The Common Humanity in Ancient World Religions: An Analytical Study in Building Bridges of Understanding between Civilizations a Case Study of Western Asia

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Abstract

This study investigates the shared humanitarian concepts found in the major religious traditions of Western Asia, including Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Zoroastrian, Judaic, Christian, and Islamic beliefs. It focuses on the themes of divine justice, mercy, moral responsibility, and the afterlife, analyzing how these religions shaped societal norms and fostered inter-civilizational understanding and through a comparative examination of religious texts such as the Torah, the Bible, the Quran, the Avesta, and ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions like the Code of Hammurabi and the Epic of Gilgamesh, the study reveals the continuity and evolution of ethical principles across different eras and cultures. While emphasizing divine justice and the moral responsibility of individuals, these traditions also advanced concepts of compassion and equality, contributing to the foundation of modern ethical systems.

Keywords: Western Asia, Comparative Religion, Divine Justice, Ancient Religions

Introduction

The study of common humanity in the religious traditions of the ancient world is integral to understanding the development of civilizations and the ways in which these cultures interacted, communicated, and influenced one another and in the ancient Near East, particularly in Western Asia, early religious systems played a foundational role in shaping the moral and ethical frameworks of societies and these religious systems, while diverse in their beliefs and practices, often shared key themes that reflect a common human experience and a shared understanding of justice, morality, and the divine and the area of Western Asia—comprising the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Persia, Anatolia, the Levant, and Arabia—served as a crossroads of human development, where various religious traditions emerged, interacted, and influenced one another over millennia(Kirby,2018).

From the rise of Sumerian religious thought around 3000 BCE in Mesopotamia to the spread of Zoroastrianism in Persia, the religious traditions of Western Asia provided foundational concepts that transcended individual cultures (Borgolte,2019). Ancient Mesopotamian religions, such as those of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, were polytheistic and deeply intertwined with the state and daily life, offering divine sanction for kingship and law and the epic tales of the Gilgamesh cycle, for example, reflect themes of human mortality, divine intervention, and the pursuit of meaning, which resonate with later religious philosophies.(Araújo,2024)

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In the Levant, the emergence of Judaism around the 2nd millennium BCE introduced monotheism, a radical departure from the polytheistic beliefs of neighboring civilizations and the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, emphasized a personal, covenantal relationship between the people and a singular God, introducing ethical laws that underpinned not only religious practices but also societal governance and the ethical monotheism of Judaism laid the groundwork for later religious developments, particularly in the context of Christianity and Islam, two major world religions that arose in the same region(De Sondy,2020).

Persian religious thought, particularly Zoroastrianism, founded by the prophet Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) in the 6th century BCE, introduced ideas about the dualistic nature of existence, the struggle between good and evil, and the ultimate triumph of justice(Sholevar,2024). Zoroastrianism profoundly influenced the religious and philosophical outlook of neighboring cultures, including Judaism, and was one of the first to propose a systematic eschatological view of the world(De Jong,2015). Its emphasis on the moral responsibility of individuals and the universal struggle for righteousness echoed across the ancient world and provided a conceptual framework for later Abrahamic religions.

Meanwhile, the Arabian Peninsula saw the emergence of Islam in the 7th century CE, which built upon the monotheistic traditions of Judaism and Christianity and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad emphasized the unity of humanity under one God, transcending ethnic and national divisions(Andre,2009) and islam's message of universal brotherhood, social justice, and compassion for all human beings reflected the growing desire for inter-civilizational unity that had been cultivated through centuries of religious dialogue and exchange in the region and this analytical study focuses on the religious traditions of Western Asia, examining how shared themes of common humanity were expressed across various cultures and faiths and by exploring the overlapping moral teachings, ethical norms, and divine principles that arose from these traditions, we can better understand how these ancient belief systems facilitated the development of bridges between civilizations and these religious traditions not only shaped the cultural and spiritual landscapes of their respective societies but also promoted a shared vision of human dignity, social justice, and divine law that transcended borders and laid the groundwork for future interfaith dialogues and through this exploration, it becomes clear that the ancient religious systems of Western Asia were not isolated or monolithic but rather interconnected and mutually influential, fostering an environment of cultural exchange that would echo through the centuries and this historical analysis highlights the common humanity that bound these ancient traditions together, offering insights that remain relevant in our contemporary quest for understanding and cooperation across different cultures and faiths.

Literature Review

Religions in the West Asian region are considered among the most important factors that contributed to shaping the religious and cultural history of humanity and through religions, humans have been able to develop moral and spiritual concepts that build bonds between different societies and civilizations and by studying the development of religions in this region, we can see how the common values that appeared in these religions helped build bridges of understanding and communication between different civilizations and the Sumerian religion is considered one of the oldest religions that appeared in the West Asia region, where the worship of many multiple gods was An essential part of daily life(Khatun, 2023) and the Sumerian gods represented the natural forces that controlled various aspects of life, such as Enlil, the god of the

winds and sky, and Inanna(Romney, 2020), the goddess of love and war. Although these religions were pluralistic, some common concepts such as divine justice, death and the afterlife found a place in these beliefs and the myth of the "Epic of Gilgamesh" is an important example of the common human values addressed in these religions, such as the search for immortality and man's contemplation of his fate after death(Abd El Hak,2022) and the Akkadian religion also had a great influence on neighboring civilizations, especially with regard to moral values and justice, which were considered synonymous with divine authority, as rulers were considered "deputies of God" in implementing these values(BABB, 2024) and the Babylonian and Assyrian religions were greatly influenced by Sumerian religions, adopting many Sumerian gods and metalogical concepts(Livingstone, 2007) and but there is an important development in the interpretation of the relationship between gods and humans and in Babylon, for example, the god Marduk had a fundamental role in creating and organizing the world, reflecting the idea of divine order in the universe. Human concepts such as justice and mercy also developed through religious texts such as the "Code of Hammurabi," which emphasized the application of divine justice among people and in Assyria, the religion was more focused on military power and control, but nevertheless, this power was believed to be a divine will aimed at To maintain order in the world and this refers to the relationship between man and God in achieving social stability and justice(Saputra, et al, 2002)

Judaism emerged as a new religious doctrine in the West Asia region, and was considered a revolution in religious thinking compared to the Sumerian and Babylonian religions. Judaism introduced the idea of monotheism, where Jews believed in one God, Yahweh, who imposed specific moral and social laws on the children of Israel and the book of the Torah, which includes Jewish law, includes many human principles such as justice and equality, and focuses on man's relationship with God by following his commandments(Shapira, 2012). Jewish principles such as "love of the neighbor" and "pardon" formed the moral foundation of Jewish societies and influenced later religions, especially Christianity. And Islam and the common existence of human beings before the One God has been the focus of great interest in man's understanding of his rights and duties(Cobbah,1987).

 Moving on to Zoroastrianism, which is considered one of the oldest religions that adopted an advanced philosophical and religious concept in the field of ethics and humanity and the Prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) founded this religion in Persia, where he taught that man has two choices: choosing the path of good (represented by the god Ahura Mazda) or deviating to evil (represented by the god Angra Mainyu). Zoroastrianism espoused ideas of individual responsibility in choosing between good and evil, reflecting the basic human idea of moral freedom. Zoroastrianism also introduced the concepts of divine justice and reward and punishment, which would later influence Jewish and Christian thought and the idea of life after death and resurrection from the dead were among the basic concepts that Zoroastrianism shared with many later religions(Emadinia, 2019) and then Christianity appeared in the first century AD at the hands of Jesus Christ in Palestine. It is a religion of a monotheistic nature, but with new concepts about the relationship between God and man. Christianity emphasized love, mercy, and justice, and encouraged forgiveness of enemies and unconditional love and these humanistic concepts that came with Christianity greatly influenced Western and Eastern civilizations alike. Christianity, which originated in a Jewish environment, took some of the ideas of the Old Testament and expanded them to include God's mercy and the immortality of the soul(Johnson, 2012) and making it a religion that carried messages in common with the ancient religions of the

Western region. Asia, such as the idea of salvation and its concern for social justice and then the last religion, Islam, which was founded in the seventh century AD by the Prophet Muhammad in the Arabian Peninsula, is considered a continuation of previous monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity, but with the addition of new aspects related to humanity and equality. Islam calls for justice and equality among human beings, emphasizes the unity of humanity before God, and includes principles such as "mercy," "justice," "honesty," and "freedom." Although Islam arose in a cultural and religious environment rich in diversity, His message carried universal human concepts that transcended nationalities and religions, which helped build bridges of understanding and cooperation between different cultures and civilizations in the West Asia region and beyond(Kraemer, 2003) and through this reference study, it becomes clear that the ancient religions of West Asia, despite their diversity and differences, shared a number of basic human principles that helped build bridges of understanding between different civilizations. Justice, mercy, individual responsibility, and concern for a person's fate after death are all common human concepts that appeared in these religions and contributed to establishing the moral foundations that still influence contemporary societies.

Methodology

In this research, a multidimensional methodology was followed to study "the common humanity in ancient religions" and its role in building bridges of understanding between civilizations, with a focus on the West Asia region and the research relied on the historical approach to trace the development of religions in this region, starting with the Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian religions, all the way to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and the temporal and social contexts in which these religions emerged were analysed, with a focus on how they influenced human concepts such as justice, mercy, and individual responsibility(Hick, 2004) and in addition, the comparative approach was used to compare common human concepts between different religions, whereby concepts such as justice, mercy, and salvation were studied in major religious texts such as the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an, analyzing the similarities and differences between them, and explaining how these values are embodied in Various cultural and religious contexts and the documentary approach was also used to analyze ancient religious and historical texts that document intellectual and religious developments in the region(McCulloch, 2004) and this included analysis of scriptures, archaeological inscriptions, and historical documents that provide insights into the development of human values and the influence of religions in shaping these values and the analytical approach was also used to examine the complex relationships between religions and the human concepts they put forward and this approach helped analyze how religions influenced the construction of shared values throughout history, and how these religions contributed to shaping the cultural and social identities of individuals and societies. Finally, emphasis was placed on the sociocultural approach to studying the influence of religions on societies in West Asia, analyzing how shared religious concepts contributed to the formation of social values such as justice and equality, and how interactions between different religions helped build a common culture and this methodology combines historical, comparative, documentary, analytical, and sociological and cultural analysis to provide a comprehensive and authoritative study of shared humanity in the ancient religions of West Asia.

Result

The history of religions in Western Asia is crucial for understanding the development of shared human concepts such as justice, compassion, and equality and these religions, each in its own way, shaped how societies viewed their relationship with the divine, their rulers, and their communities, fostering a cultural legacy that continues to influence modern civilizations.

The earliest known religion in Western Asia was Sumerian religion, which emerged in Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE and the Sumerians believed that gods controlled all aspects of life, and their concept of justice was embodied in the famous Code of Hammurabi (around 1754 BCE), a set of laws that governed daily life and ensured that divine justice was administered through human rulers and the laws were seen as having been given by the gods, and thus, the king, as a representative of these gods, was responsible for enforcing these principles and the Sumerians' focus on divine justice also had a profound influence on subsequent civilizations, particularly in the way rulers were expected to embody divine will.Following the Sumerians, the Assyrian religion, which flourished around 2000 BCE in northern Mesopotamia, had similar themes of divine justice but added a military dimension and the Assyrians were famous for their expansionist policies and for seeing their kings as gods' agents, responsible for enforcing justice through conquest and the suppression of evil and the concept of divine kingship was central to Assyrian religious thought, and rulers such as Tiglath-Pileser III and Sennacherib were often depicted as instruments of divine wrath, carrying out justice as decreed by the gods and this reinforced the idea that justice was not just a moral virtue but also a means of maintaining power and control over a vast empire and the Babylonian religion, which emerged around 1900 BCE in southern Mesopotamia, built upon the religious traditions of the Sumerians but with a stronger focus on the god Marduk and the Babylonians adopted the idea of divine justice from their predecessors but emphasized the importance of royal responsibility in ensuring peace and order and the Babylonian King Hammurabi, whose code we mentioned earlier, was considered a god-like figure, tasked with upholding justice as a divine mandate and the Babylonians also incorporated themes of compassion, with Marduk being a deity associated not just with war and conquest, but with the protection of the weak and the oppressed.

In the early first millennium BCE, Judaism emerged as a significant religion in the region, with the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel and the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Torah, provided a framework for social justice based on divine law, emphasizing the idea that justice should be enacted through laws that protect the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers and the concept of justice in Judaism was inseparable from the notion of God's covenant with His people and the Mosaic law, as given to Moses, was seen as a divine mandate that provided moral and social guidelines for maintaining justice within the community and the most notable example of Jewish social justice is the concept of the Year of Jubilee, which called for the forgiveness of debts and the return of land to its original owners every fifty years, reflecting a commitment to social equality and fairness and in the first century CE, Christianity arose in the region, influenced by Jewish traditions but adding a new emphasis on love, mercy, and forgiveness. Jesus Christ's teachings about loving one's neighbor and showing compassion to the marginalized transformed the concept of justice and the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus extolled the virtues of mercy, meekness, and humility, demonstrated a shift in the perception of justice from legalistic retribution to compassionate, relational justice. Jesus' teachings and his crucifixion symbolized the ultimate act of mercy, suggesting that justice, while important, should always be tempered with love and forgiveness and this notion of love as central to justice resonated deeply in

Christian ethics, influencing Western thought on social justice and human rights.

Islam, which emerged in the 7th century CE, further developed the concepts of justice, equality, and compassion and the Quran and the Hadith emphasize the importance of justice, both in the personal and social realms and the Quran stresses that justice is a divine command, and its principles were meant to be upheld by rulers and individuals alike. A famous verse from the Quran (4:58) states, "Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice." The Hadiths, sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad, also emphasize the importance of justice, particularly in terms of equality among people. For example, the Prophet Muhammad's final sermon declared, "All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; a white has no superiority over a black, nor does a black have any superiority over a white; none have superiority over another except by piety and good action." The Islamic concept of justice also extends to social welfare, ensuring that the poor, the sick, and the marginalized are cared for, and it provided guidelines for creating just and compassionate societies and this comprehensive approach to justice and the emphasis on equality and social responsibility contributed to the development of a broad ethical framework that continues to influence Muslim societies today and through these religions, despite their doctrinal differences, we see a consistent emphasis on justice, compassion, and the inherent dignity of human beings and these principles were reflected in the societies and civilizations that developed in Western Asia and laid the foundation for many of the moral and ethical systems that shape global cultures today.

Religion	Approximate Date	Core Humanitarian Concepts	Key Principles
Sumerian	3000 BCE	Justice, Compassion	Divine laws (Code of Hammurabi), divine justice
Assyrian	2000 BCE	Divine Justice, Military Duty	Divine kingship, justice through conquest
Babylonian	1900 BCE	Justice, Compassion	Royal responsibility for peace and justice
Judaism	1200 BCE	Justice, Mercy, Covenant	Mosaic law, social justice (e.g., Year of Jubilee)
Christianity	1st Century CE	Love, Mercy, Forgiveness	Sermon on the Mount, Compassionate justice
Islam	7th Century CE	Justice, Equality, Compassion	Quranic justice, equality before God, social welfare

Comparative table 1: Major religious contributions to humanitarian concepts

This historical journey through the religious evolution of Western Asia illustrates how these different faiths emphasized and practiced key humanitarian values such as justice, compassion, and equality. From ancient Mesopotamian laws to the ethical teachings of the Quran and Bible, these religions created moral frameworks that sought to guide individuals and societies toward a more just and compassionate existence and the comparative method applied to the religious traditions of Western Asia not only includes the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—but also encompasses earlier and concurrent religious systems, such as those of the

ancient Mesopotamian cultures (specifically the Assyrians and Babylonians) and Zoroastrianism and these traditions also contain profound concepts about divine justice, mercy, the afterlife, and moral responsibility and by comparing sacred texts, symbols, and ethical teachings, we gain insight into how each religion and culture articulated shared human concerns and shaped societal values.

Step 1: Comparing Sacred Texts

The core of the comparative method involves examining the religious texts from these various traditions to explore their understanding of key concepts such as justice, mercy, and the afterlife.

Judaism: In the Torah, justice is an imperative command from God, where human actions are judged by divine standards. As mentioned earlier, the Book of Deuteronomy commands the pursuit of justice (Novak, 2014):

"Justice, justice you shall pursue, that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God is giving you" (Deuteronomy 16:20).

This emphasizes the importance of justice in maintaining order and morality in society, where it is a divine obligation for individuals and leaders alike.

Christianity: Christianity builds on the Jewish concept of justice but emphasizes mercy, particularly through the teachings of Jesus. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advocates love and forgiveness over strict justice:

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

The New Testament expands the ideas of judgment, emphasizing the balance between justice and mercy, showing how God's mercy tempers His justice.

Islam: In Islam, divine justice is paramount, as is God's mercy and the Quran reinforces the importance of fairness in human dealings, along with a promise of reward or punishment in the afterlife based on one's deeds.

"Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice" (Quran 4:58).

Islam also highlights mercy, presenting it as a fundamental aspect of God's nature and urging believers to act mercifully in their dealings with others.

Ancient Assyrian and Babylonian Religions: The Assyrians and Babylonians, both great powers in ancient Mesopotamia, had religious systems that included concepts of divine justice and mercy, often linked to their pantheon of gods. For instance, the Assyrians believed in a form of divine retribution through their gods, with kingly rulers often seen as the instruments of divine justice and in the "Epic of Gilgamesh," the protagonist's quest for immortality reflects a worldview where divine will controls human fate, and the gods reward or punish individuals based on their deeds.

Similarly, in Babylonian religious practices, justice was represented by gods like Marduk, who is portrayed as a god of justice and order and in the famous "Code of Hammurabi," attributed to the Babylonian king Hammurabi, divine justice is deeply woven into human law:

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

This concept of retribution aligns with the idea of divine justice being enacted through human governance.

Zoroastrianism: Zoroastrianism, the ancient religion of Persia, offers a unique view of cosmic dualism and the struggle between good and evil, encapsulated in the teachings of Zoroaster. Zoroastrians believe in a supreme god, Ahura Mazda, who embodies divine justice and mercy and the Zoroastrian concept of divine judgment is illustrated in the **Avesta**:

"The good thoughts, good words, and good deeds are the key to salvation."

Justice is balanced by mercy in the Zoroastrian view, with the righteous rewarded in the afterlife, while the wicked face punishment, often in the form of torment in the afterlife.

Step 2: Symbolic Analysis

Symbolic representations of the afterlife, divine judgment, and the struggle between good and evil are key components of many Western Asian religious traditions and these symbols provide further insights into how these religions understood moral responsibility and human destiny.

Judaism: Judaism does not focus extensively on the afterlife, but it emphasizes a Day of Judgment where individuals are judged based on their actions and this is reflected in the Book of Daniel's prophecy of the resurrection:

"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2).

Christianity: Christianity, especially through the Book of Revelation, offers detailed imagery of Heaven and Hell as the final destinations after divine judgment.

"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened and then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done" (Revelation 20:12).

Islam: The Quran describes Heaven (Jannah) and Hell (Jahannam) in vivid terms, emphasizing that individuals will be judged according to their deeds, with divine justice and mercy determining their eternal fate.

"Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds, they are the best of creatures and their reward with their Lord will be Gardens of Eternity, beneath which rivers flow, where they will abide forever" (Quran 98:7).

Ancient Assyrian and Babylonian Religions: In the Assyrian and Babylonian belief systems, the gods controlled the fate of human beings through divine decrees and the Mesopotamian afterlife was often seen as a shadowy existence, where souls faced judgment and were sent to the underworld, ruled by gods such as Ereshkigal and the Epic of Gilgamesh describes this as a realm where the dead wander aimlessly, reflecting the harshness of the divine judgment in their culture.

Zoroastrianism: In Zoroastrianism, the afterlife is clearly defined by a final judgment and the **Chinvat Bridge**, which souls must cross after death, serves as a symbol of judgment, with the righteous passing to paradise and the wicked falling into torment.

"On the day of judgment, all the good souls will pass over the Chinvat Bridge to the heavenly abode of Ahura Mazda" (Avesta).

Religion	Core Humanitarian Concepts	Key Textual References	Symbolism of Justice
Judaism	Justice, Mercy, Afterlife	"Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20)	Divine judgment, resurrection (Daniel 12:2)
Christianity	Mercy, Love, Justice, Afterlife	"Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44)	Heaven and Hell, final judgment (Revelation 20:12)
Islam	Justice, Mercy, Equality, Afterlife	"Judge with justice" (Quran 4:58)	Heaven (Jannah) and Hell (Jahannam), final judgment (Quran 98:7)
Assyrian Religion	Divine Justice, Retribution, Afterlife	"The Epic of Gilgamesh" (Gilgamesh's quest for immortality)	Divine retribution, underworld (Gods of death)
Babylonian Religion	Justice, Divine Law, Retribution	"Code of Hammurabi" (Law of retaliation: "An eye for an eye")	Divine justice, Marduk's rule
Zoroastrianism	Justice, Mercy, Cosmic Dualism, Afterlife	"Good thoughts, good words, good deeds" (Avesta)	Chinvat Bridge, divine judgment (final judgment after death)

Comparative table 2: Divine justice, mercy, and the afterlife across religions

This comparative analysis reveals that while the religions of Western Asia share common values of justice and mercy, their interpretations, symbols, and the consequences for human actions differ and the Abrahamic religions emphasize a strong moral order underpinned by divine commandments, while ancient Mesopotamian religions and Zoroastrianism offer more nuanced views, including the struggle between good and evil and the eventual fate of the soul in the afterlife and these comparisons illustrate the diversity of thought in how humanity has sought to understand its relationship with the divine and the moral universe throughout history

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that the religious traditions of Western Asia, despite their doctrinal differences, shared common humanitarian values such as justice, mercy, and moral responsibility. Ancient Mesopotamian religions like the Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian traditions laid the groundwork for understanding divine justice and governance, with their emphasis on law and moral order and the Zoroastrian dualistic worldview introduced the struggle between good and evil, shaping later religious thought. Judaism advanced these ideas by institutionalizing monotheism and embedding social justice within divine law, while Christianity expanded the scope of mercy and love as central to justice. Islam synthesized these concepts with an emphasis on equality and universal brotherhood under God and through sacred texts, symbols, and laws, these traditions cultivated moral frameworks that stressed accountability, compassion, and the inherent dignity of all individuals and these shared values not only influenced their respective societies but also facilitated cultural exchanges and mutual understanding across civilizations and the comparative analysis highlights the enduring relevance of these ancient

concepts in addressing contemporary challenges, emphasizing that humanity's moral and ethical evolution is deeply rooted in these foundational religious traditions.

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