.”

Surely for the godfearing awaits a place of security,  
gardens and vineyards  
and maidens with swelling breasts, like of age,  
and a cup overflowing.  
Therein they shall hear no idle talk, no cry of lies, for a recompense from thy Lord, a gift,  
a reckoning. (78.21-36)  
Hast thou received the story of the Enveloper?

Faces on that day humbled?  
 labouring, toiled, worn,  
 roasting at a scorching fire,  
 watered at a boiling fountain,  
 no food for them but cactus thorn  
 unfattening, unappeasing hunger.  
 Faces on that day jocund,  
 with their striving well-pleased,  
 in a sublime Garden, hearing there no babble;  
 therein a running fountain,  
 therein uplifted couches  
 and goblets set forth  
 and cushions arrayed  
 and carpets outspread. (88.1-16)

'O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord,  
 well-pleased, well-pleasing!  
 Enter thou among My servants! Enter thou My Paradise!' (89.27-30)

The human race is primarily divided between the “insolent” and the “godfearing.” I have previously argued that “insolence” is defined by [rebellion](#) against the message as delivered by the earlier prophets or the prophet. If that is correct, then “godfearing” primarily means *acceptance* of God’s message through the prophets. The analysis in the earlier sections on “The Book of Doom,” strongly implies that one’s doom is determined by whether one listens to (or argues against, by “plunging”) the prophet’s revelations.

A notable characteristic of the qur’anic descriptions of paradise and Gehenna is their **sensuality**. The judgment of Gehenna is expressed by graphic images of water that does not cool, liquid that does not quench thirst, food that does not nourish or “fatten”.

In contrast, for the believers is a feast set in a garden with running water, reclining among cushions spread among luxurious “couches” (? benches), set on carpets--presumably in tents on the ground. The conversation will be quiet and pleasant, no argument or heated discussion. For the pleasure of the guests, there will “maidens” (? virgins), of the same age of the guests, with “swelling breasts.”

I therefore conclude that “paradise” for the prophet was the community he always wanted but never had. It was the community in which he could experience God’s pleasure (see 89.27-30 above), and also **be pleased**, experience the gratification, both spiritual and sensual, that he desired.

## II. Religion and Society

## 8. Religion and Society in Hinduism

### *The “Castes” of India*

We earlier studied the religion of the Rig Veda. It was practiced by a people called the Aryas (sometimes called “Aryans”). Many scholars believe that they originated somewhere in Central Asia, perhaps in what is now southwestern Russia, in the vicinity of the Ural and Caucasus Mountains and the Volga River. They spoke a language that is related to Latin, Greek, and almost all modern European languages, called “Indo-European languages.”

The Aryas were nomads. That is, they moved from place to place in search of fresh land and other natural resources. They needed large areas on which to graze their cattle and goats. The Aryas conquered northern India over many centuries. The major invasions probably took place between 1500 and 1200 B.C.E. Naturally the most important class of people in the society were the warriors. They provided the community with wealth, power, and protection from outside threats.

The importance of the warrior in Arya society is reflected in a god called Indra. Indra was talked about more than any other god in the Vedas. He was the warrior god who led the Aryas in battle. Indra “took away the flourishing wealth of the enemy” like the winner in a high-stakes poker game. Without Indra “people do not conquer.” They “call on” him “for help when they are fighting.”<sup>41</sup>

The people the Aryas conquered were called “Dasas.” They became second-class citizens. Their wealth and power was taken away and used by the Aryas.<sup>42</sup>

Aryan society was already divided into three major classes: warriors, priests, and the workers. The conquered Dasas became a fourth class of servants. This development was expressed in the Rig Veda, where Indra was credited with pushing the “Dasas” “down into obscurity.”<sup>43</sup> They lost their wealth, their place in society, and their power. They became servants to the Aryans.

Like slaves in other societies, they were used or abused at will by the classes above them. (They were not, however, owned by other people.) They were the underclass of Aryan (and later, Hindu) society. They performed jobs that were considered too “dirty” for the other classes.

However, “dirty” did not primarily mean *physical* dirt (like a boy or girl who has been out in the sandbox). Rather it had a religious meaning. Certain activities were believed make one “impure.”<sup>44</sup> That is, one could no longer carry out one’s religious duties, for example, because one had touched a corpse.

So the “shudras” took over those tasks that involved undesirable contact with dirt and death. This freed the upper classes to pursue their religious activities without fear of being “defiled” by the

<sup>41</sup> *Rig Veda*, p. 160 [2.12.4, 9].

<sup>42</sup> They may have been pushed into southern India. Even today, its inhabitants speak a non-Indo-European language. They are also darker-skinned than the light-skinned Aryas.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* [2.12.4].

<sup>44</sup> The concept of “purity” will be discussed in detail when we talk about religion and society in Judaism.

spiritual filth of these jobs. (For example, because leather comes from a dead animal, a shoe maker is considered one of the very lowest of classes.)

The social classes that originated out of this history were collectively known as varnas, which literally means “colors.” This suggests that the origins of the divisions in the early Indian society between Aryan and non-Aryan were probably ethnic, and possibly racial.

So a fourfold division in Indian society developed. The priests became more important since they held the keys and magic words to prosperity. As the Aryas settled down in India, the warriors lost some of their usefulness (and prestige). The lowest “true” Aryas were the working classes, especially merchants.

These three classes were “twice-born.” They were not only born physically, they were born spiritually as people who could study the Vedas (the holy books) and attend Vedic ceremonies and rituals. (This ceremony will be discussed later in the course.)

That is, they could do those sort of activities that make people “civilized.” Culture assumes that life is more than the basic skills of what it takes to survive. It requires leisure (free time) and learning. Religion, art, music, ritual and drama, and later philosophy and the study of writing (grammar, the history of words, the art of persuasive speech, and so) all grow out of the religious life of a people. These are the skills and arts that make a society “spiritual.” It is this ability that separates the human species from the animals.

The shudras, however, were not considered capable of a “spiritual” life. They were destined to spend their whole lives in the task of meeting their own basic needs and the needs of the classes above them. Furthermore, there was a group of people even below the shudras. They were so low on the caste scale that they didn’t belong to any organized community.

<b>Classes (“Varnas”<sup>45</sup>) in Hindu Society</b>		
<i>English Equivalent</i>	<i>Indian Name</i>	<i>Tasks</i>
priests	brahman	Perform sacrificial rituals, recite religious poetry
warriors	kshatriya	Fight, govern and rule
commoners, workers	vaisya	At first herd cattle and farm; later primarily business or trading; some crafts
servants	shudra	Crafts; Took over herding and farming from the vaisyas
“outcastes”		Do jobs too “impure” for other classes; beneath the varna system

Originally, the class system was based on merit and skill. As it became more and more complex, each class developed thousands of subclasses. These subclasses became hereditary occupational groups. The work a person did was passed down from father to son, even today very often the son of a farmer will become a farmer, or the child of a lawyer will also become a lawyer.

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<sup>45</sup>The closest English translation of “varna” is “class.” *Caste* is a translation of *jati*, which refers to the hereditary occupational groups. I will explain this distinction in the lecture.

As this “caste” system became more and more entrenched, its burdens became heavier. How do you tell a person trapped at the bottom of the lowest castes to stay there without any hope of a better life? How do you explain the power and wealth of the highest castes, not gained by skill or training, but simply by accident of birth?

The attempt to answer such questions led to the next major change in Hindu religion and thought.

### *Karma and Transmigration of Souls*

Following the Vedas (of which the Rig Veda is the first of four), the next major group of writings in Hinduism is called the Upanishads. The Vedas are a group of poems and instructions for carrying out sacrificial rituals. In contrast, the Upanishads are complex philosophical works.

As noted at the end of the last section, the rise of the caste system in India required an explanation for the rigid barriers between different occupational groups. Why were the shudras or “outcastes” trapped in demeaning and despised jobs? Why were their sons compelled to continue their fathers’ work? Why were their daughters given no opportunity to marry into a better life?

The answer given by the Upanishads to these pressing questions was the answer of *karma*. *Karma* means “action.” Western science teaches us that every action has an opposite and equal reaction. Similarly, the Upanishads taught that every act creates consequences, whether good or bad.

Karma was like a field of energy that gathered around the actions of a person. Good actions created good karma. Bad actions created bad karma. This field of energy might someday “explode in one’s face”—either with good or bad consequences.

However, it was quite clear that there was no clear connection between one’s karma and one’s happiness in this life. People have known for a very long time that bad people are often prosperous and happy, and that “bad things happen to good people.”

The Indian solution to this problem was that if karma was not effective in this life, it mattered in the next life. This meant that there had to be an enduring self that could take on a new body in another life.

So the idea of karma went hand-in-hand with the idea of *transmigration of souls* (more popularly known as *reincarnation*). After death, the soul would be reborn, and take on a new body. It might be an animal body, a human body, or even vegetation. People with especially good karma might be reborn into a paradise with the gods. Especially bad karma might earn one a place in a hell of some incredible torture.

For the Indians, this explained one’s caste position. A person born among the outcastes was being punished by her or his bad karma. The consequences of some evil he or she had done in her or his past life had caught up with her or him. Someone born into a prosperous and prestigious Brahman family was receiving the beneficial rewards of a previous life lived well.

The ideas of karma and transmigration led to a major change in religious ritual. The Vedas assumed that as long as one “fed” the gods with sacrifices, the gods would in turn feed the offerer with good things—land, bountiful harvests, large flourishing herds of cattle and flocks of goats, many sons, and so on.

But if indeed this life was followed by death and another life, and another, and another . . . , these good things were no longer so attractive. What good was prosperity if you knew it would be followed by the terror of death and the uncertainty of another life—perhaps better, yet also, maybe worse? What joy was there in an eternal cycle of struggle and pain and suffering?

So the sacrifices lost their importance. Not because Hindus no longer believed in the ability of the sacrifices to bring about the promised prosperity, but because that earthly prosperity was no longer an attractive goal. Even a rebirth into some heaven would eventually end. The most moral person would eventually wear out her or his “merit” (the good karma) and eventually have to return to an earthly life.

But if earthly happiness was not to be found in the practice of sacrifice and ritual, and the resulting prosperity, then where was it to be found?

Transmigration meant that the greatest evil was the constant change in life—gain and loss, happiness and sorrow. True salvation, if it could be had, would take the form of total, eternal release from this cycle of life, death and rebirth.

### *The Upanishads*

The solution of the Upanishads was to change the physical sacrifices of the Vedas into a sacrifice of the human self. This inner sacrifice took the form of “self-denial,” or asceticism. Asceticism is the denial of pleasure and material comfort. Anything that might satisfy the needs of the self, such as enjoyable food, nice clothes, or the pleasures of sex, is given up. Such food as might be necessary is simple and only in the amount necessary to stay alive.

The ascetic believes that by giving up a life of ease he or she can gain spiritual insight and religious truth. We know from medicine that if a person goes without food or sleep long enough, he or she can create an “altered state of consciousness.” That is, he or she will experience reality in a different way. This altered state may create visions that have a dream-like quality. Symbols or images are experienced with an unusual force or character.

The Hindu ascetics created these states of consciousness through meditation, known as *yoga*. Persons who wanted to be yogas first learned to sit quietly. Then they focused on their breathing. Gradually they turned their attention away from external things and perceptions to their inward state.

Finally they discovered something they believed was their “true self.” They called this *atman*. This self was not the self we know from external perception. We are tricked by our physical existence and society’s notion that each person is unique and different from every other person.

The external self is an illusion because we believe that physical existence is real. Our apparent external reality separates each of us from all other “selves.” But if external reality is not real, then neither is our individuality. Hindus called this illusion of personality *maya*.

If the true self was *not* the self as we understand it in European-American psychology, then what was it? The self, *atman*, was the universal self. *Atman* was the self of all things, the self of everything, Self with a capital “S.” The Hindu way of saying this was: “Brahman is *Atman*.”

As we learned at the beginning of the semester. Brahman is the universal force in all things. It made all things possible. It was “the Real,” “ultimate reality,” the cosmic essence out of which everything flowed.

“He, the highest Person, who is awake in us while we are asleep, shaping one lovely sight after another, that indeed is the Bright [*or*, Spirit], that is Brahman, that alone is called the Immortal [*or*, Eternal]. All worlds are contained in it, and no one goes beyond. This is that.”

“There is one ruler, the Self within all things, who makes the one form manifold. The wise who perceive him within their Self, to them belongs eternal happiness, not to others.”<sup>46</sup>

Even when we are unconscious (asleep), there is a universal consciousness that makes everything possible. It generates all of reality even when we are not aware of it. This universal consciousness gives rise to everything else (the “manifold”). Happiness is found when a wise person recognizes that he or she *is* this universal consciousness, this cosmic reality.

Another way of teaching this lesson was the parable of the banyan tree. Brahman was like the invisible essence of a seed. No matter how small one divided the seed, one could not discover the “essence” of the tree.

“Fetch me from thence a fruit of the [banyan] tree.” “Here is one, Sir.” Break it.” “It is broken, Sir.” “What do you see there?” “These seeds, almost infinitesimal.” “Break one of them.” “It is broken, Sir.” “What do you see there?” “Not anything, Sir.”

The father said: “My son, that subtle [subtle] essence which you do not perceive there, of that very essence this great [banyan] tree exists.

“Believe it, my son. That which is the subtle essence, in it all that exists has its self. It is the True. It is the Self, and thou, O Svetaketu, art it.”<sup>47</sup>

Although the seed was virtually invisible, it grew into a great tree. Likewise Brahman was nothing in the sense that it was no-thing. In other words, it was not any one thing. It did not have a separate identity. And yet it was the “true Self” (Atman) that gave reality to everything that existed. The lesson to Svetaketu is “Thou are it.” In modern English: “this Self is what you are.” What *you* really are *is* the cosmic reality beyond individuality and separateness.

In this story, Svetaketu—a proud young man fresh from school who thought he knew everything—learned that there is an invisible essence. It cannot be known, but it makes all knowledge possible. It is not “something,” but it generates all the “things” in the world.

So one could not say: “Brahman is this” or “Brahman is that.” The Brahman had no characteristics. Brahman was the invisible, universal power that made everything else exist. Brahman was *both* goodness and badness, light and dark, happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain. It made all these things possible. By itself, Brahman was nothing, but it gave rise to everything else. It was the basis of all opposites that we experience, and therefore was not identifiable with either side of those opposites.

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<sup>46</sup> *Katha Upanishad* II.5.8, 12 at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe15/sbe15014.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> *Khândogya Upanishad* VI.12.1–3 at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/sbe01130.htm>.

One could not say, “Brahman is love,” since that implied “Brahman is not hate.” But hate was also part of the cosmos that originated in Brahman. It “transcended” everything else, and therefore was not anything (any *thing*) at all.

So when the Upanishads said that “Atman is Brahman,” they were saying that a person’s truest self was identical with this universal cosmic power. This atman could not be any individual self, since individual selves have particular qualities. Different people are good at different subjects in school—math, writing, physics, music, or painting. People have different personalities—some are outgoing and friendly, some are shy and quiet, some are self-confident and independent.

Instead of this false focus on our individual selves and what makes us unique, we need to discover our unity with being. According to the Upanishads, individuality is not good. When we selfishly try to hang on to our separate selves—our hopes, our fears, our pleasures, our joys—we hang onto this painful world.

As we saw earlier, the goal of the Upanishads was to guide a person to freedom from the cycle of transmigration. This cycle was called *samsara*: the endless round of life, death, rebirth, another life, another death.

The answer of the Upanishads was: give up self, give up distinctiveness, give up the separation from all things. Realize that the true self is really identical with the unity of the whole cosmos. Again, the Hindu language for this was: “*Atman* (the true self) *is Brahman* (the cosmic whole).”

The means of realizing this truth was meditation and asceticism. The meditator would gradually isolate himself from his senses until he “saw inside” himself. What he “saw” is sometimes described by scholars as an “oceanic trance.”

As explained earlier, this trance can be partly explained as being brought on by deprivation of sleep and food. Many religious traditions encourage “mystic” experiences. One feels like one is floating in an incredibly vast sea, and is completely surrounded. One’s own personal identity is absorbed into something far greater and better.

This is not experienced as something evil or threatening. To the contrary, one is only too happy to let go of one’s finite, little self. Instead of being a lonely individual in an unconcerned crowd, one is a small part of a great celebration (like the Superbowl or a rock concert).

So the oceanic trance allows one to be part of the infinite universe. The person in the trance feels that he or she has finally returned home, that he or she has found the answer to all her or his questions. There is no more separation, no more loneliness. The mystic is experiencing union with all of reality. He or she knows where he or she belongs.

Since one has found one’s place in the cosmic plan, one can accept it, however great or small. Moreover, good or evil doesn’t matter. Brahman is neither good or evil. It is just as correct to say that Brahman is *both* good and evil. It would be even more correct to say that Brahman is *beyond* good and evil.

Hater and hated, rich and poor, victimizer and victimized are all one. When we let go of ourselves, we discover our true selves. All people and all things have this self in common. This self is the higher self that is one with Brahman. It is therefore one with all other aspects of Brahman.

According to the Upanishads, once a meditator had this experience, he had experienced “enlightenment.” He knew the truth about reality. Since he no longer hung onto the illusions of a personal self, he would no longer transmigrate (be reincarnate) into another life. When he realized that “Atman is Brahman,” *there was no longer any self to be reincarnated.*

This enlightenment was freedom from *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth. The name for this freedom was *moksha* (liberation). One was liberated from having to reenter this life after death as an individual self. One was freed to be taken up into the cosmic whole that one has already experienced in the oceanic trance.

### *The Bhagavad Gita*

Because of the dislike of the possibility of returning to another life, many men took up the ascetic lifestyle. They took up a life of isolation. They left normal society where they needed to support a family and relate to people. They lived on alms given by other people. They spent their lives in solitude seeking enlightenment and final liberation from the cycle of reincarnation.

This meant that many of the most talented and energetic men in society abandoned their everyday tasks, and their normal relationships—marriage, raising children, and work. Hinduism needed to find a way to regulate the practice so it didn’t destroy ordinary society.

The myth that gave the answer to this problem is found in an epic, the *Mahabharata*, which means “The Great Story of the Bharatas.” It took some ancient poet eighteen books — about six times as long as the Christian Bible — to tell this story. The basic story is the stuff of countless tales of good and evil.

Within that epic, there is a single story known as the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Gita* for short). Long ago, two groups of cousins claimed the same land in India. The Pandavas lost the land to the Kauravas in a game of dice. The Pandavas kept their bargain and went into the forest for thirteen years. But after the exile ended, the Kauravas refused to return the land, and the two groups of cousins went to war.

The *Gita* opened on a scene where a great battle was about to begin. Arjuna, the great warrior of the Pandavas (“the good guys”) looked out at his enemies and saw his cousins, friends, and teachers. He did not want to fight. Blood and destruction goes with every war. What was far worse, war between relatives is always more destructive. The anger and fury of broken ties brings social chaos.

But the god Krishna told Arjuna that he had to fight. He was a *kshatriya*, a warrior. It was his *dharma*, the law of his class. Fighting was his social duty and obligation. Arjuna was torn. He wanted to do his job. But he did not want to earn the bad karma that would come from the passion and rage of battle. Krishna gave him three reasons he could carry out his social duty, while escaping the karmic consequences of fighting.

First Krishna told Arjuna that the body was only an external shell. The soul endured immortal. So in killing the bodies of his enemies, Arjuna was not really doing any harm. He would not earn any bad karma.

That which pervades the entire body, know it to be indestructible. No one can cause the destruction of the imperishable soul.

Only the material body is perishable; the embodied soul within is indestructible, immeasurable, and eternal. Therefore, fight, O descendent of Bharat.

Neither of them is in knowledge—the one who thinks the soul can slay and the one who thinks the soul can be slain. For truly, the soul neither kills nor can it be killed.

The soul is neither born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal, and ageless. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

As a person sheds worn-out garments and wears new ones, likewise, at the time of death, the soul casts off its worn-out body and enters a new one.<sup>48</sup>

The important thing was to know the truth about reality, to understand what the world was like. That which made a person what he or she was—a soul—could not be killed. That which *could* be killed—the body—did not matter.

Secondly, Krishna told Arjuna action would not gain bad karma if one acted *without desire or passion*. Arjuna should simply do his job as a fighter without allowing himself to get caught up in emotion that usually accompanies it. Karma arises from emotion and desire, from wanting to achieve some goal. If Arjuna fought without any selfish desires about winning or revenge, then the action would not create any karma.

The *Gita* is pointing to a basic psychological principle. It is easier to do a job well if we are not worried about our performance. The soldier who is driven by rage (perhaps over some atrocity done to his own family) is not as clear-headed and as focused as the soldier who is simply doing his job as a professional.

An athlete will usually be more effective if he or she simply tries to spontaneously express her or his athletic skills. Any concern with pleasing the coach, or being the hero of the game, interferes with the natural excellence developed over years of training.

A student who applies one's self to one's studies will make better use of one's emotional and mental resources than one who is continually distracted by concerns with pleasing one's parents, keeping up one's grade average, or earning the approval of a favorite teacher.

In other words, it is the *desire* to succeed that gets in the way of actually succeeding. In the same way, Krishna was telling Arjuna that actions were done best when they were done without any goal or aim.

You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction.

Be steadfast in the performance of your duty, O Arjun[a], abandoning attachment to success and failure. Such equanimity is called Yog[a].

Seek refuge in divine knowledge and insight, O Arjun[a], and discard reward-seeking actions that are certainly inferior to works performed with the intellect established in Divine knowledge. Miserly are those who seek to enjoy the fruits of their works.

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<sup>48</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* 2.17–20, 22 at <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/2>. Accessed January 6, 2020.

One who prudently practices the science of work without attachment can get rid of both good and bad reactions in this life itself. Therefore, strive for Yog[a], which is the art of working skillfully (in proper consciousness).

The wise endowed with equanimity of intellect, abandon attachment to the fruits of actions, which bind one to the cycle of life and death. By working in such consciousness, they attain the state beyond all suffering.<sup>49</sup>

The key to success is not ambition. The key is to do the best job one can. If success comes, then it is simply a bonus. If it does not come, then one has not wasted one's time in longing for something that one can never have. There will no regrets, no feelings that one's life was wasted.

So Arjuna should simply throw himself into the battle, without caring whether he wins or loses, lives or dies. The *Gita* called this "the renunciation of the fruits of the action." We must act without being concerned about the fruits, or results of the act. Act simply and freely because it is the act which one is obligated to do, not because one wants to achieve something. By obeying the law of his obligation to society (his *dharma*), without ambition or desire, Arjuna would not get any bad *karma*.

The third reason Arjuna could fight without getting bad *karma* was that he could escape reincarnation simply by worshipping Krishna. The final answer of the *Gita* to religious puzzles of its day was that of religious devotion. By complete commitment to one's god (and Krishna is not the only god worshipped by devout Hindus), one would gain release from the cycle of this life and gain paradise.

The Supreme Lord said: This form of mine that you are seeing is exceedingly difficult to behold. Even the celestial gods are eager to see it. Neither by the study of the Vedas, nor by penance, charity, or fire sacrifices, can I be seen as you have seen me.

O Arjun, by unalloyed devotion alone can I be known as I am, standing before you.

Thereby, on receiving my divine vision, O scorcher of foes, one can enter into union with me.

Those who perform all their duties for my sake, who depend upon me and are devoted to me, who are free from attachment, and are without malice toward all beings, such devotees certainly come to me.<sup>50</sup>

These three principles that Krishna gave Arjuna correspond to three basic paths of Hinduism.

<b>Principles of the <i>Gita</i></b>	<b>Ways of Hinduism</b>	<b>Actions &amp; Practices</b>
You cannot kill the soul (you can kill the body)	Path of knowledge	asceticism, yoga, meditation
Act without desire	Path of action	sacrifice, social duty (class & stage of life)
Love me (Krishna)	Path of devotion	poetic adoration, <i>puja</i>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 2.47–51.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 11.52–55 at <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/11>. Accessed January 6, 2020.

### *The Ways of Hinduism*

The picture of Hinduism we have seen so far might not seem very “religious.” There were the complex and highly ritualized animal sacrifices that are no longer practiced. There were strict social arrangements that governed the class one belonged to, the job one could do, who one could associate with, what one could do with one’s life, and the steps one had to do it in. There were those who escaped from it all by living in the forest as a hermit.

These practices have been classified as “ways” or “paths.” The ways of Hinduism are different paths people can follow and still be good Hindus. They are also called “disciplines” (*yogas*). They are ways in which Hindus can organize their lives—give them structure, meaning, and direction. Some Hindus have tried to live by two of these ways. Some (probably a small minority) have tried to follow all three. Many have concentrated on one of the three paths.

The Hinduism of the Vedic sacrifices, the caste system, and the stages of life, make up the path of *karma*, of action. Most people don’t have the emotional discipline it takes to withdraw from life altogether. All Hindus want to do the household sacrifices and abide by the social rules. Even the man who eventually lives in the forest at some point has to be involved with life. Keeping the social rules and rituals gives good *karma*. And it is better to have good *karma* than bad.

But as we have seen, even good *karma* doesn’t win final liberation. Some Hindus (only a tiny percentage of all practicing Hindus) do become ascetics in the forest. This is the way of *knowledge*. Through meditation the ascetics gain insight into what they believe is the real nature of reality. They learn that the self is an illusion, that all reality is ultimately one, and that “Atman is Brahman.”

But there is still another side to Hinduism. It is probably more important to the average Hindu than the kinds of Hinduism mentioned above. It is certainly more “religious,” as western people understand that idea.

For many people, religion means that humans can know and love god personally. God is not simply the basis of social organization (as in the caste system) or an abstract principle of cosmic unity (as in Brahman). God is a personal being who desires people to serve him or her in a spirit of complete commitment and deep passion. This is the way of *devotion*. This way is especially well-stated in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

### *The Three Debts and the Four Stages of Life*

The answer was the development of “the stages of life.” Men were encouraged to become ascetics. However, everything had to take place in its proper stage. Men could become ascetics only after they had fulfilled several basic social obligations. These obligations were called “three debts.” The “debts” of a “twice-born” Hindu were study, sons, and sacrifice.

Having studied the Vedas according to the rule, having fathered sons according to the sacred law, and having offered sacrifices, according to his ability, he may direct his mind to the attainment of final liberation.<sup>51</sup>

The first debt was to learn the Vedas from a guru. This debt was discharged in the *student stage*. The student learned the ancient rituals of Hinduism.

The next debt was to have sons. A man was expected to carry on the family line so that his ancestors could receive the proper attention through sacrifices, prayers, and respect. On his death, of course, a man joined the ancestors. He wanted to have sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, and so on, just like his ancestors before him.

The third debt was sacrifice. Although the great rituals of the Rig Veda were no longer carried out, the sacrifices were continued in household rituals. These rituals expressed the dependence of the family on their ancestors and the gods for blessing and prosperity.

The second and third debt were fulfilled in the *householder stage*. After mastering at least some of the Vedas, a man was married, had a family and the responsibilities that went with it.

These responsibilities were represented by the household fire that was renewed each morning, along with prayers to the gods. This ritual was known as the “Angihotra sacrifice” (after the Vedic god, Agni, “fire”). It meant that all the skills that lifted humans up above the animals (cooking, shelter, clothing) were gifts of the gods. The gods had to be nourished if people were to have their own needs met.

It was difficult to seek for liberation from self and karma in the midst of everyday life. Everything one did as a householder—eating, sexual relations, concern for and interest in the well-being of wife and children, the motivation it took to earn a living—involved one in passion and desire. Passion created karma. Only after the three debts (of study, sons, and sacrifice) were paid could a Hindu man think about “the attainment of final liberation.”

The path to this liberation took place in two stages. The third of the four stages was *retirement*, or the *forest-dweller stage*. Here the man seeking liberation would retire to the forest. The forest represented withdrawal from civilization and the order of society. His wife could accompany him in this stage, unless the sons took care of her.

The forest-dweller was not to grow his food. He lived on roots and fruit that grew naturally. Often people who wanted to get merit (which would give better karma) would donate simple food. His clothing was either a natural animal skin, or else old, worn-out clothing. Other than receiving alms of food, and possibly living with his wife, his primary connection to society was his continued offering of the household sacrifices.

His primary task was to recite and memorize the Vedas, and gradually detach himself from the desires, passions, and interests of “regular” people. The concerns of his past life slowly weakened and then disappeared.

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<sup>51</sup> G. Buhler, trans., *The Laws of Manu, Sacred Books of the East*, vol 25 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1886), quoted in Robert E. Van Voorst, ed., *Anthology of World Scriptures* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, Inc., 1994), p. 42.

He was now ready for the final stage: the *ascetic* or *wanderer stage*.

...let him wander about absolutely silent. He must care nothing for enjoyments that may be offered to him. Let him always wander alone, without any companion, to attain final liberation. ... He shall neither possess a fire nor a dwelling. He may go to a village for his food. He shall be indifferent to everything, firm of purpose, meditating and concentrating his mind on Brahman... . Let him not desire to die, let him not desire to live.<sup>52</sup>

When a man has given up both hope and despair, happiness and sorrow, he is ready to die. He has been purified of all desire, and therefore has no more karma hanging on to him. He cannot transmigrate into another body. He has been liberated from the terrible cycle of death and rebirth. He has achieved *moksha*.

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<sup>52</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, in *Ibid*.

## 9. Judaism, Purity and Sanctification



Through their experiences, the Jewish people came to believe that God was *both* “great” and “good.” He was a personal deity, active in the affairs of human beings. He intervened on behalf of “his” people. He “knew” them and they could know and follow his will.

God’s will was known through his teaching. Jews called this teaching “Torah.” The Torah revealed God’s will for the Jews. God had spoken. The divine voice had identified itself. This was why God was personal. This divine self-identification is called revelation.

God’s will was a *moral* will. God expected his people to live pure and holy lives. “Holy” was the opposite of “natural.” God’s holy people did not live for food, sex, or undisciplined pleasure. They were gradually transformed from animals into human beings.

Humans were animals that had “souls.” They could think, and therefore “think ahead.” Life could have more meaning than temporary pleasure for the moment. It could have “eternal” value. Life’s meaning endured beyond death. But it could do this only if God’s people were willing to be disciplined.

This transformation from an animal existence to a rational and spiritual existence was called “sanctification.” God’s people were expected to become sanctified (holy). In so doing, they showed also the world that God was holy. The ultimate meaning of life was found in discipline, rational thought, and moral action.

God’s Torah was more than general ideas of being good or nice to others. Torah was a complex and highly developed set of guidelines for all aspects of life. The observant Jew was happy for every opportunity to obey one of God’s commandments (*mitzvot*).

For most people in EuroAmerican culture, religion is private and personal. But in Judaism character was a public, open action. A religion lived only in the privacy of one’s “heart” was no religion at all. God’s will had to be obeyed in all of the activities of life.

### *Rabbinic Judaism and Modern Judaism*

At the beginning of Part II, we began with a summary of Hebrew history and religion. Hebrew history and the nation of Israel ended with the exile. Some of the Israelites taken into exile returned to Jerusalem perhaps 70 or 100 years later.

They were no longer Hebrews/Israelites but Jews. Their country was no longer called Israel, but Judea. Their religion was an early form of Judaism. This Early Judaism is also called “Second Temple Judaism.” The second temple was built after the return of Jews from Babylon, around 500 B.C.E. Scholars consider event that the beginning of Early Judaism. This Early Judaism ended with the destruction of that second temple by the Romans in 70 C.E.

### *Torah*

According to the Hebrew scriptures and later Jewish tradition, the person most responsible for these changes was a scholar called Ezra. Ezra was a leader in the Jerusalem community of

returned exiles, perhaps around 450 B.C.E. He was a “scribe,” the title for a professional reader and writer.<sup>53</sup>

Since he could read, Ezra probably began reading ancient Hebrew writings. He created an anthology of these writings. Because few people could read, the written word carried a special power. Today we are taught to question what we read and look for “proof.” Back then, a writing was “sacred” because it had lasted, maybe hundreds of years. The community heard it and obeyed it as the truth.<sup>54</sup>

The Hebrew scriptures call this anthology “the scroll of the Teaching [Torah] of Moses (Nehemiah 8:1, see Ezra 3:2).” Apparently there were ancient writings attributed to Moses (the presumed deliverer of the Hebrews from Egypt). These writings included rules for worship (especially for the sacrifice of animals to God) and Israelite society.

Like any editor, Ezra took separate writings and melded them together. He probably added “editorial” comments. He joined different fragments together so that they read like a united whole. In that sense, Ezra was the *writer* of the Torah.

From then on, Jews believed that God had given them a *teaching* about to live. The Christian translation of Torah (“law”) suggests a rigid system of rules that keep people from living fulfilling lives.

But for Jews, God’s “teaching” has always been a wonderful present. God doesn’t expect people to live without knowing what he wants them to do. God “reveals” the divine plan or blueprint for a happy and successful community. Thus Torah is also understood as the “revelation” of God to his people. One does not have to try to figure out goodness on one’s own. One has a roadmap for character and morality.

In the “First Jewish-Roman War” (66–73 CE), the Jewish temple was destroyed. So Jews had to answer the question: how do we worship God? There was one group of Jews that provided a solution. The Pharisees (no one knows for certain what the name means) said that the ancient laws of worship didn’t *only* apply to temple worship. They could be applied to the *everyday* life of ordinary Jews. The “laws of purity” could be followed by all Jews, not just the priests.

But this meant that the Pharisees *reinterpreted* the Torah. They changed *where and how* the laws were obeyed. The laws were not just obeyed at the temple, or during the sacrifice of animals to God. They could be followed wherever a Jew lived and worked. They could be obeyed during everyday life.

The Pharisees changed the purity laws so that *all* Jews could have a sense of obeying God. For example, Pharisees said that one should wash one’s hands before meals. This simple act changed the nature of the meal. The meal became more than meeting animal needs (like a lion eating its prey). It became a spiritual and religious act. It was done “before God.” This most ordinary of all

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<sup>53</sup> Very few people, even kings, were able to read and write. If a king had a message for another ruler, he had it written down by his scribe. When the message reached its destination, it was read by another scribe.

<sup>54</sup> The change from oral authority to written authority was a significant one. An oral command carries weight only as long as the person is around to keep giving the command. But a written command has authority long after the person who said it is dead. It commands as long as someone is willing to read it and obey it.

human activities became holy. It was “sanctified”—*set apart*. It was an act of worship and obedience to God. Because these acts could be practiced in the home, that took the place of the temple.

In this way the Pharisees brought the Torah “up to date.” They enabled ordinary Jews to feel like it was relevant to their lives.

The spiritual descendants of the Pharisees came to be called rabbis, and the Judaism they defined is called *rabbinic* Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism is led by religious scholars known as *rabbis*. Rabbis gathered the records of Jewish teachings. Some of these laws were gathered in a book called *the Mishnah*. The *Mishnah* was put together by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi (“the prince”).<sup>55</sup> The *Mishnah* was created around 200 C.E. So that is a convenient date for the beginning of Judaism.

### *The Mishnah and the Talmud*

The Pharisees were the only group left with any real power. Their interpretation of the Torah became the official interpretation of a renewed Judaism. Scholars called rabbis (“master,” “teacher”) studied the teachings of the Pharisees. Over several hundred years they convinced more and more Jews to follow their version of Judaism. This became *rabbinic* Judaism.

The founding text of rabbinic Judaism was the Mishnah. The Mishnah was a collection (“anthology”) of traditional laws. It covered the following topics:

- tithing of crops and animals to the temple; prayer services in the synagogue
- Sabbath and holy days
- marriage and divorce
- civil and criminal law
- sacrifices in the temple and the way to kill animals for food
- ritual purifications necessary to enter the temple.

As you can see, many of these laws applied to the temple that had been destroyed 130 earlier. Obviously they couldn’t be kept. So why were they written down?

There was another puzzle. The Mishnah made no reference to the teachings of the Torah or the Hebrew Bible. By what authority did the Mishnah write down these laws? The rabbis spent the next 300 years trying to figure out these two puzzles. The results of their study and discussions were the *Talmudim* (the plural form of *Talmud*).

The Talmudim were commentaries on the Mishnah. One was written down in Palestine. A second, and larger, Talmud was formed in Babylon. In the 700 years since the exile, the community of Jews in Babylon had become large and prosperous. After the Second Jewish–Roman War (135), Jews fled the death and destruction in Palestine. Many of these Jews went to Babylon.

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<sup>55</sup> “Nasi” meant the patriarch, or official leader, of the Jewish communities in Palestine.

Soon after the Mishnah was created, rabbis discussed it with their students. They gathered in homes or synagogues. These informal schools were called rabbinic academies (*yeshivot*). The results of their discussions were written down in commentaries.

The next generation of rabbis discussed the Mishnah and the commentaries on the Mishnah. The third generation discussed the Mishnah, and the commentaries of the two previous generations. This went on for 300 years. Around 500 C.E., these long discussions were officially written down as “the Talmud.”

### *The Dual Torah*

Like the Pharisees before them, rabbinic Jews *reinterpreted* the Torah. They took laws that had applied to the temple (now destroyed) and reapplied them to everyday life. How did the rabbis know that their version of the Torah was the true version?

The answer to that question came in the teaching of the *dual Torah*. The rabbis taught that there were two versions of the Torah. One was the official, *written* version. This was the version passed down in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy).

But the rabbis said that there was also an *oral* Torah. The oral Torah was passed down by word-of-mouth from Moses to the rabbis. It was known only to those who had learned it by constant repetition. In other words, it wasn't a public text available to everyone. It was a secret, memorized Torah. It gave the true interpretation of the written Torah.<sup>56</sup>

“Moses received the Torah on Sinai, and handed it down to Joshua; Joshua to the Elders [or, Judges]; the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly” (Pirké Aboth i. 1).<sup>57</sup>

But now this secret, oral Torah had been written down as the Mishnah. The rabbis believed (as do orthodox Jews to this day) that the Mishnah was the true interpretation of the written Torah. It needed to be carefully read and closely studied. The teachers who handed on the oral Torah “said three things:”

“Be deliberate in judgment; raise up many disciples; and make a fence round the Torah” (Pirké Aboth i. 1).<sup>58</sup>

With these words Judaism became the careful intellectual study of “the Torah.” By this time “the Torah” meant the first five books of the Bible *as they were interpreted by* the Mishnah and the Talmud. (That is what it will mean from here on in this chapter.) Jewish men<sup>59</sup> were to study the

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<sup>56</sup> The Mishnah is derived from the word *shanah*, which means “to repeat (A. Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud* [New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1949], p. xxvi).” Ancient teaching usually took place through memorization. The subject was mastered by saying it over and over. A teacher was someone who could say it by memory.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, p. xviii.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, p. 125.

<sup>59</sup> Women's primary responsibility was home and family. They were free from some religious obligations and from the study of the Torah. See Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, pp. 159–60.

Torah and understand its rules and guidelines. They were also to teach others and “raise up many disciples.”

Rabbis were to carefully apply those laws to legal problems and situations that arose in their communities. So the rabbis were not primarily “clergy” as we understand it. They studied the *laws* of the Jews in the same way that American lawyers and judges study the Constitution of the United States and the laws enacted by Congress.

This “law” was called *halakah* (sometimes spelled “halakha” or “halakhah.”). Halakah meant “the way to go.” It included criminal law (robbery, murder, etc.), civil law (e.g., a farmer suing his neighbor over a land dispute), marriage and divorce, worship, religious festivals, diet, and dress.<sup>60</sup> Unlike the modern west, Judaism did not separate between “religion” (worship and spirituality) and “politics” (law and rules for living day-to-day).

The rabbis believed that God had given them the responsibility to determine the full meaning—to “unpack”—Torah. This principle is called:

### *Independence of Halakhic Judgment*

“On that day, Rabbi Eliezer put forward all the arguments in the world, but the Sages did not accept them. [Another version says, the vote was 10 to 1 against Rabbi Eliezar.]

“Finally, he said to them, ‘If the *halakha* [the legal ruling] is according to me, let that carob-tree prove it.’

“He pointed to a nearby carob-tree, which then moved from its place a hundred cubits, and some say, four hundred cubits. They said to him ‘One cannot bring a proof from the moving of a carob-tree.’

“Said Rabbi Eliezer, ‘If the *halakha* is according to me, may that stream of water prove it.’

“The stream of water then turned and flowed in the opposite direction.

“They said to him, ‘One cannot bring a proof from the behavior of a stream of water.’

...

“Then, said Rabbi Eliezer to the Sages, ‘If the halakha is according to me, may a proof come from Heaven.’

“Then a heavenly voice went forth and said, ‘What have you to do with Rabbi Eliezer? The halakha is according to him in every place.’

“Then Rabbi Joshua rose up on his feet, and said, ‘It is not in the heavens’ ([Deuteronomy 30:12](#)).

“What did he mean by quoting this? Said Rabbi Jeremiah, ‘He meant that since the [Torah](#) has been given already on Mount Sinai, we do not pay attention to a heavenly voice, for You have written in Your Torah, ‘Decide according to the majority’ ([Exodus 23:2](#)).<sup>61</sup>

[Another version ends with a rabbi standing up and declaring: “Very well, Rabbi Eliezar, ten to two.” I.e., God has (only) one vote.]

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<sup>60</sup> See the overview in *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, s.v. “halakah.”

<sup>61</sup> [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Halakha\\_&\\_aggadata\\_&\\_midrash.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Halakha_&_aggadata_&_midrash.html) , accessed December 28, 2012.

## “Fencing the Torah”

In *Pirké Aboth* I. 1, the rabbis were instructed to **“make a fence round the Torah.”** To understand this idea, imagine a cliff. You want to guard against anyone falling off the cliff. You can, of course, station an ambulance at the bottom. But it is far better to put a *fence* at the *top* of the cliff. But suppose that someone leans over the fence to look down. If the fence breaks, the person will still fall. So you put the fence *away from the edge of the cliff*.<sup>62</sup>

In this analogy, breaking the Torah is equivalent to “falling off the cliff.” The rabbis put a “fence round the Torah” by making sure that no one *could even get close* to breaking the Torah. They did this by making their rules cover all possible situations.

Was a person to keep the Sabbath? The rabbis attempted to define all possible situations in which one could fail to keep the Sabbath. How far could a person travel? How much grain could a person strip from wheat growing in a field? Could a woman cook on the Sabbath? She couldn’t light a cooking fire on the Sabbath. But she could light the fire the *previous day*.

The Christian and modern western prejudice is that all these rules are “legalistic” and restrictive. But for rabbinic Jews, they were a great blessing and joy. God had given them the Torah. He gave them a way to know his will. They could live according to God’s will in all of life.

“Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hast sanctified us by Thy commandments and commanded us to occupy ourselves with the words of Torah. Make pleasant, therefore, we beseech Thee, O Lord our God, the words of Thy Torah in our mouth and in the mouth of Thy people, the house of Israel.... .. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Who teachest Torah to Thy people Israel. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who hast chosen us from all nations and given us Thy Torah. ...” (Ber. 11b)<sup>63</sup>

## Revelation and Sanctification

When the Talmud said that God’s commandments had “sanctified” Israel (the Jewish people), it meant the following: In itself, life seemed little more than an struggle to survive. There was nothing that made people different from the animals and the “survival of the fittest.” Life was “profane,” empty of meaning and purpose.

But God gave the Jews his teachings. God *revealed* the truth about life. This revelation gave life purpose. Jews did God’s will. They made life holy. They “set apart” life to God. This “set apartness” is called *sanctification*.

So revelation tells humans that there is a God (a higher reality). This reality gives human life a higher meaning. Just as Jews “set apart” their lives to God, humans are set apart from the animals. Life is more than the animal pursuit of survival. Life is “designed” to be spiritual and moral. So there must be a “designer.”

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<sup>62</sup> I owe this analogy to my mentor in all things Jewish: Dr. Norbert Samuelson previously of Temple University’s Department of Religion.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, p. 150.

Furthermore, obedience to the Torah sanctified God's name. Jews showed the whole world that there was a god who was holy (separate from all that was impure and evil). They showed that this god had revealed his holy will. It was possible to know God's plan and follow it.

The Torah was a great gift that God had given to his "people Israel." Jews were "chosen" "from all nations" to receive God's revelation. They were selected to show that God was holy. God desired people to be holy, to have good character and high standards of morality. That is why they rejoiced in the Torah with such words as:

"Never have I abandoned it in the slightest degree; and since I have never abandoned it, it was not a burden upon me but a source of singing; as it is said, 'Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage' (Ps. cxix. 54)" (Midrash Mak. III. 16).<sup>64</sup>

Jews were more than happy to "fence the Torah." Keeping God's commandments was a wonderful opportunity. Why take a chance that one might accidentally break one of God's laws? It was far better to err on the side of caution. It was better to be more strict than one had to be.

### *Morality as Discipline*

God was holy and called Israel to be holy. Holiness was purity. Purity meant separation from the animal side of life. Animals lived on a natural and physical level. Humans were a mixture of the animal and the spiritual.

"Like the animals he eats and drinks, propagates his species, relieves himself and dies. Like the ministering angels [spiritual beings] he stands erect, speaks, possesses intellect, and sees" (Gen. VIII. 11).<sup>65</sup>

Animals live for *right now*. They are only concerned with what is immediately in front of them: food, sex, sleep. So when it ends...it ends. Death is a natural consequence of focusing on immediate gratification. If humans live like dogs, they die like dogs.

Becoming holy meant becoming less animal and more spiritual. Of all creatures, only humans had a ...

"... soul [which] is from heaven and his body [which is] from earth. Therefore, if a man obeys the Torah and does the will of his Father in heaven, behold he is like the creatures above; as it is written, 'I said, Ye are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High' (Ps. lxxxii. 6). But if he obey not the Torah and perform not the will of his Father in heaven, he is like the creatures below; as it is said, 'Nevertheless ye shall die like men' (ibid. 7)" (Sifré Deut. § 306; 132a).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 149–150.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 68. According to Cohen, when it says that man "sees," it means that "he has eyes in front and not on the side like an animal." The biology might not be exactly correct, but the central point is that humans are given special knowledge and abilities that no other animal species has. This knowledge gives people *moral* awareness.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 67–68.

But human beings could *choose* to be more than an animal. They could restrain these animal elements. They could see “ahead.” They could learn that actions have consequences. They could talk, debate and have rational conversations about what were the best choices.

Through restraint and self-discipline they developed higher, spiritual natures. In other words, human beings were responsible to *become* pure. That is, they were to *become* what they *were* (in God’s eyes): spiritual and moral beings. “The soul is the spiritual force within man which raises him above an animal existence, inspires him with ideals, and prompts him to choose the good and reject the evil.”<sup>67</sup>

“The Holy One, blessed be He, says to man, ‘Behold, I am pure, My abode is pure, My ministers are pure, and the soul I give you is pure. If you return it to Me in the same state of purity that I give it to you; if not, I will destroy it before you’” (Lev. R. xviii. 1).<sup>68</sup>

### *The Good Impulse and the Evil Impulse*

Judaism taught that humans have two impulses within them: a good impulse and an evil impulse. These two impulses compete for a person’s allegiance. “The character of a person is determined by which of the two impulses is dominant within him.”<sup>69</sup> The following text quotes and then interprets a verse from Ecclesiastes.

“‘Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king.’ The first clause refers to the good impulse. Why is it called a child? Because it does not attach itself to a person until the age of thirteen and upward. Why is it called poor? Because all do not hearken to it. Why is it called wise? Because it teaches creatures the right path. The second clause refers to the evil impulse. Why does he call it a king? Because all hearken to it. Why does he call it old? Because it attaches itself to a person from youth to old age. Why does he call it a fool? Because it teaches man the wrong path.” (Eccles. R. iv. 13).<sup>70</sup>

The good impulse began at the age of thirteen. That was the age the rabbis thought a person gains a sense of moral responsibility. The evil impulse began when the baby was born. The desire to get one’s own way was a part of human makeup from the very beginning of life. People were born wanting to do what *they* wanted to do.

For Judaism, sin lay in *choosing* to follow the evil impulse. Humans were capable of choosing to follow God’s will. They were responsible if they chose not to do God’s will. One didn’t avoid sin because it was *impossible*. One avoided sin because of a conscious, deliberate decision. One *chose* to obey (or disobey) God.

This text illustrates this point by talking about the sins of eating pork and of committing incest.

“A man should not say, It is impossible for me to eat swine’s flesh; it is impossible for me to enter into an incestuous alliance. (He should rather say), It is possible for me to

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Ibid., pp. 22–23.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Ibid., pp. 88–89.

perform such acts [of sin]; but what am I to do, seeing that my Father in Heaven has so decreed for me?" (Sifra to xx. 26).<sup>71</sup>

Sin was easily avoided when it was not something one wanted to do. If I don't want to commit murder, I am *not* being moral by not killing anyone. Choosing not to sin is moral only when I *want* to do what God has forbidden.

In other words, for Judaism morality is not determined by what is "natural." Morality is determined by God's will as revealed in the Torah. The Torah transforms human life. Without the Torah, life itself is meaningless. Without people doing God's will and living moral lives, humanity has no reason to exist.

### *Evil and the Sexual Impulse*

One illustration of how the rabbis understood evil can be seen in their view of the sexual impulse. Sex was, of course, "natural." Like everything else that was "natural," it was created by God. Since God gave humans sexuality, it was good. Sex was necessary for the God-given order of life.

"Were it not for that impulse [of sex], a man would not build a house, marry a wife, beget children or conduct business affairs" (Gen R. ix. 7).<sup>72</sup>

Without sexuality people would not feel the need to get married or to have children. And without this need to have a family, people wouldn't work to support themselves. People wouldn't build houses or create businesses.

This means that the sexual drive is the foundation of culture. It is what makes people "get up in the morning." What is true in sexuality is true in all of life. The possibility of doing evil implies the possibility of doing good. We would not be moral unless it was possible for us to be *immoral*.

In contrast, animals are neither moral or immoral. They simply act in accordance with their instincts. The lion who kills the gazelle on its African savanna is neither good nor bad. It simply *is*. It is doing what "nature" (instincts) tells it to do.

This is the fundamental difference between animals and humans. Animals simply act in accordance with their natural drives. But humans can *choose* to rise above these natural drives. This is the essence of the Jewish point of view: morality is the *transformation* (the "sanctification") of nature.

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 90.

## 10. The Five Pillars of Practice of Islam



### *(1) The Shahada*

The guidelines, rules, and laws of Islam cover all aspects of life. Like rabbinic Judaism, Islam is as much a way of life as it is what westerners call a “religion.” The most essential guidelines of Islam are called the “Five Pillars.” These are the basic practices that all Muslims should follow.

The first pillar is the “*Shahada*” (sometimes spelled “Shahadah”). It means “witnessing.” The *Shahada* is a “statement of faith” by a Muslim. It says only two things: “There is no god but (*the*) God.” In this way the Muslim states her or his intention to bring all of life under the authority of this one true god. Secondly, “Muhammad is the prophet (*or*, “apostle”) of God.” The Muslim says that he or she believes that Muhammad’s revelation are the true expression of God’s will.

### *The Unity of God*

The *Shahada* teaches that only God (Allah) is divine. There is no other power that can compete with him. This basic teaching of Islam is called *tawhid*: the unity of God.

A self-centered life is focused on many things: money, fame, power, feeding the physical appetites of food and sex. That is why originally most religions were polytheistic. Human beings were aware that there were many different things that gave life meaning. These “meanings” were things that people lived for or found important in their lives: food, having babies, sex, or important things in nature.

In the first human communities, each of these things became a “god” or “goddess.” The earliest divinity was probably a “mother goddess.” She stood for the ability of women to produce babies and for the wonderful things produced by “mother earth.” By worshipping her, people were saying that it was important to have children and food. Males became more important in hunting, farming, trade, war, and crafts. More of the gods became male: gods of war, agriculture, and political order. The many gods meant that life didn’t have a single focus.

Judaism and Christianity developed the idea of *one God*. It passed from there to Islam. Muhammad reacted against the many gods and goddesses in Arabic paganism. His prophecies said that there was only one true power in the universe:

God, there is none but He, the alive, the ever real. Slumber takes Him not, nor sleep. Everything in the heavens and in the earth is His.... He knows everything that mankind have presently in hand and everything about them that is yet to be. ... In the vastness of the heavens and the earth His Throne is established. Tirelessly He preserves them. So great is his majesty.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Readings in the Qur’an*, trans., Kenneth Cragg, p. 86 [Surah 2:255].

God alone truly existed. Everything else was dependent on him. People put their trust in other gods. They discovered that they put their trust in their own ideas and beliefs. But these ideas were worthless. Compared to God, everything else was helpless.

Those who adopt to themselves guardian deities, to the exclusion of God Himself, resemble the spider with that frailest of all houses, a cobweb of her own making.<sup>2</sup>

Only God was capable of keeping the universe going. If he took away his support, everything would vanish. That was why all should *surrender* to God. He was the one true power in the universe. If one wanted one's life to have meaning, one had to submit to him and allow him to have his way.

As we saw earlier, submission to God gave life eternal meaning. It also gave life *unity*. Since God was one, there was one true source of life. All the "parts" of life were to be brought under his authority. There was one unified basis for meaning and purpose in life. Everything one did was done in the name of the one true God. Everything was done to glorify him and demonstrate his power and authority in the universe.

## (2) *Salat*

The second pillar is "*Salat*." The *Salat* is the "prayer service" of faithful Muslims. Prayer is the Muslim way of recognizing the power of God in their lives. It is an acknowledgment that they cannot control their own lives. Rather they must depend on a higher power for guidance and strength.

Prayer is to be done five times a day: sunrise, noon, afternoon, sunset, evening. It can be done anywhere. It can be done alone or with others. Customarily, the Friday noon *salat* is done at the "mosque" with the community. There Muslims pray with each other and listen to a sermon by someone trained in the Qur'an and Muslim law.<sup>3</sup>

"Mosque" (*masjid* in Arabic) means "place of ritual prostration." Whether in the mosque or not, Muslims pray by kneeling and then bending their faces and hands to the ground. This posture expresses their "prostration" before God. It is the bodily expression of their inner state of submission and surrender to God. In prayer the Muslim is before God in complete humility.

Prayer is preceded by rituals of purification. The Muslim washes his or her face, hands, and feet. If water is not available, sand can be used. As we have seen in other religions, rituals of purification separate a person from the "profane" (ordinary) world. They place the person in a special realm where he or she is now ready to meet God.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 182 [Surah 29:41].

<sup>3</sup> Technically, there are no "clergy" or ordained leaders in Islam. Every Muslim male is qualified to speak to the community in the mosque. However, in practice there are a group of men who are highly educated in Muslim theology and law. These men are called "*ulama*," which means "learned." The Friday sermon is usually delivered by these *ulama*. They are simply those males who have the necessary education in theology and law.

The *ulama* are therefore parallel to Jewish rabbis. Rabbis are also simply people (until recently male) who study the teachings and laws of Judaism. They are not "priests," nor do they have any "sacerdotal" ("supernatural") authority. The only qualification for both rabbis and *ulama* is education.

### (3) *Fasting in Ramadan*

The third pillar is “*Sawm*.” *Sawm* means “fasting.” Muslims abstain from food, drink, and pleasure (especially sex) during daylight hours for the whole month of Ramadan.<sup>4</sup>

Fasting in the month of Ramadan is not quite as difficult as it may seem. Once the sun goes down, Muslims often party and have large banquets. Furthermore, the month doesn’t last quite as long as western months, since the Muslim calendar is based on the moon. The lunar month is shorter than the 30 or 31 days of the western calendar.

Another “blessing” that Muslims point to is the fact that the month of Ramadan comes in different seasons. The reason is that the lunar year is “out-of-sync” with the solar year. The lunar month of Ramadan doesn’t come in the same solar month from year to year. So the burden of Ramadan is borne at different seasons in the year. Muslims point to this as one proof for the wisdom of Muhammad’s prophecies.

### (4) *Almsgiving*

The fourth pillar is “*Zakat*,” when means “almsgiving.” *Zakat* is a combination of a tax and giving to charity. The money collected is used to help the poor and other needy people, such as new converts. However, the *zakat* is not voluntary. It is a religious obligation. At the same time, it is more than a tax. It is a *religious* act through which Muslims shows God how thankful they are for their wealth. By giving *zakat*, Muslims shows that they don’t hoard their wealth for selfish purposes.

### (5) *The Pilgrimage*

The fifth and final pillar is “*Hajj*,” the famous pilgrimage taken by Muslims. Every year, hundreds of thousands of Muslims travel to Mecca at the same time. The *Hajj* predates Islam. It is based on an ancient pilgrimage that pagan Arabs made to the black meteor rock, the Kaaba, at Mecca.

As we have seen, many religions try to take a person from an “impure” (unholy or non-moral) state to a “pure” (holy or moral) state. Religion takes humans as animal beings and transforms them into spiritual and moral beings.

Part of the role of a pilgrimage is to make this transformation a physical and concrete reality. The pilgrim leaves her or his home and everyday life. The physical movement begins the process of transformation. The religious change reaches its climax as the pilgrim reaches the goal. The pilgrim then returns home a “new” person.

Muhammad promoted this pilgrimage as a way of making it easier for Arabs to convert to Islam. In that way, they could keep some of their ancient customs. At the same time, Muhammad destroyed the idols that were worshipped at the Kaaba.

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<sup>4</sup> Exceptions are made for pregnant women, people with medical problems, and so on.

For later Muslims, the *Hajj* was and continues to be the way of experiencing the whole Muslim community. Whatever one's nationality or ethnic identity—Arabic, Egyptian, Indonesian, African, American, or whatever—one is above all a Muslim.

The pilgrim also reenacts the covenant that Abraham made with God. This takes place in a ceremony called the “Standing.” The pilgrims gather at “Mt. Arafa” (ten miles outside Mecca) and pray from midday until sundown. They spend the time repenting of their sins and resolving to follow God with renewed commitment.<sup>5</sup>

Muslims are required to take this pilgrimage only once in their lives. They must be physically and financially able to do so. They are expected to provide for their families while away. In other words, the *Hajj* is not meant to be a hardship.

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<sup>5</sup> *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, s.v., “pilgrimage (Islam)” and Denny’s *Islam*, pp. 53–56 (also found in *Religious Traditions of the World*, pp. 645–647). Denny’s descriptions of all of the “pillars” is a good place to start for further study.

### III. Religion, Morality, and Ethics

## 11. Overview of Chinese Religion

In this course, we have already studied one great religion of India: Hinduism. We will soon study another one: Buddhism. Hinduism emphasizes social order and happiness. Buddhism says that freedom from suffering and tranquility is more important.

Confucianism, like Hinduism, is a religion of order. According to Confucianism, a good society is one in which a clearly defined role in the community. Religion provides the rituals by which each person is shaped into a well-functioning member of the community.

Taoism rejects the goals of an ordered society. We cannot know what is ultimately good for a community. Actions that look like they may produce a good community may, in the long run, produce bad. Actions that appear bad may, in the long run, produce good.

### *Harmony and the Tao*

In spite of this fundamental difference, Confucianism and Taoism are agreed on one point: the goal of religion and good character is *harmony*. People and society are to be harmonious.

For Confucianism, this happens because of a well-ordered relationship between leaders and citizens. It is closer to a philosophy than it is a religion: how do people live full lives in society. It talks about relations in the family, and between the government leaders and its citizens. It encourages education and self-improvement as a way of living a full life in society.

For Taoism, harmony means acceptance of all of life, good and bad. We cannot say that *this* is good and *that* is bad. So accept life as it is. This “all of life” is called “the Tao.”

The basic meaning of “Tao” is “the way.” In the first place, it referred to the idea that the stars followed a way or path in the heavens. Ancient cultures realized that the stars moved in regular patterns. Many societies believed that the way to success and happiness was to repeat these patterns on earth.

There were not only regular movements among the stars, but of the moon and sun. Because of the importance of a regular food supply, all societies paid close attention to the regular cycles of the moon and sun. This gave them a way to figure out the months<sup>6</sup> and the seasons. Months and seasons were ways of calculating when to plant and harvest crops.

Just as the regular periods of the moon and sun determined the seasons, ancient societies came to believe that the paths of the stars determined the paths of the life of an individual or a whole society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A “month” originally meant one entire cycle of the moon’s phases. The Old English word for “moon” is *mona*. The Old English word for “month” is *monath*.

<sup>7</sup> This was the origin of astrology. Ancient peoples became aware that the movements of the sun and moon “caused” the seasons and regular patterns of nature on earth. How? Well, they “knew” that a “spirit” or “life-force” “caused” a human body to move about. Likewise, they assumed, the “spirit” or energy of the sun and moon resulted in changes on earth. In the same way, they concluded, the patterns of the stars “caused” the pattern of human life. If you were born “under” a star, that star “determined” what would happen to you.

So “the Tao” came to mean the entire pattern of the heavens. This meant that society ought to figure out and put itself “in sync with” with the heavens. People on earth could achieve harmony by imitating the harmonies of the stars, sun, and moon. Follow the Tao, the way, by following the harmony of Heaven.

The proper harmony of “Heaven” was maintained in part by sacrifices and rituals. The purpose of these ceremonies was to enact on earth the order of Heaven. There were opposing forces in Heaven. The rituals made sure that the proper balance was maintained.

Anything out of the ordinary (extremely bad weather, odd events in the sky, freaks of nature ) might signal that Heaven was out of balance. If left uncorrected, the ruler could lose the “Mandate of Heaven”<sup>8</sup> and be overthrown. The ruler could correct the situation by changing his policies.

This idea of “balance” became expressed as the ideas of “Yin” and “Yang.” Yang was the power of light and warmth. Yin was the power of darkness and coolness. Just as the seasons move from winter to summer and back again, all life moves between Yin and Yang.

Yang is the energy that gets life going (think of the fire and drive of sexual passion). But just as life ends naturally in the quiet of death, Yin naturally completes Yang. Neither is “good” or “bad.” Yin or Yang are only “bad” when one is out of balance with the other.

Since the sun brings heat and light, it is associated with Yang. Since the moon rules during the cool of the night, it is connected with Yin. Also, since the work of summer (planting and harvesting in the fields) was primarily male work, Yang became viewed as a male force. During winter, most work was done indoors and was “domestic” household duties like making cloth. So Yin was thought of as female.<sup>9</sup> But both Yin and Yang were necessary for the complete balance of life.

Because rulers and leaders in Chinese society wanted to be in harmony with Heaven, they practiced divination, which we discussed at the beginning of the course.

### *Respect for and Sacrifices to One’s Ancestors*

The previous section talked about harmony with the cosmos, in society and politics. Perhaps the most important area of harmony was harmony with one’s ancestors. Some of these practices that express this harmony are among the very earliest that we know about in Chinese religion. They still influence it today.

After death one’s father and mother became spiritual beings. (They were neither in “heaven” or “hell” as westerners understand it. However, they could continue to influence events on earth.) Just as one tried to please them and take care of them in life, one honored them in death.

At regular intervals (especially at spring and fall), a family would have a banquet. They invited their ancestors to join them. A person was assigned the role of being “possessed” by the

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<sup>8</sup> “Mandate” means support or authorization. Chinese rulers were always concerned about being “in sync” with the order and harmony of Heaven, the cosmic source of peace and order on earth.

<sup>9</sup> *Religions of Asia*, ed., Fenton et. al., 167.

ancestors. In this way, the ancestors experienced the joy and happiness of their earthly descendants.

When the parents were alive, they took care of the children. In the same way, the descendants prayed to their ancestors to give them prosperity and happiness. So the ancestors became god-like beings. At the banquet, the ancestors were fed and blessed with gifts. In return, the Chinese looked for riches, a long life, and (especially) descendants to pray to *them* after *they* became “ancestors.”

The importance of the ancestors is expressed in the following early poetry:

[He says], “While I present [this] noble bull,  
And they assist me in setting for the sacrifice,  
O great and august Father,  
Comfort me, your filial son.

.....  
You comfort me with the eyebrows of longevity;  
You make me great with manifold blessings.  
I offer this sacrifice to my meritorious father,  
And to my accomplished mother.<sup>10</sup>

The ancestors were fed by these sacrifices, just as the ancient Vedic Hindus believed that their sacrifices of animals, butter, and milk fed their gods. The sacrificer hoped to receive a long life, wealth, and power.

These ancestor rituals became the basis of “filial piety.” To be “filial” means to respect, honor, and obey one’s parents. (The word “filial” comes from the Latin *filius*, meaning “son.”) “Piety” has the idea of a religious attitude, here in the sense of being devoted and reverent. So “filial piety” means to have the attitude of a devoted and reverent son.

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<sup>10</sup> “Sacrificial Odes of Kau, Ode 7,” taken from James Legge, trans., *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, part I, vol. 3, *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879), pp. 325–326, as edited by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 191.

## 12. The Tao According to Taoism<sup>11</sup>

As we saw in the earliest forms of Chinese religion, the Tao was the **way or path** of the celestial bodies — the stars, sun, and moon. A harmonious society was formed by determining the Tao of Heaven and following it on earth. Confucius believed that the Tao was by making relationships and social structures right.

But other philosophers disagreed with Confucius. Making the world work better would *not* lead to harmony. Indeed, you should not try to change the world at all. An early example of such a philosopher was the unknown writer (or writers) of *Tao De Jing*.

According to *Tao De Jing*, humanity cannot be improved through struggle and effort. Reality, “the Tao,” includes happiness and suffering. If I didn’t have to work for a living to support my family, I would never know the fulfillment of a job well–done. Just as “light” wouldn’t exist without darkness, pleasure wouldn’t exist without pain.

Part of the problem of society is that people falsely believe they can identify “the good.” They say, “*this* is how to solve the problem.” But according to *Tao De Jing*, no one can identify the Tao.

TAO called Tao is not TAO. / Names can name no lasting name.<sup>12</sup>

Let us say you have chosen to be an atheist. You have decided that you will live and act on the assumption that there is no higher being. This belief may be an understandable response to your own upbringing and experiences. (For example, maybe the god you were taught to believe in did not let you make any of your own decisions. You rejected what you came to believe was a “false” view of god.)

Even so, the view of reality you embraced was only a partial view. You became an atheist in response to your prior experiences. These experiences were unique to you. Another person might have had different experiences and have come to opposite conclusions.

*Tao De Jing* is telling us that *no one view of reality is the whole of reality*. The path that each one of us takes in life is unique to us and partial. So the instant we try to identify truth we have lost it. *All truth is partial truth*. If we say, “this is how we ought to live,” we have told a falsehood. We have tried to “name” the Tao. But in fact we have only named the Tao in our particular situation. We have made a mistake in limiting reality to only one piece of an infinitely larger whole.

Since any specific view of truth is only partially true, we should not work for any particular agenda. Immediately following the above quotation, *Tao Te Ching* continues:

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<sup>11</sup> In the words “Tao” and “Taoism,” the initial T is pronounced with the sound *duh*. So “Tao” is pronounced as “dowel” and *Tao Te Ching* is “dowel duh jing,” (rhyming with “bing”).

<sup>12</sup>*Tao Te Ching* 1, in *Lao-tzu/Tao Te Ching*, translated by Stephen Addiss & Stanley Lombardo (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993). “Lao-tzu” is the legendary author of *Tao Te Ching*, and another name for its title. The *Tao Te Ching* is the second most translated work in world literature, next to the Bible. There are many translations on-line that can give the student insights into the possible meanings of any saying.

Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth.  
 Naming: the mother of ten thousand things.

Empty of desire, perceive mystery.  
 Fill with desire, perceive manifestations.<sup>13</sup>

The ultimate source of everything *is not any one thing*. As in the Upanishads and some forms of Buddhism, reality is *no-thing*. The ultimate source of everything that is (“the Originator”) has no specific identity. It is a dark, indescribable something. Yet everything is “in” it.

Vague and intangible;  
 Within are entities.

Shadowy and obscure;  
 Within it there is life.<sup>14</sup>

### *Inhumaneness*

One could argue that Taoism has a refreshingly realistic view of life. Instead of getting all worked up over life’s injustices, Taoism reminds us to take the bad with the good. Disappointment and loss are the “other side of the coin” of happiness and success.

But the moral price of this view is high. Taoism says that all efforts to “improve” the world or make life easier are wrong. The Tao is not concerned about human beings and our petty concerns. The Tao is “inhumane.” I am simply one small part of the great cycle of yin and yang. My happiness doesn’t matter to the Tao. It doesn’t matter whether I live or die. It doesn’t matter whether I am happy or miserable, rich or poor.

The sky and the earth do not care,  
 They regard the myriad things as straw dogs; . . . .<sup>15</sup>

This means that all efforts to make society more “just” are misguided. Attempts to free people from oppression will only make society worse. Taoism implies that “morality,” as we usually understand it, is a mistake. It criticized Confucius’s belief that “superior men” (an idea we’ll explain in detail later) could make improve society.

### *Naturalness*

In response, Taoism taught *naturalness*. The idea of naturalness can be understood with the help of some human prehistory. As far as we can tell, the earliest human communities were “hunter-gatherer” societies. They got food by hunting wild animals and collecting fruits that grew naturally, such as berries or nuts.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Tao Te Ching* 21, in *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Tao\\_Te\\_Ching#Chapter\\_5\\_\(第五章\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Tao_Te_Ching#Chapter_5_(第五章)), accessed January 6, 2020. According to this source, “straw dogs” were effigies used in sacrifices. In the ritual, they were treated “very seriously; but once the sacrifice” was over, they were treated “in a very casual way.”

About 11,000 years ago in the Middle East, some humans figured out how to domesticate wild grains. These grains eventually became our wheat, oats, and millet. *Cultivation* is an artificial condition. It permits communities to stay in one place and settle down. A group of people can plan on a crop. Because of the increased food supply, the group becomes larger. A larger community requires a more complex organization. It has to learn how to make decisions and find solutions for disagreements.

On the surface, this development might appear like “progress.” It is the beginning of civilization as we know it. But it also led to a brand new set of problems — the haves and have-nots, power-struggles, war, slavery, the rise of the domination of society by men.

*Tao Te Ching* said that a natural state of complete simplicity was better than an unnatural state of culture. It wanted small, self-contained communities. People shouldn’t travel, since knowledge of other communities encouraged greed and war. Simple farming met the basic needs of people without developing complex societies or sophisticated cultures. There wasn’t any need nor motivation for change. People remained content with their own customs and way of life.<sup>16</sup>

The Master leads by  
emptying people’s minds;  
filling their bellies,  
weakening their ambitions,  
and making them become strong.  
Preferring simplicity and freedom from desires,  
avoiding the pitfalls of knowledge and wrong action.<sup>17</sup>

Taoism and its principle of “naturalness“ suggests that if we give up our artificial demands for a “better life,” a higher standard of living, we would be happier. We only need rules of justice when we stop following the Tao, the natural path of life and reality. We only need morality when we create complex societies with competition and greed. “Righteousness” and “filial piety” are man-made efforts to control a man-made problem: human conflict. But human rules create more problems: hypocrisy, *pretending* to be good rather than *really* being good.<sup>18</sup>

If people followed the Tao, they would no longer fight for wealth or power. If all people lived naturally and without desires, we wouldn’t need wisdom. People would spontaneously follow the Tao. Societies would go with the flow of nature. Humanity would accept the limits of being human. Instead of trying to defeat death, it would accept the realities of suffering.

Even if one regards the *Tao Te Ching*’s solution as unrealistic, there is still something to be learned from the idea of naturalness. Too often we want something, thinking that it will make our life easier. But our desires are drawn into a spiral of ever-increasing greed and dissatisfaction.

A computer has become an essential tool in our lives today. (This book is being written on one.) It’s fun for a while, but the thrill wears out. One needs a new gadget to make it interesting.

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<sup>16</sup> Liu Xiaogan, “Taoism,” in *Our Religions*, p. 244. (Two texts explaining the theory behind “Taoist Government” are given below on pp. 88–9.)

<sup>17</sup> <http://tao-in-you.com/lao-tzu-tao-te-ching-chapter-16/>, accessed January 6, 2020. Trans. J. H. McDonald.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://tao-in-you.com/lao-tzu-tao-te-ching-chapter-18/>.

Maybe the latest operating system will help! But that demands more memory, a bigger hard drive, and a faster processor in the computer.

Originally, the purpose of the computer was to save time, but now one *spends* time to keep the machine running smoothly. One spends time on Facebook. One adds “interface” improvements, which conflict with other software. One spends hours tracking down and fixing the problem. And often the fix will be *another* program.

A similar example arises when both adults in the family go to work to earn more money. The result is that they pay more money for food, since eating lunch away from home is more expensive. In the place of inexpensive home-cooked meals, the family eats out more. The parents hire a baby-sitter for young children. Owners of large, lush lawns hire landscaping company to take care of them. Most of the money the parents hoped to save are used up in expenses that would have otherwise been unnecessary.

### *No-Thought (Wu-nian)*

If you can empty your mind of all thoughts  
 your heart will embrace the tranquility of peace.  
 Watch the workings of all of creation,  
 but contemplate their return to the source.  
 All creatures in the universe  
 return to the point where they began.  
 Returning to the source is tranquility  
 because we submit to Heavens mandate.  
 Returning to Heavens mandate is called being constant.  
 Knowing the constant is called ‘enlightenment’.  
 Not knowing the constant is the source of evil deeds [confusion]  
 because we have no roots.  
 By knowing the constant we can accept things as they are.  
 By accepting things as they are, we become impartial [like a king].  
 By being impartial, we become one with Heaven.  
 By being one with Heaven, we become one with Tao.  
 Being one with Tao, we are no longer concerned about  
 losing our life because we know the Tao is constant  
 and we are one with Tao.<sup>19</sup>

### *Non-Action*

If people live “naturally,” then how do they act? They act without desire or need. They act spontaneously. They follow the Tao, rather than their wants or reason. They act without attempting to accomplish anything.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://tao-in-you.com/lao-tzu-tao-te-ching-chapter-16/>, accessed January 6, 2020. Trans. J. H. McDonald. Bracketed phrases added by instructor.

The idea of *wu-wei* is usually translated “non-action.” But it is better understood as acting without desire, or acting without making an effort to reach some goal.<sup>20</sup> “Non-action” was the result of being “natural.” The motivation was the Tao, not some personal goal. So when “I” did something, it was really the Tao acting through me. I received neither credit or blame.

The person who engaged in non-action was nothing more than a small part of the great cosmic scheme. There wasn’t any element of “self” in her or his action. (See the beginning of the scriptural quotation under “No-Thought (Wu-nian),” on the previous page.)

From the viewpoint of the Tao, human beings are no different from animals or plants. All things follow their natural processes — birth, growth, production of new life or fruit, death, decay, and dissolution. So when you act, there is not really a *you*. The patterns of nature are acting *through* you. Just as lion instinctively pursues its prey or an animal uses defensive mechanisms to protect itself against being eaten, you respond immediately to the situation.

This implies that “You” are not responsible for “your” actions. Your “mind” reflects life, but doesn’t hold onto it. Non-action therefore leads to a self-lessness. You don’t force yourself or your will on anything else. You have no plans, no hopes, no fears, no wants, no desires. Whatever happens, happens. You can’t control the world, so why try?

Do you want to rule the world and control it?  
I don’t think it can ever be done.  
The world is sacred vessel  
and it cannot be controlled.  
You will only it make it worse if you try.  
It may slip through your fingers and disappear.  
Some are meant to lead,  
and others are meant to follow;  
Some must always strain,  
and others have an easy time;  
Some are naturally big and strong,  
and others will always be small;  
Some will be protected and nurtured,  
and others will meet with destruction.  
The Master accepts things as they are,  
and out of compassion avoids extravagance, excess and the extremes.<sup>21</sup>

When we try to grasp spiritual meaning by our own efforts, we lose it. Life, meaning, purpose, happiness — whatever name we give it — is only experienced by *not* trying to experience it. It is only as we surrender ourselves, our lives, our destinies to the Tao (or, God, the Buddha, Christ...) that we gain what we most want and desire — a full human life. According to Taoism,

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<sup>20</sup> Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*, paraphrases it as “‘active nonstriving’ (p. 179).”

<sup>21</sup> <http://tao-in-you.com/lao-tzu-tao-te-ching-chapter-29/>, accessed January 7, 2020. Trans. J. H. McDonald.

this is done through naturalness and acting without desire, without any personal effort on our part.

### *The only thing lasting is change*

There is only one way we know about the Tao. Experiences keep emerging out of its inexhaustible power and infinite depth. We know *something* is there, because we see its products (life in all of its variety). *If* we want to give it a name, we can call it “the Mother of all things.” But we will never discover what *is*.

Something unformed and complete  
Before heaven and earth were born,  
Solitary and silent,  
Stands along and unchanging,  
Pervading all things without limit.  
It is like the mother of all under heaven,  
But I don't know its name—  
Better call it TAO.<sup>22</sup>

The Tao is the constant process of life. The Tao does not change because the *fact of change* does not change. Experiences ebb and flow. Sometimes we are happy, and sometimes we are sad. Sometimes life is full of excitement and anticipation, and sometimes life is empty of zest. But “what goes around comes around.”

The energy that seems to fade one time will return another time. Indeed, the dark and empty experiences of life psychologically prepare us to experience the powerful experiences of life. Pain is the fuel of pleasure.

An example of this principle can be seen in people who win the lottery. They forget that is not *money* that brings excitement, but the *search for money*. Such people often end up being miserable. They have forgotten that the Declaration of Independence does not give us the right to “happiness,” but the “*pursuit* of happiness.”

Life is most full of happiness when we accept pain and loss. We need to see suffering as part of the Tao. The dark and the light sides go together. As we have seen, Yin (dark, femaleness, death) and Yang (light, maleness, life) go together. Yin requires Yang, and Yang requires Yin. When we understand this, we will stop trying to *change* life. We will simply *accept* it.

In other words, life becomes a problem only when we try to *stop* its infinite variety. According to Taoism, Confucianism made this mistake: it tried to *fix* things. In *Tao Te Ching*, the proper response is to simply *allow things to happen*.

### *Taoist Government*

If you overly esteem talented individuals,  
people will become overly competitive.

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<sup>22</sup>*Tao Te Ching* 25, trans. Addiss & Lombardo. In ancient religions of middle Eastern origin, this “formless” origin of everything was known as “chaos.” In Genesis 1, it was called “without form and void.”

If you overvalue possessions,  
 people will begin to steal.  
 Do not display your treasures  
 or people will become envious.  
 The Master leads by  
 emptying people's minds;  
 filling their bellies,  
 weakening their ambitions,  
 and making them become strong.  
 Preferring simplicity and freedom from desires,  
 avoiding the pitfalls of knowledge and wrong action.  
 For those who practice not-doing,  
 everything will fall into place.<sup>23</sup>

The more prohibitions you make,  
 the poorer people will be.  
 The more weapons you possess,  
 the greater the chaos in your country.  
 The more knowledge that is acquired,  
 the stranger the world will become.  
 The more laws that you make,  
 the greater the number of criminals.  
 Therefore the Master says:  
 I do nothing,  
 and people become good by themselves.  
 I seek peace,  
 and people take care of their own problems.  
 I do not meddle in their personal lives,  
 and the people become prosperous.  
 I let go of all my desires,  
 and the people return to the Uncarved Block.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <http://tao-in-you.com/lao-tzu-tao-te-ching-chapter-3/>, accessed January 6, 2020. Trans. J. H. McDonald.

<sup>24</sup> <http://tao-in-you.com/lao-tzu-tao-te-ching-chapter-57/>, accessed January 6, 2020. Trans. J. H. McDonald.

## 13. The Buddha



Hinduism (which you have studied previously in this course) has a special concern with order in the community. It accepts the ascetics who withdraw from normal society. But even then, it finds a way to make them a part of the social order. But Buddhism raises a very important question. Are the goals of an ordered society really important? Communities have rules because they want people to get along. Then everyone can be “happy.” But is happiness good? Is it a goal worth pursuing?

Buddhism says “no.” Happiness depends on desire. I want this person to like me, I want to get into a special college, or get that job, or get married. If I obtain these goals, then I will be “happy.” If I don’t get what I want, I feel unhappy. I might even become depressed or angry. Life’s disappointments lead to pain and suffering.

Buddhism provides a solution to suffering. The solution is inside each of us. Suffering is not caused by gods or devils. So we shouldn’t waste time asking them to help us. Suffering is not caused by the outside world. So we shouldn’t waste energy trying to change the world.

Suffering is caused by our own desires. If I can stop my desires — for money, sex, pleasure, or “fulfillment” — then I can stop suffering. According to one form of Buddhism, we ought to withdraw from everyday life, and stop our desires.

The ideal life is one of disciplined concentration as a monk. As we learn to control our thoughts, feelings, and innermost attitudes, we can stop all desire. As we stop desire, we gain — not happiness — but complete tranquility: peace of body, thoughts, and spirit.

For some Buddhists, this tranquility could be found in everyday life. For all Buddhists, agreed that true happiness was found in letting go of desires and ambition. Life is “emptiness.” Life has no ultimate purpose or meaning. There is no “real self” that we need to find.

The sooner we accept that this is the way reality is, the sooner we will find inner peace. This is the peace of “enlightenment.”

### *The Loss of Indian Community*

Around 600 B.C.E., India was going through a period of radical change. The old agricultural way of life was becoming more and more urbanized. Farmers and people who herded cattle for a living were being replaced by businessmen and traders.

The community, protection, and care of the clans and tribes was giving way to impersonal cities. A young person seeking his or her own way in life could easily get lost — physically, socially, and spiritually.

With the loss of tribal belonging went a loss of tribal rules and morality. How did a person act in such a cold and uncaring environment? Freedom brought moral chaos. A person could get away with a lot of injustice. People needed new moral guidelines in the midst of this chaos.

Because of the increase in business, more people became wealthy and could afford lives of ease and pleasure. But many people discovered, then as now, that pleasure did not answer life’s

fundamental questions or meet its deepest needs. If pleasure and satisfaction of the senses could not answer life's questions, then perhaps *denial* of pleasure could make one happy.

### *The Buddha, the Four Sights*

As we saw in "The Loss of Indian Community," India went through a rapid period of change and moral questioning about 2500 or 2600 years ago. It seemed that there were two basic alternatives to this crisis of character: surrender to pleasure, or total denial of pleasure.

Many of the *nouveau riche* ("new rich" — businessmen who had made a lot of money in the changing society) chose pleasure. In different ways, the Upanishads, the Jains, and other religious and moral people chose its opposite: denial of pleasure, extreme asceticism.

But asceticism did not always seem to work either. After all, the logical end of asceticism (as expressed in Jainism), was to do nothing, be nothing, to simply allow one's self to die rather than to harm others.

Is this really the way to good character? Doesn't this answer run away from the problem of our responsibility to the rest of life instead than facing it? Was there a path inbetween the extremes of complete pleasure and total self? The Buddha was a teacher who believed he had discovered the "middle way."

The Buddha began his life as prince named **Siddhartha Gautama**.<sup>25</sup> His early life was pampered and sheltered. According to traditional stories told later, his father did his best to shield Siddhartha from the facts of suffering, pain, disease, and death.

Once (according to these stories) when Siddhartha wanted to take a journey out to the forest, his father removed all the beggars, sick, and physically maimed people from the side of the road. But the gods made sure that Siddhartha saw three men, each representing a stage of suffering in life.

### *The First Three Sights*

THE palace which the king had given to the prince was resplendent with all the luxuries of India; for the king was anxious to see his son happy. All sorrowful sights, all misery, and all knowledge of misery were kept away from Siddhattha [Siddhartha], for the king desired that no troubles should come nigh him; he should not know that there was evil in the world.

But as the chained elephant longs for the wilds of the jungles, so the prince was eager to see the world, and he asked his father, the king, for permission to do so. . . .

There by the wayside they met an old man with bent frame, wrinkled face and sorrowful brow, and the prince asked the charioteer: "Who is this? His head is white, his eyes are bleared, and his body is withered. He can barely support himself on his staff."

The charioteer, much embarrassed, hardly dared speak the truth. He said: "These are the symptoms of old age. This same man was once a suckling child, and as a youth full of

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<sup>25</sup> "Gautama" was his family name and meant "of the lineage of Gotama." "Siddhartha" would be his "first name" (like Frank or Robert).

sportive life; but now, as years have passed away, his beauty is gone and the strength of his life is wasted.”

Siddhattha was greatly affected by the words of the charioteer, and he sighed because of the pain of old age. “What joy or pleasure can men take,” he thought to himself, when they know they must soon wither and pine away!”

And lo! while they were passing on, a sick man appeared on the way-side, gasping for breath, his body disfigured, convulsed and groaning with pain. The prince asked his charioteer: “What kind of man is this?” And the charioteer replied and said: “This man is sick. The four elements of his body are confused and out of order. We are all subject to such conditions: the poor and the rich, the ignorant and the wise, all creatures that have bodies are liable to the same calamity.”

And Siddhattha was still more moved. All pleasures appeared stale to him, and he loathed the joys of life.

The charioteer sped the horses on to escape the dreary sight, when suddenly they were stopped in their fiery course. Four persons passed by, carrying a corpse; and the prince, shuddering at the sight of a lifeless body, asked the charioteer: “What is this they carry? There are streamers and flower garlands; but the men that follow are overwhelmed with grief!”

The charioteer replied: “This is a dead man: his body is stark; his life is gone; his thoughts are still; his family and the friends who loved him now carry the corpse to the grave.” And the prince was full of awe and terror: “Is this the only dead man, he asked, or does the world contain other instances?”

With a heavy heart the charioteer replied: “All over the world it is the same. He who begins life must end it. There is no escape from death.”

With bated breath and stammering accents the prince exclaimed: “O worldly men! How fatal is your delusion! Inevitably your body will crumble to dust, yet carelessly, unheedingly, ye live on.” The charioteer observing the deep impression these sad sights had made on the prince, turned his horses and drove back to the city.<sup>26</sup>

For him, these were new realities. As he thought about them, he became more and more restless. Finally he decided to leave his comfortable life, his wife and daughter. He would discover the truth about life, and find answers to human suffering.

Gratification of the senses only brought restlessness and emptiness. The more one had, the more one wanted. The more one wanted, the more one felt disappointed by the things one had.

To solve this problem, he tried the way of extreme **asceticism**. He copied the lives of wandering pious men, who had no family, home, or money. These wandering ascetics (called *sramanas*) might have possessed a single tattered and dirty garment. Like a devoted Jaini monk, he was even willing to starve himself. (Old, disease, death, and *asceticism* are collectively known as the **four sights**.)

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<sup>26</sup> “The Three Woes,” trans., Paul Carus, *The Gospel of the Buddha: Compiled from Ancient Records* (Chicago: Open Court, 1894), at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/btg/btg07.htm>.

But it brought him no nearer to a solution of human suffering. Starvation also created restlessness and emptiness (an empty stomach, among other things!). So what was he to do? Siddhartha continued to meditate on his situation. He realized that inner peace did not come from an empty stomach.

True calm is properly obtained by the constant satisfaction of the senses. The mind's self-possession is only obtained when the senses are perfectly satisfied. True meditation is produced in one whose mind is self-possessed and at rest.<sup>27</sup>

By “constant satisfaction of the senses,” Siddhartha did not mean having anything one wanted (food, sex, excitement, etc.). He meant that the senses were satisfied with what they received. One didn't desire more pleasure than one had. One didn't rebel against the pain one experienced. One was “at rest.”

Inner peace — calm and serenity — is obtained through acceptance of the moment. The mind is in control of itself. Pleasure does not make one restless for more. One simply accepts what one experiences at the moment.

In the same way, pain doesn't really hurt if one simply accepts it. It comes and goes. The mind knows it is only temporary and will go just like it came. Suffering happens when one *focuses* on the pain, when one identifies it — “this hurts!” Then one begins to reject it, get angry at it. The sufferer wants to strike out at whatever is causing it. Suffering doesn't come from pain, but from *fighting against*, or *resisting*, pain.

As the Buddha thought about how to find this “true calm,” he discovered the **Middle Way**.

“There are two extremes, O bhikkhus, which the man who has given up the world ought not to follow—the habitual practice, on the one hand, of self-indulgence which is unworthy, vain and fit only for the worldly-minded and the habitual practice, on the other hand, of self-mortification, which is painful, useless and unprofitable.

. . . A middle path, O bhikkhus avoiding the two extremes, has been discovered by the Tathagata—a path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana! . . . Let me teach you, O bhikkhus, the middle path, which keeps aloof from both extremes. By suffering, the emaciated devotee produces confusion and sickly thoughts in his mind. Mortification is not conducive even to worldly knowledge; how much less to a triumph over the senses!”<sup>28</sup>

With this insight, Siddhartha was able to identify suffering. Since he knew what caused suffering, he knew how to stop it. Suffering came from desire. By stopping desire, he could stop suffering. When his desire ended, he would achieve **nirvana**, which means “extinguishment (like a candle being blown out).” If he achieved *nirvana*, then he would no longer be reincarnated into another life. He was free from **samsara** (the wheel of life).

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Philip Novak, ed., *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religion* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> “Sermon at Benares,” in Carus, *Gospel of the Buddha*, at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/btg/btg17.htm>.

Inconceivable is the beginning of this Samsara; not to be discovered is any first beginning of beings, who obstructed by ignorance, and ensnared by craving, are hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths. . . .

Which do you think is more: the flood of tears, which weeping and wailing you have shed upon this long way hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths, united with the undesired, separated from the desired—this, or the waters of the four oceans?<sup>29</sup>

When Siddhartha realized the truths that led to *nirvana*, he became **the Buddha**. This means “the Enlightened One.” He now knew the truths that led to the end of suffering, and could teach this enlightenment to others.

### *The Four Noble Truths*

These truths were explained as “the four noble truths.” The first truth is that **life is full of suffering**. If we are feeling pleasure, then we will feel pain when the pleasure stops. If we want something we cannot have, then that causes pain also.

The second truth is that suffering has a cause. (If we know the cause of suffering, then we can stop it.) **The cause of suffering is desire and “craving.”**<sup>30</sup> We want food, or sex, or fame or success. The constant need for more and more is what keeps us in the wheel of life (*samsara*).

the origin of suffering . . . is that thirst (or craving), causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there—that is to say, the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for (a future) life, or the craving for success (in this present life).<sup>31</sup>

Since the cause of suffering is this desire, the way to *get rid of suffering* is to stop the desire. Stop *wanting* something, and its absence will no longer cause you pain. Thus the *third* “noble truth”: **there is an end** (more formally called “extinguishment”) **to suffering**.

... the destruction of suffering . . . is the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst; the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, the harbouring no longer of this thirst.<sup>32</sup>

“Passion” means *any* emotion within a person that needs and wants something. Passion is that restlessness within us that continually reaches out for more. Passion is never satisfied, never gratified. Each new pleasure temporarily fills the appetite. But before long, the emotions want something more, something new, something fresh.

The Buddha’s insight was that if we can stop the desire, then we can stop the suffering that is caused by desire. And when we stop the desire and suffering, then we stop the cycle that keeps

<sup>29</sup> Nyantiloka, *The Word of the Buddha* (Kandy, Ceylon: Buddhist Publication Society, 1967), 16, 17 [at <https://www.urbandharma.org/pdf/wordofbuddha.pdf>].

<sup>30</sup> The word for “craving” is *tanha*, which literally means “thirst”.

<sup>31</sup> *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* 6, at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sbe11/sbe1104.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

sending us around in another life. It is the desire that results in new karma, and new karma leads to another life.

It is volition that I call "*Karma*" (action). Having willed, one acts by body, speech, and mind. . . . All beings are the owners of their deeds (*karma*), the heirs of their deeds: their deeds are the womb from which they sprang, with their deeds they are bound up, their deeds are their refuge. Whatever deeds they do—good or evil—of such they will be the heirs.<sup>33</sup>

So if one extinguishes desire (which then extinguishes suffering), one will not create any new karma. Extinguishing ("cessation of") desire gets rid of karma. Without karma, there is no self to be reincarnated.<sup>34</sup> When one reaches the goal of ending desire, and ending the cycle of reincarnation, one (like the Buddha) has achieved *nirvana* (in the Pali language this is translated "nibbana.")

This, truly, is Peace, this is the Highest, namely the end of all Karma formations, the forsaking of every substratum of rebirth, the fading away of craving. detachment, extinction, Nibbana. . . .

The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion: this, indeed, is called Nibbana.<sup>35</sup>

So how does one cease desire, craving, thirsting for more and more satisfaction? **The fourth "noble truth" is that *there is a way*.** This way is known as "**the Eightfold Path.**"

Truly, it is this Noble Eightfold Path, that is to say: Right views; Right aspirations; Right speech; Right conduct; Right livelihood; Right effort; Right mindfulness; and Right contemplation....<sup>36</sup>

This path is divided among three primary activities. First of all, the person who would gain nirvana must *think right*. One has to throw away one's old way of thinking, and take on a new view of reality. One's ideas ("views"), and mental framework ("aspirations") must show that he or she understands life in a new way.

Secondly, the person who aspires to nirvana must *act right*. Speech, actions, and the way one earns a living ("livelihood"), must be directed by one's new understanding.

Thirdly, he or she must make an "effort" to transform her or his inner character. This change begins with "mindfulness" — awareness of one's self. Although the Buddha rejected the harsh forms of asceticism practiced by the Hindu yogis and the Jains, he still believed that the only way to finally stop wanting and gain nirvana was by meditation.

<sup>33</sup> Nyantiloka, *Word of the Buddha*, 21, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Buddhism is a little different from Hinduism. According to Hinduism, it is the *self* or soul that is reincarnated. But as we will see below, according to Buddhism, there is no constant self. See below, §6. There is only the karma that is reincarnated as it seeks a new self to fulfill its desire. Once the desire is gone, the karma cannot create another self. The self lacks the willpower to continue to exist, and fades away like fog in the morning sun.

<sup>35</sup> Nyantiloka, *Word of the Buddha*, 25, 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* 7.

*“Mindfulness“ and Meditation*

Meditation is a practice of quieting the senses and focusing the mind on one’s inner being. As we saw in discussing the Upanishads, it usually begins by sitting quietly and stopping incoming sensations. The meditator becomes more and more aware of her or his own body and its basic operations.

A primary operation of the body is breathing, so the meditator will often simply focus on the pattern of “in and out” — inhalation and exhalation. Some Buddhists will walk back and forth in a straight line, concentrating on each step. This concentration is what the Buddha meant by “mindfulness.”

Whatever the technique, the purpose is to draw the mind and consciousness away from sensations and feelings. Sensations (beautiful sights, stirring music, pleasant smells) and feelings (enthusiasm, sexual desire, anger) are the things that keep us desiring and craving more. We reach nirvana by controlling ourselves. These sensations and feelings no longer move us or attract us.

It is good to tame the mind, which is difficult to hold in and flighty, rushing wherever it lists;<sup>37</sup> a tamed mind brings happiness.

Let the wise man guard his thoughts, for they are difficult to perceive, very subtle, and they rush wherever they list; thoughts well-guarded bring happiness.

.....  
If a man’s thoughts are not scattered, if his mind is not perplexed, if he has ceased to think of good or evil, then there is no fear for him while he is watchful.<sup>38</sup>

The constant restlessness of the human mind is clearly evident in our popular culture. TV and movies are specifically designed to show new images. The frame never stays at one spot very long. It is full of action, and constantly “cuts” from thing to another.

For Buddhism, this impatience and ceaseless motion is simply a way of meeting ever-changing desires. No wonder so many people in our society are confused, resentful, and full of fear for the future!

If this practice of “mindfulness” is continued long enough, eventually the meditator reaches contemplation. In contemplation, the meditator has no desire or needs. He or she is empty of feeling or passion. Contemplation is a state of total control of one’s physical and psychological responses to life.

...A wise monk...[practices] watchfulness over the senses, contentedness,....  
.....

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<sup>37</sup> “To list” comes from the idea of a sinking ship “listing” or inclining to one side (before it finally capsizes). It includes the idea of being naturally inclined to move in some direction, or to prefer to do something. In other words, the mind is naturally inclined to follow each passing thought.

<sup>38</sup> E. A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: Penguin Books, A Mentor Book, 1955, 1982), 55.

As the Vassika plant sheds its withered flowers, men should shed passion and hatred, O monks!

The monk whose body and tongue and mind are quieted, who is collected, and has rejected the baits of the world, he is called quiet.<sup>39</sup>

The practical implications of the Buddha's teachings here are similar to those of the Bhagavad Gita. While we must act, we must act without passion or desire. We are most productive in human society when we simply do the job that is given us.

On the other hand, greedy pursuit of our own personal happiness leads to anxiety, conflict and destructive emotions. We are never really happy with life. Our achievements seem empty, because we never get "enough" (enough prestige, enough power, enough money).

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<sup>39</sup> *Dhammapada* 25:375-377, trans. By Max Müller, *The Dhammapada, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 10 (Oxford University Press, 1881), as edited by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 97.

## 14. Buddhist Morality

### *The Early Buddhist Communities*

Because of the importance of meditation, early Buddhism was practiced by monks. Like the Hindu ascetics, Buddhism was a religion for men (and, to a lesser extent, women) who were willing to give up ordinary life.

Marriage, romance, affection, and sex were out of the question. All of these experiences required the passion that destroyed the possibility of achieving nirvana. The same was true of earning a living. A career needs ambition (to “get ahead in life”) and desire (to earn money, to get wealthy).

The first Buddhists were monks or nuns who spent their day in meditation. They did not grow their own food or earn money to buy it. They got their food by walking around and begging. A person who begs for food and lives on the alms people give her or him is known as a “mendicant.”

India’s climate is divided between the dry months and the rainy months (known as the “monsoon season”). Buddhist mendicants would wander during the dry months; but the rains made it difficult to travel. So they came together during the rainy season. Eventually these informal communities became formal monasteries.

A monastery is a community of monks or nuns who live together for emotional support and religious guidance. All of the Buddhist monasteries taken together were called the Sangha (“the community”).

With the formation of the Sangha, the last of the “**Triple Gem**” (also called the “Three-fold Jewel”) of Buddha was founded. The first of the Jewels was the Buddha. The second jewel was the Buddha’s teaching and doctrine, called “the Dharma.” The third jewel, the Sangha, was the community that lived by the Dharma.

I take refuge in the Buddha!  
I take refuge in the Dharma!  
I take refuge in the Sangha!<sup>40</sup>

So early Buddhism was primarily directed at people who gave up the routine joys and pleasures of life. They lived in the community of monks or nuns, and followed the Buddha’s teaching. Through meditation, they hoped to achieve what they considered to be the far greater bliss of passionlessness and contentment.

But what place did ordinary people have in Buddhism? After all, their everyday lives denied them the opportunity to pursue and hopefully achieve nirvana.

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<sup>40</sup> Robert C. Lester, *Buddhism: The Path to Nirvana*, Part Eight of *Religious Traditions of the World*, H. Byron Earhart, ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 857.

### *Morality for Lay Buddhists*

According to the Buddha, although lay Buddhists (people who were not monks or nuns) could not achieve nirvana, they could learn and practice basic moral discipline. This discipline was summarized as follows:

Let him not kill any living being, let him not take what has not been given [to him], let him not speak falsely, and let him not drink intoxicating drinks, let him refrain from unchaste sexual intercourse, and let him not eat untimely food at night. Let him not wear wreaths nor use perfumes, let him lie on a couch spread on the earth. ...Let him dutifully maintain his parents, and practice an honorable trade. The householder who observes this strenuously goes to the gods....<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the lay Buddhist was to abstain from anything that suggested or promoted unnecessary passion or desire. That is why it was forbidden to eat food at night. It was unnecessary food. Wreaths, perfumes, and fancy furniture were luxuries that served no useful purpose. They simply increased the wish to show off and indulge in expensive tastes.

Buddhists did not always consistently practice the command not to kill any living thing. Some Buddhists allowed it as long as one did not kill the animal one's self, and it was not killed specifically for one's own use.<sup>42</sup> The Buddha expanded this command as follows:

Let him refrain from hurting all creatures, both those that are strong and those that tremble.<sup>43</sup>

So the Buddha's primary concern was that his followers should not hurt anything else simply in order to make life easier or happier for one's self.

"Unchaste sexual intercourse" was any relations outside of marriage. While any form of sexual relations promoted passion, at least marriage disciplined that passion and kept it within bounds. Outside of those bounds, sexuality was a "burning heap of coals."<sup>44</sup> The fire of desire would consume one and burn one up.

But realist that he was, the Buddhist recognized that not all men could even reach this level of discipline. At the very least, however, he insisted that a man should not "transgress with another man's wife."<sup>45</sup> Presumably such a man could gratify his sexual needs through a prostitute or some other willing girl.

This paragraph comes after a paragraph that warns against stealing. One should not take anything that belongs to another. So adultery was especially wrong because one was getting sexual use and pleasure from a woman that belonged to another man. This implies that the Buddha went

<sup>41</sup> *Culavagga, Dammikasutta* 25-29, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 98.

<sup>42</sup> See the comments and texts in Wm. Theodore De Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China, & Japan*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1969), pp. 91-2.

<sup>43</sup> *Culavagga, Dammikasutta* 19, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 98.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

along with (although he may not have personally agreed with) the common view in ancient societies that a wife was a husband's property.

The Buddha also warned against alcoholic drinks:

For through intoxication stupid people commit sins.... Let him avoid this seat of sin, this madness, this folly.<sup>46</sup>

Drunkenness caused two problems. Drunken people did things they should not have done. Secondly, drunkenness caused people to do things they would not have done if they had stayed in their "right" mind. Alcoholic drinks kept people from being fully aware of their actions and thoughts. Only a person who was fully self-conscious was able to discipline her or his passions and curb her or his desires.

The Buddha also encouraged people to fast on several days each month, even if they could not do it to the same extent as monks or nuns. But the most important thing lay people could contribute to the Sangha, the larger Buddhist community, was to provide food for the monks.

On the surface, this might look like a selfish motivation. Since the monks (and nuns) couldn't grow or buy their own food, they had to get it from somewhere. So one might assume that the Buddha convinced lay people that they would be "blessed" (he called it "receiving merit") if they gave food to the monastic communities.

But in fact there was a genuine two-way relationship between the monks and the lay Buddhists. The lay Buddhists provided food and shelter (by building monasteries) for the monks. The monks provided religious rituals, moral teaching, and a cultural center for the community. In a time when life was routine and without a great deal of excitement, the monasteries provided a combination of education and entertainment (through their rituals and ceremonies).

In general, lay Buddhists were not expected to gain nirvana in their present life. (Only the monks could do that.) But by living right and providing for the monks, they hoped to gain "merit." With enough merit, they could hope to be born into a better life where they could gain nirvana.

Or even better, they might be born into the realm of the gods. (The only problem with that is that eventually the merit "wore out" and they would come back to earth.)

Monks spent a life of mental and moral discipline and meditation, and hoped to gain nirvana. Buddhists who were not ready to spend their lives in this way tried to live in accordance with basic moral guidelines and contribute to the physical needs of the monks. They hoped to gain merit that would either gain heaven or a better life in which they could pursue a more ideal life-style.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 24, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 98.

## *Nirvana*

As we have seen, nirvana meant extinguishing (putting out) desire and thereby putting out the karma that led to another life. If one no longer had karma, one was not reincarnated into another life.

What was the nature of nirvana? When Buddhism talked about nirvana's "bliss," what was it talking about? What did a person experience in nirvana? Nirvana was not the same as the prevalent western idea of heaven (influenced by Christianity).

Even though Buddhists continued to believe in the realm of the gods where one could achieve happiness, even that heavenly bliss would end. The "heaven" of Buddhism was gained by merit, and all merit eventually wore out. Then the person returned to earth, where they continued to have to work towards nirvana. Only nirvana could end the cycle of "the wheel of life" (samsara).

One can compare the wheel of life to the orbit of a spaceship around earth. Earth's gravity forces the spaceship to orbit it. But the spaceship can achieve "escape velocity." It gains enough speed to free itself from earth gravity and can fly through space.

Just like earth's gravity ties the space ship to earth, karma ties us to life. It keeps us in a body. (Karma is made by desire. Desires can only be met through a body. We need physical sensations to meet our wants.)

But nirvana is the "escape velocity" that finally breaks us free from the wheel of life. When we achieve nirvana, we are empty of desire. Our karma evaporates. Like moisture in the desert, it becomes gas or vapor. It is no longer strong enough to produce another body. Nirvana finally frees us from the boundaries of space, time, and personality.

Similarly, the goal of Buddhism is to become empty of desire and self, and thus avoid reincarnation into another life. Nirvana is the final refuge from the passions that twist human beings.

"For those who stand in the middle of the water, . . . in the formidable stream that has set in, for those overcome by decay and death, I will tell thee of an island, O Kappa. This matchless island, possessing nothing (and) grasping after nothing, I call Nibbâna, the destruction of decay and death.<sup>47</sup>

## *The Extinction of the Self*

Buddhism took this idea and carried it to its logical conclusion. In contrast to Hinduism's Atman, Buddhism held the doctrine (teaching) of anatta (also written "anatman"). "An-" means "no," and "-atman" of course comes from the Hindu word. So anatta meant that there was no self.

Buddhism said that the "self" was in fact an "aggregate" of temporary sensations. "Aggregate" implies a combination of different bits and pieces of stuff thrown together and mixed up.

The "self" is made up with bits and pieces of sense data. Right now my sensations are primarily focused on my computer screen and my ideas. In the background, my son is listening to TV. I

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<sup>47</sup> *Sutta-Nipâta*, 1092–93 at Sacred-Texts.com.

hear what sounds like a truck outside. A door is opening at this instant, and there are footsteps upstairs. I now hear my daughter and wife talking to each other. Even as I write, one set of sensations replaces another.

We naturally think that throughout these changing sensations there is something constant and unchanging — the self that senses all these things. But how do “I” know that? The only way “I” know about this supposed self is through the constantly changing sensations.

The Buddha taught that we are in fact ignorant of reality. Our ignorance creates the illusion of a self. This illusion brings pain and suffering.

The idea of ignorance is what gives the root to the huge poison-tree of mundane [ordinary] existence with its trunk of pain.<sup>48</sup>

As we have already seen, suffering comes from hanging onto the momentary sensation and making it last. We suffer when pleasure stops. We also suffer when we mistakenly believe that pain is real. But pain is only a temporary experience.

Suppose a man who was not blind beheld the many bubbles on the Ganges as they drove along, and he watched them and carefully examined them; then after he had carefully examined them they would appear to him empty, unreal and unsubstantial. In exactly the same way does the monk behold all the corporeal phenomena, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and states of consciousness—whether they be of the past, or the present, or the future, far or near. And he watches them, and examines them carefully; and, after carefully examining them, they appear to him empty, void and without a Self.<sup>49</sup>

The “I” is the illusion created by the enduring memory of past pain and the fear that it will return. If we let go of the hope for pleasure and the fear of pain, then self vanishes.

Let no man ever cling to what is pleasant, or to what is unpleasant... .

Let, therefore, no man be attached to anything; [if a man loves something,] loss of the beloved is evil. Those who are attached to nothing, and hate nothing, have no fetters.

From pleasure comes fear; he who is free from pleasure knows neither grief nor fear.<sup>50</sup>

If we desire something, then we want to get it. If we get it, then we want to keep it. If we lose it, we experience pain. The self is the sum total of our wishes and fears — desire to have or desire to avoid losing what we have.

But it is difficult to let go of the illusion of the self. According to Buddhism, we are bound to life and the illusion of the self by a chain of sensation and karma. A physical body has sensations, these sensations create desires, desires make us hold onto life.<sup>51</sup> The more we try to satisfy these

<sup>48</sup> *Buddhacarita* 16.36, trans. by Cowell, *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, ed. by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Nyantiloka, *Word of the Buddha*, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Burt, *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, 63.

<sup>51</sup> According to Buddhist teaching, there are twelve steps in the wheel of life. It begins with “ignorance” (of the Buddha’s teaching). Ignorance creates karma, and that leads to consciousness. (Another way of saying that is that

desires, the more karma we create. After death, that karma needs a way of satisfying its unfulfilled desires, and so it creates a new body.

If one can break any link in the chain, one can stop the wheel of life that takes us round and round and round.... The ties that bind us to our bodies will vanish. And without bodies and its accompanying sensations, there is no ongoing self.

These complex ideas can be explained by the following illustration. Let's say I taste two flavors of ice cream. I have a "sensation." I decide I like vanilla, but don't like chocolate. My sensations have resulted in desire. I desire vanilla, and desire to avoid chocolate.

As my desires multiply and grow stronger, I create a self. "I" become identified as someone who likes vanilla ice cream, hamburgers (but not, say, fish), corn (but not, say, broccoli), and so on.

**My "self" is the combination of all my accumulated likes and dislikes.**

You might protest: "I'm more than the combination of my tastes in food. I have an identity, a personality." Think carefully: subtract all your desires, your likes and dislikes, the things you try to achieve and the things you try to avoid or get rid of: preferences in dress, politics, musical styles, interests (e.g., auto mechanics or cooking) and activities (e.g., sports or music).

Take away all these attitudes and attachments. What is left of the "self?" The Buddha might well have been right: nothing. For many westerners, this is a scary idea. But for many Buddhists, this is exactly what they want to happen. They want to get rid of attachments, likes, and wants so that the self will disappear "into thin air."

So nirvana means: (1) the end (extinguishment or extinction) of desire, which leads to the end of suffering; (2) the end of karma; and (3) the end of the self as a separate entity. Generally speaking, this last step happens at death. Without desires or needs, there is nothing to create a new self in a body. The "self" can fly free in the cosmos, so to speak. It dissipates or empties into no-thing-ness. It is not-any-separate-thing.

By putting a stop to ignorance and what follows from it..., [he] thoroughly reaches at last to absolute thinness. Then he becomes blissfully extinct.<sup>52</sup>

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our past actions give us an identity or a history.) It is consciousness that forms or takes on a body that can sense things. In other words, without a body the consciousness cannot be *conscious of* anything. For a graphic representation and further explanation, see Lester, *Buddhism*, in *Religious Traditions of the World*, p. 907 and also pp. 904-908. I will give a diagram of this in the Lectures.

<sup>52</sup> Buddhacarita 16.43, trans. by Cowell, *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, ed. by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 90.

## 15. Two Ways of Being Buddhist

### *Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism*

As we saw earlier, the Buddhism founded by the Buddha was primarily designed to be lived out by monks and nuns. These people withdrew from the wider society and gave up the “ordinary” lives of marriage, family, and work.

Those people who were unwilling to undergo this rigorous life of self-denial blessed the monks and nuns by providing food and shelter. They were in turn blessed with good karma, religious education and moral guidance. But in general, they were not expected to live up to the highest ideals of Buddhist practice and morality.

This Buddhism was guided by the monasteries (communities of monks or nuns). These monasteries were ruled by the head monks. So it was called *Theravada* Buddhism. “Theravada” means “tradition of the *theras*.” The *theras* were the senior monks.

So Theravada Buddhism was a rigorously monastic Buddhism. The life of the monks and nuns was to be one of thorough self-discipline. Through asceticism, the monks and nuns hoped to break the chains of desire, and thereby achieve nirvana.

Theravada Buddhism is sometimes simply called “Conservative Buddhism,” since it is the traditional form of Buddhism, apparently taught by the Buddha and developed by the early monastic communities.

About the beginning of the common era (around the time that Jesus was born in Palestine), some Buddhists began to question this form of Buddhism. In the first place, they said, it was elitist. Why should ordinary people be excluded from the full practice of Buddhism?

This revised form of Buddhism emphasized that *everyone* was able to achieve enlightenment, not just the monks and nuns. It called itself *Mahayana* Buddhism. “Mahayana” means “the Great Vehicle,” or, in more colorful language, “the Big Ferryboat.” The “ferryboat” was based on the idea of taking a person across the river of life to nirvana.

Mahayana’s unflattering title for Theravada was *Hinayana*, “the Little Ferryboat.” Mahayana considered itself the “Big Ferryboat” since it could “hold” more people than Theravada. Theravada could only “carry” monks and nuns to enlightenment and nirvana. Mahayana believed it was capable of enabling everyone to achieve enlightenment. People didn’t need the difficult discipline of separation from everyday life.

### *“Samsara is Nirvana”*

As we have seen, Theravada believed that everyday life kept a person attached to passion and desire. How could a person who was married, had a family, and a job find the inner peace that came from complete detachment from people and things?

Mahayana said that Theravada was moving towards the goal in the wrong way. The goal of all Buddhism was to end suffering by ending selfish desire. But Theravada’s way of achieving that goal was itself *selfish* (at least that was what Mahayana thought).

Theravada Buddhists (monks or nuns) were supposed to be denying themselves. But they were still concerned about their own well-being — being without suffering. So even though they were

moving towards the extinction of self, they were still concerned about — the *self*. They were focused on the achievement of their own highest desire (the end of desire!). Mahayana Buddhism said they should have reached out and helped *others* to achieve this goal.

Mahayana said that the better way to achieve true enlightenment was to give up the preoccupation with one's *own* enlightenment. Enlightenment was still the ultimate goal. But it was better to work for the enlightenment of *everyone*.

In other words, the monks and nuns in the more traditional form of Buddhism thought only of themselves. Mahayana Buddhism thought that one ought to take the focus off of one's private enlightenment. One should rather see how one could help *others* achieve this greatest of goals.

But then what *was* nirvana? It wasn't the utter bliss of the monk or nun in the quiet of her or his meditation. So where was it to be found? Mahayana said that one didn't have to *reach* it. Everyone could experience nirvana wherever one was. This meant that there was really no difference between *samsara* (this life of pain and desire) and nirvana.

After all, what was nirvana? It was the achievement of "nothing." One got "there," only to discover it was "no where." It was no-thing. It could not be anything different from *samsara*, since it had no distinguishing characteristics. One didn't have to work hard to get to nirvana, since there was nowhere to go. Nirvana was here and now. One only had to know how to find it.

As is Nirvana so is Samsara  
Do not think there is any distinction.

.....  
Do not sit at home, do not go to the forest,  
But recognize mind wherever you are  
When one abides in complete and perfect enlightenment,  
Where is Samsara and where is Nirvana?<sup>53</sup>

In order to achieve enlightenment, you didn't need to stay at home (away from the hustle of work and the bustle of business). Nor did you need to go into the forest (like a monk or Hindu yogi). You didn't need to "achieve" it at. All you had to do was "abide" in enlightenment. It is already and always available to everyone. And what was this enlightenment?

"This is my self and this is another."  
Be free of this bond which encompasses you about,  
And your own self is thereby released.  
Do not err in this matter of self and other.  
Everything is Buddha without exception.  
Here is that immaculate and final stage,  
Where thought is pure in its true nature.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> From Saraha, *Dohakosa*, as translated by D. S. Snellgrove in Conze, *Buddhist Texts*, 238. Edited and presented by De Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition*, 121.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Enlightenment is the realization that there is no distinction between my self and yourself. There is no separation between me and you, between this and that. Everyone is one, “everything is Buddha.”

This was similar to the Hindu answer that “Atman is Brahman.” The true self was ultimate reality. The major difference was between Hinduism’s *Brahman* and Buddhism’s *Buddhahood*. Brahman was an eternal reality. Buddhahood was a process in which one continually realized that *nothing* had eternal existence.

So enlightenment was the recognition that all things share in the great process or movement of life. I dare not hold on to pleasure, since that may be someone else’s pain. I do not react to pain, since that is some other being’s pleasure.

The positive side of this viewpoint is that when I stop worrying about *my* pleasure and pain, life becomes bearable. When I am not focused on what *I* deserve, I don’t get angry at injustice or persecution. When I stop complaining that life is “unfair” (which it often is) I am emotionally free. I can accept life’s good things — those moments of joy that are experienced in family and friends, in hard work, in art, and so on.

From the typical western point of view, the down side is one we saw in Upanishadic Hinduism. This view would seem to do away with all moral distinctions. Terrorized and terrorizer, hater and hated, rich and poor are one. This idea is clearly stated in *Siddhartha*, a modern Western novel that retells the Buddha story.

...everything that exists is good — death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. Everything is necessary, everything needs only my agreement, my assent, my loving understanding; then all is well with me and nothing can harm me.<sup>55</sup>

### *The Bodhisattva*

According to Theravada (Conservative Buddhism), a person who experienced the bliss of nirvana in present life was an *arhat*: a fully perfected saint, someone who was in total control of her or his passions and sensations.

But according to Mahayana, instead of entering into nirvana, one should turn around. Instead of becoming an arhat, one voluntarily surrender this last goal (just as one was about to achieve it). Instead of seeking to reach one’s own nirvana, it was better to help *others* reach the bliss of enlightenment.

Mahayana compared the arhat (the ideal or goal of the monk or nun) to a firefly that only gave off light for itself.

....A firefly...doesn’t imagine that its glow will light up all India or shine all over it, and so the disciples and private buddhas don’t think that they should lead all beings to Nirvana...after they have gained full enlightenment.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Hilda Rosner (New York: Bantam Books, 1951, 1972), 144.

<sup>56</sup> From *Pancavimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita*, pp. 40-41, edited by De Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition*, p. 82.

The “disciples” were people who followed the traditional Theravada teachings. The “private buddhas” were those who reached enlightenment only for themselves. They didn’t give any thought to communicating it to others. According to Mahayana, the *arhats* said they were letting go of the self but were really selfish. The *arhat* kept the truth of enlightenment to herself or himself instead of sharing it with others.

A person who took the vow to help others achieve enlightenment was a *bodhisattva*. The bodhisattva gave up his own enlightenment so that others could know it. He or she was guided by a spirit of compassion for other beings, that they might be freed from suffering and pain.

[The Bodhisattva says:] ...I must save the whole world from the forest of birth, old age, disease, and rebirth.... For all beings are caught in the net of craving, encompassed by ignorance, held by the desire for existence; they are doomed to destruction, shut in a cage of pain...;....

I care not at all for my own deliverance. I must save all beings from the torrent of rebirth with the raft of my omniscient mind. I must pull them back from the great precipice. I must free them from all misfortune, ferry them over the over the stream of rebirth.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to the image of the self-centered firefly in the earlier quotation, the bodhisattva was like the sun. He or she was more concerned with the well-being of others than her or his own release in the bliss of nirvana.

But the disc of the sun, when it has risen, lights up all India and shines all over it. Similarly the bodhisattva...when he has gained full enlightenment, brings countless beings to Nirvana.<sup>58</sup>

So the bodhisattva was motivated by a spirit of compassion for all living things (“sentient beings” — beings that are able to sense and perceive). The compassion of the bodhisattva was the Mahayana way of saying that its holy men and women should be concerned with others rather than themselves.

Compassion was concern that all should reach enlightenment. And enlightenment, as we have seen, was rising above the needs of self. So Buddhist compassion meant that Buddhist holy men and women would put the enlightenment of others ahead of their own final nirvana.

### *Other-Power and Self-Power*

The best we can tell, the historical Buddha taught that one reached nirvana by one’s own efforts. This ideal of helping *others* to reach enlightenment was new.

In the earlier Buddhist view, the gods could not help, since they had achieved their status in heaven by good karma. Since they were trapped by their *own* karma, they could not help *others* escape karma. Their karma would eventually wear out and send them back to a this-worldly existence. (The same thing would happen to any human who achieved heaven.)

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<sup>57</sup> From *Siksamuccaya*, pp. 278-83, edited by De Bary, *Buddhist Tradition*, pp. 84, 85.

<sup>58</sup> From *Pancavimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita*, pp. 40-41, edited by De Bary, *Buddhist Tradition*, p. 82.

So according to Theravada, one achieved enlightenment through *self-power*. Nirvana was, as we have seen, reached through rigorous self-denial and discipline of one's body and spirit. No one could do it for you. You had to do it for yourself.

Therefore, O Ânanda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the truth. Look not for refuge to any one besides yourselves. And how, Ânanda, is a brother to be a lamp unto himself, a refuge to himself, betaking himself to no external refuge, holding fast to the truth as a lamp, holding fast as a refuge to the truth, looking not for refuge to any one besides himself? Herein, O Ânanda, let a brother, as he dwells in the body, so regard the body that he, being strenuous, thoughtful, and mindful, may, whilst in the world, overcome the grief which arises from bodily craving--while subject to sensations let him continue so to regard the sensations that he, being strenuous, thoughtful, and mindful, may, whilst in the world, overcome the grief which arises from the sensations--and so, also, as he thinks, or reasons, or feels, let him overcome the grief which arises from the craving due to ideas, or to reasoning, or to feeling.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast, Mahayana said that one was saved by *other-power*. It did not require any hard effort to achieve enlightenment. All one had to do was to hear the message of the Buddha and believe it.

Whoever...shall hear this ... [teaching] and after hearing, if only a single stanza, joyfully accept it, even with a single rising thought, to those also, Bhaishajyârâga, be they young men or young women of good family, I predict their destiny to supreme and perfect enlightenment.<sup>60</sup>

The youth "of good family" were laypeople. In Theravada, these people were generally thought to be incapable of nirvana. But this Buddhist text assured them that even their simple devotion and mental commitment was sufficient to achieve "perfect enlightenment."

So in order to achieve enlightenment, one didn't have to conquer one's desires. One didn't have struggle with one's self until it was extinguished. Rather enlightenment was the result of religious belief and practice.

...Those who shall take, read, make known, recite, copy, and after copying always keep in memory...but a single stanza of this teaching;...who shall worship that book with flowers, incense, perfumed garlands, ointment, powder, clothes, umbrellas, flags, banners, music, etc., and with acts of reverence such as bowing and joining hands...I predict their destiny of supreme and perfect enlightenment.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Mahâ-Parinibbâna-Suttanta*, ch. 2, § 33–34 at Sacred-Texts.com.

<sup>60</sup> *Saddharma-pundarika Sutra* 10.1, trans. By H. Kern, *The Saddharma-pundarika, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 21 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884), p. 213, as edited by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 94.

<sup>61</sup> *Saddharma-pundarika Sutra* 10.1, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 95.

In other words, enlightenment by *other-power* meant that one was “saved” from the results of bad karma by believing in the Buddha and trusting in the compassion of the bodhisattvas. Enlightenment was no longer the result of hard work, it was the result of faith.

We see that Mahayana Buddhism emphasized “other-power.” It said that enlightenment was achieved through dependence on the Buddha and the compassion bodhisattvas (who had taken a vow to bring all things to enlightenment). This belief meant that the difficult self-denial of the monks and nuns was less important.

### *The Buddha as Teacher and as Divine*

“Other-power” also led to another change in emphasis. In the older (“Theravada”) Buddhism, after the Buddha had reached nirvana, he was no longer a person in any normal sense of the word. Since he had finally been enlightened about the true nature of his self (that it was really nothing), his karma had vanished. When he died, his identity disappeared in the infinite cosmos.

The Sangha (the Buddhist community) still had his teaching, but the Buddha *as a person* was unimportant. Theravada didn’t believe that you could pray to the Buddha, since there was nothing to pray to. The Buddha couldn’t help you, since “he” didn’t “exist.”

But according to Mahayana, the Buddha was an eternal source of compassion and enlightenment. The Buddha had actually achieved enlightenment in some infinite past. But because human beings were so stubborn and dense, he tried many different ways to tell his teaching. Each of these different ways was called a “vehicle.”

Each vehicle was communicated by a Buddha in a different age of the world. The “Shakyamuni” Buddha (“the Sage of the Shakyas Tribe” — the historical Buddha’s tribe) was simply the Buddha who had appeared in one particular place and time.

In other words, the Mahayana Buddha was the eternal source of compassion and enlightenment for all who believed in him. As one prayed to the Buddha and sought his guidance, one gained the “Buddha-nature.”

...Today I have been born into the Buddha-family and I am now a Buddha-son. ... Now I invite the world to Buddhahood, and, incidentally, to happiness.<sup>62</sup>

As we have seen, this “Buddhahood” was the spirit of enlightenment that found the unity of the self in all things. To be a “Buddha-son” meant that one lived ultimately for in the awareness that true bliss was present here and now. By worshipping the Buddha, one could lay aside the false ideas that tied one to passions and selfishness.

This new emphasis meant that the Buddha had actually become divine. The Buddha was no longer simply a long-dead teacher. His spiritual presence showed people that all the ideas and attitudes that cause pain are empty and not worth following. His continuing compassion helped people break free from their self-centeredness and find peace in reality as it is.

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<sup>62</sup> *Religions of Asia*, John Y. Fenton, et. al., eds., 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 125, quoting Marion Matics, *Entering the Path of Enlightenment* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 156.

## 16. Confucianism



### *The Setting of Confucius*

One of the first thinkers to build on these general ideas was the philosopher Confucius. Confucius emphasized that “filial piety” was the fundamental building block of a harmonious society.

In Chinese, Confucius’ name was “K’ung Fu–tzu,” which means “Master Fu.” He is believed to have died in 479 B.C.E. According to the usual calculations, the Buddha had died only a year before in India.

Moreover, in this very year in Greece, the powerful Persian empire were defeated by the freedom-loving Greeks. This was the beginning of the “golden age” of Athens, the creation of democratic ideals, and the rise of the philosophers that we will read about in Part II. Also around this time, a small group of Hebrews returned from Babylonian exile to Jerusalem, and began to create Judaism.

So this was a very important time in human history. There were so many significant changes in religion, philosophy, and culture between about 600 and 400 B.C.E. that historians have come to call it “the axial age.” (“Axial” refers to “axis.” It was as if history “turned around on” its axis during this time.)

People realized that it was not enough to depend on the traditions that their own culture or ethnic group had developed. People needed to act based on clear moral standards. Ethics and the study of character began during this time. Scholars and wise people used a combination of religious tradition and critical human reason to discuss: “what are the standards for good human character?”

Confucius (like the Hindus, Greeks, and Hebrews) lived during a time of confusion and upheaval. The earliest Chinese dynasty was the Shang dynasty. According to some calculations, it ruled for four hundred years. In 1122 B.C.E., it was followed by the Chou (pinyin: Zhou) dynasty. The Chou believed in “Heaven” (“T’ien”/“Tian”) and the Tao. During this dynasty, ancestor rituals became more complex.

About two hundred years before Confucius was born, the Chou dynasty was destroyed by invaders and rebellious groups within China. The chaos led to the “age of the hundred philosophers.” Thinkers tried to figure out what had gone wrong and how it could be fixed. Confucius believed that the Chou was a model of good government when order reigned. He wanted to restore the unity and wisdom that it stood for.

### *Filial Piety*

Confucius began with the ancient Chinese concern with one’s ancestors. A good society was formed when each person respected one’s superiors. However, Confucius came to believe that people should have been less concerned about one’s ancestors in the spiritual world. Rather, true filial piety was concerned about relationships here and now.

Tzu-yu asked about being filial. The Master [Confucius] said, ‘Nowadays for a man to be filial means no more than that he is able to provide his parents with food. Even hounds and horses are, in some ways, provided with food. If a man shows no reverence, where is the difference.’<sup>63</sup>

### *Sayings on Filial Piety*

“Let there be a careful attention to perform the funeral rites to parents, and let them be followed when long gone with the ceremonies of sacrifice;—then the virtue of the people will resume its proper excellence.”<sup>64</sup>

Soon after, as Fan Ch’ih was driving him, the Master told him, saying, “Mang-sun asked me what filial piety was, and I answered him,—‘not being disobedient.’”

Fan Ch’ih said, “What did you mean?” The Master replied, “That parents, when alive, be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety.”

Mang Wu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “Parents are anxious lest their children should be sick.”

Tsze-yu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “The filial piety nowadays means the support of one’s parents. But dogs and horses likewise are able to do something in the way of support;—without reverence, what is there to distinguish the one support given from the other?”

Tsze-hsia asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “The difficulty is with the countenance.”<sup>65</sup>

Animals can “help” their parents. But animals do not (so far as we can know) develop inner attitudes of “reverence” (hsiao, “piety”). Almost all religious traditions recognize the difference between doing external actions by rote and doing actions out of a heart of sincerity and true commitment. (This seems to have been one of the universal insights of the “axial age.”) In other words, it is not enough do religious actions, one must develop a religious spirit and attitude. A child should assist and provide for his parents with a respectful attitudes.

### *“Li”: Rituals, Propriety, Social Custom*

How could one develop this inner attitude of respect towards parents and those who had authority in society? Confucius believed that rituals created social order. This idea was called *li*. *Li* is usually translated “propriety.” “Propriety” means to “be proper,” to act appropriately in any situation. Since a person who acts properly has good manners, *li* also implies the development of proper manners. A person with propriety knows how to act wherever he or she is.

In other words, Confucius believed that good manners were formed by public ritual. Rituals enabled everyone to find her or his place in the community. It created the proper relationship

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<sup>63</sup> *Analects*, II.7, translated with an introduction by D. C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1979).

<sup>64</sup> *Analects*, 1 [.9], trans., James Legge at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/conf1.htm>. This digitized version does not provide verse numbers. I give them in brackets so the student can consult other translations.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 [.5-.8].

between people. Through ceremonies one learned to be respectful to one's parents and other people in positions of authority.

The basic idea behind *li* is the following. Through years of experience, parents and leaders learn what works. They also learn that certain actions have destructive consequences. But in every generation, the natural drives and energies of adolescence make young people believe that they know better than their parents.

Some of the drive that adolescence brings is good. Change keeps culture from stagnating. But sometimes this drive for change gets out of hand. Endless change makes people forget how to be civilized. Confucius emphasized that ritual was based on past custom.

The Master said, “[The] Chau [dynasty] had the advantage of viewing the two past dynasties. How complete and elegant are its regulations! I follow Chau.”<sup>66</sup>

The earlier rulers did not have complete guidelines. But Confucius believed that the Chau [=Chou] dynasty had all the resources one needed to govern and guide society in a civilized way. To be “civil-ized” is to be “civil,” to be considerate of others. Without civilization, humans deteriorate into animals. Without discipline, the human community “goes to the dogs.” Each person does what he or she wants to do, rather than what is best for the entire community.

According to Confucius, ritual taught people how to act towards each other. Public ceremonies helped people to understand that the good of the community is ultimately more important than personal satisfaction. By participating in ritual, one gave up one's private needs and became a part of the whole community. In a very real way, ceremonies created society. They transformed humans from animals into human beings.

### *Rituals make a good community*

Although Confucius' ideal society was hierarchical, it was not authoritarian.

Lead the people with legal measures and regulate them by punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honor and shame. Lead them with the power of virtuous example (*de*) and regulate them by the rules of *li*, and they will have a sense of shame and will thus rectify themselves.<sup>67</sup>

Rulers can force the people to do the right thing out of fear. But according to Confucius, people ought to want to obey the law, simply because it's the law. To apply Confucius' idea to a modern day setting, he believed we ought to obey the speed limit (for example) because that is our duty, not because we are afraid of getting caught.

People ought to be motivated by “honor and shame,” not by fear. To put those ideas into modern terms, people ought to be guided by integrity and self-esteem. We should obey the law because our “sense of self-worth” will not allow us to be disobedient. We would feel bad (“shame”). We

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 3 [.14].

<sup>67</sup> *Analects*, 2.3, quoted in *Religions of Asia*, ed., Fenton et. al., 169.

would feel that we have betrayed our proper place in the community (we would have “dishonored” ourselves or our family).

The right rituals, *li*, had three basic meanings. First was public ritual. Civic ceremonies helped everyone to find their place in society. Confucius wanted a place for everyone and everyone in her or his place. Life and society was harmonious because you knew who you were, where you belonged, what you were supposed to do, and how you related to everyone else in your community.<sup>68</sup>

Secondly, *li* meant good manners and etiquette—as simple as don’t interrupt a conversation between two other people, or good table manners. Etiquette helps us to get along with other people, without thinking too hard. We just know how we should act.

Thirdly *li* meant guidelines for social interaction. How do you react in a stressful situation? What sort of behaviors should you regularly cultivate?

“Unless a man has the spirit of the rites [*li*], in being respectful he will wear himself out, in being careful he will become timid, in having courage he will become unruly, and in being forthright, he will become intolerant.”<sup>69</sup>

Confucius believed that if people were to discipline themselves, their rulers also had to be disciplined. Leaders were to lead by the power of their own “virtuous example.” As people participated in the public rituals (*li*), their lives would be transformed and “rectified” (made right).

### *Benevolence*

By having the proper relationship towards other people in one’s community, one could become a “superior man.” A superior man was a man (women were not encouraged to develop these skills) who guided all of his actions by “benevolence.”

The Master said, “A youth, when at home, should be filial, and away from home he should be respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, cultivate the friendship of good people. When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should employ them in the arts.”<sup>70</sup>

A “superior man,” (*chun-tzu*) literally meant “prince’s son.” In all societies and all cultures, the upper classes have been the first to benefit from education and moral insights. Originally, the good life was a life of leisure in which the gentleman (the western equivalent of the *chun-tzu*) could read books, enjoy the arts, and think about life.

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<sup>68</sup> The word “regulate” in the phrase, “regulate them by the rules of *li*” means “kernels of wheat filling the ear evenly. This...conveyed...a single and concise image: kernels regularly and predictably filling their assigned space in an assigned pattern, over and over”: *Religions of Asia*, Third edition, eds., Fenton and Miller, 169.

<sup>69</sup> *Analects* VIII.2, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

<sup>70</sup> *Analects*, 1.6, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 177–78.

But Confucius, like most great moral thinkers, realized that real moral superiority was not a result of one's social class but of inward growth and discipline. This discipline included respect of one's elders, sincerity and truthfulness, training and practice of the arts, and benevolence — concern for other human beings.

“Benevolence” is a translation of *ren* (sometimes spelled “jen”). Some other translations are “humaneness” (having the feelings proper to every human being), “fellow feeling” (compassion or sympathy), and “virtue” (a state of good moral character).<sup>71</sup>

In other words, *ren* means being a human being, instead of an animal driven by brute instincts. It means being able to put yourself in another person's shoes and feeling what he or she feels. This leads to the Confucian version of the Christian “Golden Rule”:

Tzu-kung asked, ‘Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life?’ The Master said, ‘It is perhaps the word “shu” [= reciprocity]. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.’<sup>72</sup>

Since not everyone can be rich, being good does not require wealth. A truly humane person realizes that “the good life” is not a result of money or power. A good life is the result of “being good.”

The Master said, “Those who are without virtue [*ren*] cannot abide long either in a condition of poverty and hardship, or in a condition of enjoyment. The virtuous rest in virtue; the wise desire virtue.”

The Master said, “It is only the truly virtuous man, who can love, or who can hate, others.”

The Master said, “If the will be set on virtue, there will be no practice of wickedness.”

The Master said, “Riches and honors are what men desire. If they cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and meanness are what men dislike. If they cannot be avoided in the proper way, they should not be avoided. If a superior man abandon virtue, how can he fulfill the requirements of that name? The superior man does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to virtue. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it.”<sup>73</sup>

It is better to be poor and “good” than rich and “bad.” If one has to cheat or lie in order to become rich, then one should not become rich. If one can avoid poverty only by stealing or hurting people, then it is better to remain poor. A poor person who helps others and works at living a moral life is “superior” to a rich person who thinks only about herself or himself.

However, morality was not meant to be drab or boring. “Benevolence” or “virtue” (*ren*) included practicing the things that gave life beauty and enjoyment.

The Master said, “Let the will be set on the path of duty.

“Let every attainment in what is good be firmly grasped.

<sup>71</sup> Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*, 178.

<sup>72</sup> *Analects* XV.24, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

<sup>73</sup> *Analects*, 4 [.2–.5], trans., Legge at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/conf1.htm>.

“Let perfect virtue be accorded with.

“Let relaxation and enjoyment be found in the polite arts [i.e., in culture].”<sup>74</sup>

A human being is not only someone who feels for others, he or she is someone who appreciates beauty and art. A good life is a life that embraces all those things that make us aware that life is beautiful. It is worth living to the full. Confucianism has always emphasized the value of education and humanistic studies.

### *The “Superior Man“*

The ideal person was well-trained in the arts — ritual, music, dance, and calligraphy — and had studied ancient texts. He<sup>75</sup> was a “well-rounded” person. That is, he did not specialize in anything, but was experienced in all aspects of human culture.

Here Confucius expressed the elitist, aristocratic origins of all culture. Art is only possible where there is free time. Free time is made possible by material prosperity. In all societies before the nineteenth century capitalistic west, material prosperity was created either by slaves or peasants. One can see this elitism in the following text:

Fan Ch'ih requested to be taught husbandry [farming]. The Master said, “I am not so good for that as an old husbandman [farmer].”<sup>76</sup>

If one wanted to learn a practical trade like farming (or in modern terms) carpentry, or auto mechanics, then one should go to a farmer, carpenter, or mechanic. The “superior man” didn’t specialize in any one thing. His job was not to provide material prosperity. His job was to give moral and educational leadership to society.

Fan Ch’ih having gone out, the Master said, “A small man, indeed, is Fan Hsu! If a superior man love propriety, the people will not dare not to be reverent. If he love righteousness, the people will not dare not to submit to his example. If he love good faith, the people will not dare not to be sincere. Now, when these things obtain, the people from all quarters will come to him, bearing their children on their backs; what need has he of a knowledge of husbandry?”<sup>77</sup>

But Confucius was not saying that the “superior man” should live a life of ease:

The Master said, ‘The gentleman seeks neither a fully belly nor a comfortable home. He is quick in action and cautious in speech. He goes to me possessed of the Way to be put right. Such a man can be described as eager to learn.’<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 7 [.6].

<sup>75</sup> In Confucius’ time, and for all of Chinese history, this ideal person was male, not female. As in the west, the female’s job was to complement and support the male by being faithful in her domestic tasks.

<sup>76</sup> *Analects*, 13 [.4], trans. Legge at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/conf1.htm>, accessed January 7, 2020. Words in brackets added by instructor.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> *Analects* I.14, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

The ideal person, then, was someone who lived simply and without luxury. True learning was not a way of “getting ahead in life,” or living a comfortable middle–class lifestyle. The “superior man” learned in order to discipline himself. He continually “criticized” his behavior and worked to improve it. He judged his life on the basis of “principle.” He based his life on unchanging moral convictions.

*Sayings on the “Superior Man”*

The Master said, “it is not the failure of others to appreciate your abilities that should trouble you, but rather your failure to appreciate theirs.”<sup>79</sup>

The Master said, “With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and my bended arm for a pillow;—I have still joy in the midst of these things. Riches and honors acquired by unrighteousness, are to me as a floating cloud.”

The Master said, “When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them.”<sup>80</sup>

The Master said, “The superior man in everything considers righteousness to be essential. He performs it according to the rules of propriety. He brings it forth in humility. He completes it with sincerity. This is indeed a superior man.”

The Master said, “The superior man is distressed by his want of ability. He is not distressed by men’s not knowing him.”

The Master said, “The superior man dislikes the thought of his name not being mentioned after his death.”

The Master said, “What the superior man seeks, is in himself. What the mean man seeks, is in others.”

The Master said, “The superior man is dignified, but does not wrangle. He is sociable, but not a partisan.”

The Master said, “The superior man does not promote a man simply on account of his words, nor does he put aside good words because of the man.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., I.16.

<sup>80</sup> *Analects*, 7 [.16, .22], trans., Legge at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/conf1.htm>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 15 [.18–.23].

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