

# How the Bible changed the course of ethical thought

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SPECIAL TO THE CJN

The books of the Hebrew Bible were written thousands of years ago in a very different world from ours. Already in the Middle Ages, respected Jewish thinkers like Moses Maimonides and Abraham ibn Ezra realized that the more we know about the ancient Near East in biblical times, the better we understand the nuances of the biblical text. Maimonides went to great efforts to describe accurately what non-Jewish life was like in biblical times, often referring to the book, *The Nabatean Agriculture*, a dubious work that was the best that he could find.

Today we know considerably more about life in the ancient Near East than any Jewish reader of the Bible in the last 2,000 years. Archeological discoveries of artifacts and inscriptions from contemporaneous neighbours of our biblical ancestors have presented us with stories, poems, prayers, legal texts, and artistic works from those cultures.

But scholars disagree about the significance of these findings. Eighteen hundred years ago, the Babylonian king, Hammurabi, lent his name to a code of laws that became famous in the modern age, when it was discovered just over 100 years ago. Scholars have been comparing Hammurabi's code with the law codes of the Hebrew Bible ever since. Some point out how much more ethical the Bible is, while others emphasize how similar the two codes are. The ultimate question, did the Bible represent a revolutionary change from what was common in the ancient Near East or was it just a minor variation on the theme, is still being debated.

A new book on this subject, *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics*, takes a stand on the issue. The author, Jeremiah (Jerry) Unterman of Jerusalem,



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by Jeremiah Unterman,  
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may be known to *CJN* readers since in the past he held Jewish educational leadership positions in Canada. With scholarly training in the Bible and the ancient Near East, he is one of a small number of people who could undertake this project to challenge “the scholarly perception that the Jewish Bible has made, at best, only an inconsequential contribution to the ethical development of ancient Near Eastern values.” Unterman makes it clear from the beginning that the book's goal is “to demonstrate by substantial evidence, derived from various sources (Sumerian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Hittite, Ugaritic, Assyrian and, of course, biblical), that the Jewish Bible not only changed the course of ethical thought but advanced it far beyond ancient Near Eastern society and religion in key areas.” In my assessment, his project is a success.

The book covers many ethical issues, too many to address in this review. I was particularly interested in the section on attitudes to the poor.

Unterman points out that among cultures surrounding the ancient Israelites, Egyptian texts do reflect concern about the poor. Many inscriptions on Egyptian graves praise the deceased for caring for the poor. One 3,500-year-old grave inscription reads: “I did that which men praise and with which the gods are pleased. I gave bread to the hungry and satisfied those who have nothing.”

But Unterman places these findings in context. “Grave inscriptions which state that the deceased ‘fed the hungry, watered the thirsty, and clothed the naked’ afterwards request that the visitor to the grave offer bread and beer for the soul of the deceased, as the deceased is seen as in poverty and need, with an emphasis on hunger and thirst.” In other words, ancient Egyptians boasted of their care for the poor when they felt it would serve

their own interests.

Some ancient Near Eastern law codes urge their subjects not to take advantage of the poor. But nowhere in the ancient Near East do we find the type of legislation that the Torah provides, requiring Jews to actively alleviate the plight of the poor. Unique in the ancient Near East are biblical laws requiring Jews to pay day labourers immediately (Deut 24:14-15); give free loans to the poor even when they have reason to believe that the loans will never be repaid (Deut 15:7-11); return clothing to a poor person that was taken as surety for a loan (Exod 22:24-26); leave part of their harvest for the poor (Lev 19:10-11 and Exod 23:11); redeem a fellow Jew who sold himself into slavery due to poverty (Lev 25:48-49), and redeem the ancestral property that a destitute Israelite relative was compelled to sell (Lev 25:25-28).

The book is readable and accessible. Lengthy scholarly notes appear at the end of the book and they can be enjoyable, too. In one note, Unterman reports a conversation he had with a scholar who wrote that the Sumerian and Babylonian law codes protected strangers to the same extent that the Bible protected strangers, a conclusion that Unterman feels is entirely unsupported by evidence. When Unterman asked him how he could come to such a conclusion, the scholar answered that when he wrote that book, “he was rebelling against the strict Christian upbringing that he had received in his parents' home” and was thus looking to prove that the Bible was nothing special.

Of course the problem of biased treatments of the Bible and the ancient Near East can cut both ways. An anti-religious bias can lead to one set of distortions; a pro-religious bias can lead to another. But I recommend this book as a careful comparative study of biblical ethics, written by a scholar with strong Jewish values. ■

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