

Religion and Ethics in the Conception of Authority and Governance in the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Study of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia

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Abstract:

Authority and governance in the civilizations of the Ancient Near East were shaped by the influence of the religious dimension and ethical values, which contributed to defining the ruler's status, the sources of his legitimacy, and his functions, while regulating his relationship with the ruled and shaping conceptions of justice and righteous governance. Proceeding from this premise, the present study investigates the influence of religion and ethics on the conception of authority and governance in Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, through a comparative study of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia as civilizational models that gave rise to distinct patterns of political organization and the exercise of governance.

The study draws on three methodological approaches: the historical approach, to trace the evolution of conceptions of authority and governance within their respective civilizational and historical contexts; the comparative approach, to discern points of convergence and divergence among the three civilizations in the ways religious and ethical influence manifested in their political orders; and the descriptive-analytical approach, to examine the religious and ethical frameworks operative within each civilization and analyze their bearing on the structure and practice of governance.

The study concludes that authority and governance did not develop in isolation from the intellectual, religious, and ethical systems that predominated in the Ancient Near East. Religion constituted the primary framework through which power was rationalized and legitimized, while ethical values prescribed the normative ideals governing the exercise of rule and the ruler's obligations toward the governed. And that this connection did not take a single form in the three civilizations under study; a divergence rooted in the fact that authority and governance in each case were forged through a layered interaction between religious frameworks, ethical values, and the distinct political and social exigencies of each civilization.

Keywords: Religion and Ethics, Authority and Governance, Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations, Comparative Study

Introduction:

An extrapolation from the history of humanity's ancient civilizations reveals that the greatest civilizational experiences emerged in the East. The regions of the Nile Valley, Mesopotamia, Persia, the Indian subcontinent, and East Asia witnessed the rise of stable societies that achieved, at an early stage of human history, highly sophisticated levels of

political and social organization, alongside their architectural, artistic, and scientific advancements. Some of these civilizations succeeded in establishing vast kingdoms and empires, administering diverse cities and provinces in a manner that necessitated the formulation of codes and legislation to regulate various aspects of public life. This reality underscores the existence of coherent conceptions regarding authority, governance, the functions of the ruler, and their relationship with the governed. and attests to the presence of early and deeply rooted reflection on questions of power, legitimacy, justice, and political order, well beyond the conventional assumption that confines the origins of political, administrative, and legal thought to the Greek and Roman traditions.

Accordingly, the political and social order of ancient Near Eastern civilizations emerged as a domain that generated distinct conceptions of authority, governance, legitimacy, justice, and the relationship between the ruler and the governed. These conceptions that were never detached from the prevailing intellectual, religious, and ethical systems of their time. Consequently, religion and ethics functioned as primary pillars through which humanity rationalized the cosmos, society, and power. Political and social organization was bound, to a considerable degree, to the preservation of a cosmic and moral order understood as an extension of divine will; and the legitimacy of governance was contingent upon the righteous exercise of authority and the extent to which the ruler upheld the ethical values prevailing in his society.

The significance of this study lies in its examination of the intellectual foundations, religious systems, and ethical values upon which ancient Near Eastern civilizations were established, alongside an investigation of the reality of political authority and the evolution of governance within these societies. It aims to demonstrate the extent to which religion and ethics influenced the conceptions and practices of authority and governance, and to reveal how they were reflected in the legitimacy of both authority and the ruler, the nature of governance functions, the relationship between ruler and ruled, and the criteria of righteous governance. This is achieved through the analysis and comparison of selected models drawn from Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, namely: Pharaonic Egyptian civilization, Mesopotamian civilization, and ancient Persian civilization.

the central problem of the study is structured around the following main research question:

To what extent did religion and ethics shape the conception of authority and governance in Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, particularly in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia?

This main question gives rise to a number of subsidiary questions: How were religious and ethical frameworks reflected in the legitimacy of political authority as well as the ruler? and How did they influence the nature of the ruler, the definition of his functions, and his relationship with the ruled? And did the relationship between religion, ethics, authority, and governance take a broadly similar form across the three civilizations, or did it instead reflect the distinctive character of each civilization and its intellectual, religious, and social foundations?

This study adopted a methodological integration suited to the nature of its subject and objectives. It employed the historical approach to trace the development of authority and governance, as well as the intellectual foundations upon which they were based in Ancient

Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia, then embedding them within the historical and social contexts in which they emerged and developed. The study also drew on the descriptive-analytical approach; to present and analyze the religious and ethical foundations and frameworks in the three civilizations, and to examine the nature of the relationship between religion and ethics, on the one hand, and authority and governance, on the other, particularly with regard to the source of political legitimacy, the status and functions of the ruler, and the nature of his rule. The comparative approach was also employed to compare the manifestations of the influence of religion and ethics on conceptions of authority and governance in the three civilizations under study. This approach seeks to elucidate the relationship between religious and ethical foundations and conceptions of authority and governance in these civilizations, and to determine whether the fact that they shared a reliance on such foundations resulted in homogeneous and similar conceptions of authority and governance, or whether differences in these foundations, shaped by the distinctive character of each civilization and its historical and social context, contributed to the emergence of divergent conceptions and practices of authority and governance.

1. The Nature of Authority and Governance in Ancient Egyptian Civilization

Egypt is widely regarded as one of the cradles of ancient civilization. Two major kingdoms developed in the region, Upper Egypt (in the South) and Lower Egypt (in the North). These kingdoms were unified around 3100 BCE under Menes, a ruler from the south, who established Memphis as the capital (Edwards, 2008:15-16). In ancient Egypt, political authority was closely connected to religious beliefs and ideas about the origin of the universe, the destiny of human beings, and the principles that should regulate social relations. For this reason, understanding the nature of political authority in ancient Egypt requires an examination of the religious, intellectual, and ethical ideas that shaped Egyptian political consciousness.

1.1. Religious and Ethical Foundations of Authority and Governance in Ancient Egypt:

The ancient Egyptians associated the origin of the cosmos with thought, holding that it was a deity who brought it into existence, they conceived of the world as the product of an ordered divine act; this belief in cosmic order was also reflected in their understanding of society and political organization. They likewise held firm beliefs in reward and punishment, drawing clear distinctions between praiseworthy and blameworthy conduct, which attests to the presence of a strong ethical dimension in their conception of human behavior.

Justice was one of the central values in ancient Egyptian thought. It was understood not only as a moral principle but also as a basis for law, social order, and the stability of the state. This can be seen in the teachings attributed to Ptahhotep, one of the best-known sages of ancient Egypt. Ptahhotep lived during the reign of King Djedkare Isesi of the Fifth Dynasty, around the late twenty-fifth and early twenty-fourth centuries BCE. He served as a vizier before withdrawing from public affairs and devoting himself to teaching and writing about wisdom and ethical conduct (Strudwick, 1985: 85-87). His work, commonly known as “*The*

Maxims of Ptahhotep or Instruction of Ptahhotep"¹, a compilation of maxims, counsel, and principles concerning governance and conduct addressed to his son, among the most prominent of which are the necessity of self-discipline, adherence to ethical values, and the exercise of reason. These teachings reflect a conception that explicitly binds the virtue of the individual to the integrity of both society and governance. (Sa'd 2000: 14).

Beliefs concerning death and the afterlife held a prominent place in ancient Egyptian life, particularly among the ruling class. The Egyptian conception of human destiny rested on a distinction between the soul and the body: the soul was held to be immortal, while the body was considered subject to decay; a belief that led the Egyptians to preserve the body through mummification. The depth of this belief in life after death, especially among rulers, was manifest in the extraordinary attention devoted to royal tombs and the construction of the pyramids. (Shariati, 1984:1)Among the general population, by contrast, the prevailing orientation was one of attachment to the pleasures of earthly life, with the afterlife conceived as a realm of nothingness.

1.2. Political and Social Organization in Ancient Egyptian Civilization

Prior to the establishment of the unified state, Egypt underwent a historical phase known as the Predynastic Period, which preceded the emergence of a centralized Egyptian state. This period began during the later part of the Chalcolithic Age and concluded with the unification of Egypt and the establishment of dynastic rule around 3100 BCE. It witnessed the development of settled communities and the emergence of local political centers throughout the Nile Valley, culminating in the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt into a single unified state. The present study's examination of political authority and governance in ancient Egypt pertains primarily to the post-unification era. Following unification, Egyptian history progressed through four foundational periods: the Early Dynastic Period (3100–2686 BCE), the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BCE), and the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE) (Bard, 2008: 37)— each separated by Intermediate Periods characterized by varying degrees of political instability and the reconfiguration of authority.

During the Old Kingdom, the system of governance was monarchical, with the primary powers of the state concentrated in the hands of the king, who exercised legislative, executive, and judicial functions and held authority over the appointment of viziers, priests, and administrative officials throughout the cities and provinces. Political authority derived its legitimacy from a religious foundation: the status of the Pharaoh was inextricably bound to beliefs concerning his divine nature or his descent from a deity, thereby investing the monarchy with a legitimacy of divine origin.(Fayyad & Murad, 2011 :54) This religious legitimacy was inseparable from the exercise of political power; the Pharaoh was regarded simultaneously as political ruler and divine figure, rendering his relationship with his subjects a compound one: at once a ruler accountable for the governance of his people, and a deity to

¹.The *Maxims of Ptahhotep* date back to the reign of King "Isesi" of the Fifth Dynasty. The oldest extant copy was transcribed on the Prisse Papyrus, which dates to the Middle Kingdom period and was discovered at Dra' Abu el-Naga in Thebes. It is currently preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.

whom they owed cultic allegiance. Thus, religious and political functions were closely intertwined.

The religious function of the Pharaoh manifested in the supervision of priests' duties and ritual worship; he bore responsibility for the construction and maintenance of temples and royal tombs, and for the oversight of offerings, endowments, and associated properties. (Dunand & Zivie-Coche, 2004:89-91) His political function, by contrast, was bound to the defense of the state, the protection of its independence, the preservation of its unity, the maintenance of security, the administration of justice, and the provision of strong and stable governance. (Frankfort, 1948:51-54) The exercise of authority was therefore not anchored in political power alone; it was equally bound to a religio-ethical conception imposing upon the king the obligation to preserve order and achieve justice.

Although Egyptian society during this period was divided into three open strata — between which individuals could move — namely the Pharaoh, the nobility, and those who worked the land, political and representative councils for the deliberation of laws and affairs of state were entirely absent. (Frankfort, 1948 : 52), This absence underscores the extent to which political and social organization in the Old Kingdom was bound to the king's status and the religious frameworks that surrounded and sanctioned his authority.

With the transition to the Middle Kingdom, which represented a golden age and a period of prosperity in ancient Egyptian history; national unity was consolidated, borders expanded, and Egypt attained a profound degree of order and stability. The conception of authority and the ruler's function underwent a relative transformation during this period: the portrayal of the ruler as a king of divine nature ceased to be the sole operative conception guiding the exercise of governance, and in its place emerged the idea of a ruler accountable for the country's affairs, the welfare of the ruled, and the realization of order and justice. The conceptions of rulership thus shifted, in this era, from the divine king to the ruler as shepherd of his people. (Bell, 1971: 23).

The New Kingdom witnessed a significant expansion of Egyptian power and marked the dawn of the imperial era. It was also characterized by the reforms introduced by Akhenaten, the pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty, around 1380 BC. His reforms stand as an important example of the close relationship between religion and politics. Akhenaten sought to unite the Egyptian gods under a single deity, the sun-disk god Aten. (Sa'd 2000 : 10), This led to a reorganization of the religious institution and its relationship with royal authority, demonstrating that the political structure of the state was closely connected to changes in religious belief. In addition, Akhenaten brought about what can be described as a major change in the fields of politics and international relations. He allowed the Greeks to benefit from Egyptian libraries and concluded what is described as a peace treaty with a Babylonian king of the time. He was also among the earliest rulers to advocate belief in one god, one world, and a single universal and comprehensive law governing that world. (Wade, 2021: 2-3) This was an idea that Alexander of Macedon would later seek to embody.

2. The Nature of Authority and Governance in Mesopotamian Civilization

Mesopotamia stands among the oldest civilizational centers to witness the emergence of political organization and the development of governance in the ancient world. The term

refers to the geographical region situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, encompassing, within its historical boundaries, parts of present-day Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The term derives from the Greek *Mesopotamia*, literally meaning “the land between the rivers.”(Al-Samarrai 2015 : 15) It became the established term for the region in which some of the oldest civilizations, cities, and states in human history arose.

Beginning in the fourth millennium BC, the region witnessed the emergence of successive political and cultural entities,(Ur, 2014: 249) most notably the Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Chaldean civilizations. The succession of these civilizations contributed to the development of diverse forms of political, administrative, and legal organization, which in turn influenced the development of the concept of authority and the exercise of government. Political development in Mesopotamia began with the Sumerians, who established a number of city-states and laid the foundations of early civilization in the southern part of ancient Iraq. Political organization subsequently expanded with the establishment of the Akkadian Empire by Sargon of Akkad. Political organization subsequently advanced to a broader scale with the rise of the Akkadian Empire under Sargon of Akkad. (Oppenheim, 1977: 154) Mesopotamian civilization reached its zenith during the Babylonian period, most notably under Hammurabi, whose name became synonymous with one of the most celebrated legal codes of the ancient world.(Liverani, 2014: 164-165) This political evolution persisted under the Assyrians, who constructed a state of markedly military and imperial character, (Liverani, 2014: 514) before the Neo-Babylonian Empire rose on the ruins of the Assyrian Empire, until Babylon ultimately fell to the Persians in 539 BCE.(Oppenheim, 1977: 65)

This successive civilizational and political development generated an interconnected intellectual, religious, and legal environment, reflected in the conceptions of Mesopotamian peoples regarding kingship, authority, law, and justice. The significance of Mesopotamia for the present study therefore lies not merely in the succession of its states and dynasties, but in what this development affords in terms of models that illuminate how political authority was bound to religious beliefs, ethical values, justice, and law.

2.1. The Religious and Ethical Foundations of Authority and Governance in Mesopotamian Civilization

Religious beliefs in Mesopotamia were deeply intertwined with the region's natural environment, as its erratic climatic conditions exerted a decisive impact on the religious, social, and political conceptions of its peoples. Their beliefs; in the earliest stages, were founded on the worship of natural forces, before these were anthropomorphized into deities endowed with human attributes. Among the most prominent of these was Ishtar (Al Jabbar 2009: 17)— the primordial mother goddess and giver of life — who occupied a distinguished place in Mesopotamian religious belief, regarded simultaneously as the goddess of love and beauty and war.

The religious conceptions of the Mesopotamian peoples were reflected in their understanding of human beings, life, and death. They held no belief in immortality or eternity, accepting instead the inevitability of mortality; Babylonian thought accordingly advocated for the appreciation of life and the necessity of enjoying it within the bounds of existing

circumstance (Sa'd, 2000, p. 16). Although kings were regarded as mortal humans destined to die, this did not negate the sanctity of royal authority or its divine origin, nor the conviction that the ruler derived his legitimacy and status from the gods (Fayyad & Murad, 2011, p. 70).

This conception shaped the nature of political authority, which was concentrated in the persona of the ruler; a figure regarded as a legendary hero chosen by the gods and favored with their blessing, who wielded the military prowess necessary to protect the state, extend its dominion, and exercise control over his subjects. This intersection of divine legitimacy with political and military power is clearly manifest in both the Assyrian and Babylonian experiences, most notably during the reigns of Sargon of Akkad and Hammurabi, where the king's strength was bound to his religious standing and his capacity to impose order, uphold stability, and safeguard the state. (Barmash, 2020: 65, 134)

2.2 The Functions of Authority and Legal Codes in Mesopotamian Civilization

In the successive civilizations of Mesopotamia, the king was regarded as the representative of the deity, exercising political authority and governing his realm as the deity's delegate or appointed agent. He was responsible for constructing temples and ensuring the continuity of religious worship. This conception was particularly prominent during the Akkadian period, but it gradually declined in later periods, before the age of Hammurabi. The king subsequently came to be regarded as a human being endowed with sacred status, deriving his legitimacy from his relationship with the gods without necessarily being regarded as a deity himself. (Brisch, 2013: 38-40) The functions of governance were therefore characterized by a complex and multifaceted nature encompassing political, administrative, military, and religious dimensions.

At the political level, the king bore responsibility for preserving the unity of the realm and, in certain periods, expanding its borders — a drive partly explicable by the political fragmentation that characterized Mesopotamia and the existence of numerous competing city-states. (Baines & Yoffee, 1998: 207-208) At the administrative level, the king oversaw the organization of state affairs, the management of public institutions, and the administration of economic and social projects. (Liverani, 2014: 123). The military function was embodied in the king's role as commander of the army — overseeing its organization, ensuring the resources necessary to sustain its strength, supervising its mobilization, and formulating military strategy. This served to elevate military power into one of the principal instruments upon which authority relied to protect the state and extend its dominion. (Baines & Yoffee, 1998: 208)

The king's religious function, by contrast, was bound to his status as chief priest of the deity, personally responsible for offering sacrifices, performing religious rituals, constructing temples, administering their estates, and appointing subordinate priests. The king was equally entrusted with conveying divine law to his subjects, proclaiming it among them, and binding them to its observance. (Tahran, 2025: 193-194) This intertwining of religious and legal authority is clearly manifest in the Code of Hammurabi, in which Hammurabi declared that Shamash — the ancient Babylonian god of the sun and justice — was the source of his laws, that he had received from him the symbols of authority and the body of laws, and that he was bound to implement them so as to eradicate evil and vice from society. (Harper, 1904: 3, 5)

The people, in turn, were obligated to obey and uphold these laws, for they derived from divine will rather than from purely human deliberation.

Against this background, the significance of legal codes in understanding the nature of authority and governance in Mesopotamia becomes evident. Laws constituted one of the most prominent manifestations of political and social organization, reflecting a pronounced Mesopotamian inclination toward codification and the systematic regulation of all domains of life — leaving a discernible imprint across virtually every dimension of social existence. These codes were not merely rules governing relations among individuals; they were equally bound to the exercise of authority and the concepts of justice and order, regulating social, economic, and political relations within the state and serving as one of its primary instruments for consolidating power and extending influence into neighboring territories. (Moscati 1986: 95)

Mesopotamia witnessed a succession of legal codes associated with the rulers who promulgated them: the Code of Urukagina (c. 2350 BCE), the Code of Ur-Nammu (c. 2100–2050 BCE), the Code of Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1930 BCE), the Laws of Eshnunna (c. 1770 BCE), and the Code of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BCE) (Moscati 1986: 96) — the last of which stands as the most celebrated legal code in human history, encompassing civil, criminal, and economic provisions regulating the relations and transactions of individuals within the Babylonian Empire under Hammurabi.

The Code of Hammurabi occupies a singular place within this legislative development, distinguished by its comprehensiveness, scope, and influence as well as its capacity to consolidate and codify preceding legal traditions and to shape subsequent legislation. In both its structure and content, the Code reveals the intertwining of religious legitimacy with the legal and ethical functions of governance across its three principal components: the Prologue, the Body of Laws, and the Epilogue. The Prologue affirms that Hammurabi received his authority from the gods and that his mission was to champion the weak, protect orphans, and realize justice and prosperity throughout the land. (Harper, 1904: 3) The Body of Laws comprises 282 provisions covering rules governing family affairs and marriage, economic regulations relating to trade and labor, and; from a political standpoint; an affirmation that individuals hold rights vis-à-vis the state. (Harper, 1904: 97) The Epilogue praises the king, his authority, and the laws he established as expressions of divine will. (Harper, 1904: 99–100)

3. The Nature of Authority and Governance in Ancient Persian Civilization

The evolution of ancient Persia was intertwined with successive political and civilizational transformations that significantly shaped the nature of authority and the exercise of governance. Ancient Persia passed through three fundamental historical eras. It began with the Achaemenid Period (550 BCE–330 BCE), which witnessed the establishment of the First Persian Empire — known as the Achaemenid Empire — founded by Cyrus the Great (Waters, 2014: 5) following his rebellion against the Median Empire, and concluded with the conquest of Persia by Alexander of Macedon. This was followed by the Parthian Period (247 BCE–224 CE), marking the emergence of the Parthian Empire, named after the region of Parthia and alternatively known as the Arsacid Empire after the dynasty's founder, Arsaces I.

This empire acquired significant political and military power in the region, engaging in a protracted rivalry with the Roman Empire. (Gregoratti, 2017: 126-127) Finally, the Sasanian Empire (224 CE–651 CE) arose following the victory of King Ardashir I over the Parthian regional kings, constituting the final ancient Persian empire before its eventual fall to the Islamic conquests around 651 CE. (Daryaei & Rezakhani, 2017: 155)

In fact, this historical sequence facilitates an understanding of the environment within which Persian conceptions of authority and governance were forged. It demonstrates that religion was not separate from the social and political life of the realm. Since the founding of the Persian Empire around 550 BCE, the Persians did not differ from other ancient Eastern civilizations in that their religious doctrines provided the organizing framework for the functions of authority, determining the system of governance and defining the status and responsibilities of the ruler.

3.1. The Religious and Ethical Foundations of Authority and Governance in Ancient Persia

Religious beliefs occupied a prominent place in ancient Persian society, evolving from the worship of certain natural elements and phenomena into more complex religious conceptions. Persian religious doctrine was divided into two distinct tiers. The first was popular Persian belief, which permitted the worship of the four classical elements: fire, air, water, and earth (Al-Nashhar 1997: 107); alongside deities such as Mithra and Anahita, among other deities of popular worship. The second was royal Persian doctrine, wherein monarchs acknowledged certain deities of popular worship while simultaneously placing Ahura Mazda at the absolute apex of the pantheon. They envisioned Ahura Mazda as an invisible deity with no dedicated temple; rather, the entire earth serving in his stead as a place of worship (Al-Nashhar 1997: 108). This veneration persisted until the late fifth century BCE, with the spread of Zoroastrianism (Fayyad & Murad, 2011 : 105).

Persian civilization was broadly associated with three foundational doctrines: Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mazdakism — all sharing the core conception that the universe is constituted by two primordial principles: light and darkness, good and evil. The present study's analytical focus, however, centers on Zoroastrianism — founded by Zoroaster, one of the most significant thinkers representing the doctrine of the Persian intellectual elite. The texts of the Avesta serve as the primary source for the teachings of this faith (Shehu, 2020: 5-6).

Ahura Mazda occupies a central position within Zoroastrian thought; not merely as a Persian deity but as the god of the entire cosmos. Zoroaster inextricably identified Ahura Mazda with absolute goodness, rendering them two names for a singular essence (Ghullab 1938: 189); goodness thus became the core tenet of Zoroastrian doctrine. In direct opposition to this singular, benevolent deity stands Ahriman; the Devil and the source of all worldly evil. Accordingly, the history of the world is a cosmic struggle between these two opposing forces, and humanity must choose either to perform good deeds and align with the benevolent deity or to turn toward false religion and follow the Devil in all their actions. (Al-Nashhar 1997: 110).

Zoroaster believed in the concept of reward and punishment in the afterlife, maintaining that the temporal world is fundamentally bound to the afterworld (Al Shantawi 1953: 50). He and his adherents likewise affirmed that humanity must lead a moderate and balanced social life, encouraging individuals to enjoy life and to assist others in doing so as a matter of religious obligation. Zoroastrianism accordingly emphasizes the imperative of moderate conduct across all domains of life, framing it as an act of obedience to divine commandments. (Bardner 1993: 94)

The ethical dimension stands as the foundational pillar of Zoroastrian philosophy. The virtues of justice, chastity, sincerity, and honesty occupy the forefront of its ethical value system, while the cultivation and advancement of human well-being are regarded as among the highest religious obligations. This system is complemented by secondary virtues, including the spreading of joy, self-defense, the protection of the homeland, and the confrontation of adversaries. These ethical principles constituted the core of the teachings to which Zoroaster devoted his life: teachings that flourished across Persia, where Zoroastrianism served as the official state religion until the Islamic conquest and the subsequent conversion of the vast majority of the population to Islam. A small minority, however, remained faithful to Zoroastrianism; known as the Magi, who are regarded as the historical ancestors of the Parsis in India today. (Al Shantawi 1953: 52)

3.2. The Functions of Authority and the Nature of Governance in Ancient Persia

Persian conceptions of authority were oriented, to a considerable extent, toward the practical dimensions of governance and the administration of the state, rather than toward abstract ideas regarding the origins of authority and the grounds for its emergence. Persian political thought focused its attention on developing mechanisms of administrative control, structuring state institutions, and defining the functions and conditions of governance, and this is due to the belief that the existence of the royal institution constituted an intuitive, self-evident reality — one that is beyond any question or doubt.

This pragmatic perspective directly shaped the nature and form of political authority. The architecture of the state conformed to a unifying logic with deep religious and Zoroastrian roots, which prepared Persian political thought to embrace the singularity of authority embodied in the person of the Shahanshah: the King of Kings, endowed with absolute powers. This absolute individualization of rule was anchored in the concept of Divine Glory known as *Khvarenah* “a divine radiance granted to the king” (Frye, 1977: 80) that made him the earthly representative of divine will. As a result, his authority could neither be shared nor questioned by any individual or group, and any revolt against him was regarded as a direct disruption of the cosmic order.

Authority in Persia assumed a distinctly centralized character, with the monarch occupying the apex of the political hierarchy and holding the principal powers of the state. To give institutional expression to this absolute monarchy across the vast expanses of the Persian Empire, characterized by a multiplicity of peoples and ethnic groups, the satrapic system was devised. The empire was divided into administrative provinces, or satrapies, ranging in number from twenty to thirty. Each province was administered by a governor known as a satrap, who acted as a direct representative of the king and as his deputy in exercising

administrative, judicial, and financial powers, while remaining absolutely and directly subordinate to the central authority. (Waters, 2014: 100)

4. Manifestations of the impact of Religion and Ethics on Authority and Governance in the Three Civilizations: A Comparative Approach

Having examined the religious and ethical frameworks and the nature of authority and governance in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient Persia, it becomes evident that religion and ethics did not manifest to the same degree or in the same form across these three political experiences. Their influence was shaped by the prevailing belief systems and by the historical and social conditions under which each civilization developed. The similarities among them do not negate the distinctiveness of each experience; rather, they reveal multiple patterns of interaction between religious frameworks, ethical values, and the exercise of authority and governance.

At the level of the source of political legitimacy, the three civilizations shared a fundamental principle: political authority derived its legitimacy not from material force alone, but from a religious source that invested it with a sacred character. Religious frameworks were thus clearly operative in the establishment of political authority, although the forms assumed by this presence differed from one civilization to another. In ancient Egypt, the legitimacy of the Pharaoh was intimately bound to religious belief, his religious status deeply intertwining with his political function — particularly during the early periods of Egyptian state history, when the Pharaoh was regarded as either a god or the son of a god. This conception gradually evolved from the absolute divinity of the king in the Old Kingdom toward a more pronounced human dimension and the image of the ruler as guardian of the affairs of the country and its people during the Middle Kingdom. In Mesopotamia, the legitimacy of the king was likewise grounded in divine will — the king appearing as the representative or appointed agent of the deity, responsible for administering the affairs of the country, maintaining temples, administering justice, and championing the weak, while retaining his human status. In ancient Persia, authority was likewise rooted in a religious conception; the Zoroastrian framework, however, offered a relatively distinct understanding, linking governance to the ethical framework of the struggle between good and evil and to the values embodied by Ahura Mazda in opposition to the forces of evil represented by Ahriman. The Shahanshah — the King of Kings — accordingly derived his legitimacy from Divine Glory (*Khvarenah*), which rendered him the earthly representative of divine will.

With regard to the functions of the ruler, clear points of convergence emerge across the three civilizations, although the scope of their religious and political functions and the manner in which they were organized differed. In all three, the ruler was not merely a political sovereign but also performed essential religious functions; most notably in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. In ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh bore responsibility for performing religious rites, maintaining temples, and preserving order, alongside defending the country, administering justice, and managing its affairs. In Mesopotamia, the ruler combined political, administrative, military, and religious functions, responsible for preserving the unity of the country, administering state institutions, commanding the army, maintaining temples, and conveying divine law to the ruled. In ancient Persia, by contrast, the conception of authority

was oriented more strongly toward the centralization of governance in the person of the king, who exercised his authority through an extensive administrative apparatus based on the division of the empire into satrapies: reflecting the extension of the religious framework into a broader political and imperial structure.

Concerning justice and ethics and their correlation to the legitimacy of governance, these two elements constituted a central value in the conception of authority across all three civilizations, with the ethical criterion serving as the fundamental reference for evaluating the exercise of authority and governance. In ancient Egypt, righteous governance was associated with justice, order, self-restraint, and adherence to ethical values — meanings were prominently featured in Egyptian wisdom literature, most notably the Maxims of Ptahhotep, which emphasized reason, ethics, and moderation in conduct. In Mesopotamia, justice emerged in a form more closely tied to codification, as clearly manifested in the Code of Hammurabi, which presented the king as a ruler tasked with establishing justice, protecting the vulnerable, and regulating social relations through laws derived from divine will. In ancient Persia, the ethical dimension assumed a central position, particularly within the Zoroastrian framework, in which Zoroastrian doctrine was founded upon the duality of good and evil and linked human life to the necessity of choosing good and practicing the virtues of justice, truthfulness, sincerity, and chastity. This endowed the exercise of authority and governance with an ethical dimension that extended well beyond mere adherence to religious rituals.

Conclusion :

In conclusion, it can be stated that authority and governance in the civilizations of the Ancient Near East did not develop in isolation from the intellectual, religious, and ethical frameworks that prevailed within these societies. Religion served as one of the primary frameworks through which authority was interpreted and legitimized, while ethical values contributed to defining what the exercise of governance and the relationship between the ruler and the ruled ought to be. This nexus did not, however, assume a uniform form across the three civilizations under examination. Whereas the intertwining of the sacred and the political was most pronounced in the Egyptian experience, Mesopotamia witnessed a distinct coupling of authority with justice and codification, while the ethical dimension in Persia, particularly within the Zoroastrian framework, gained greater prominence through the duality of good and evil and the imperative of adhering to the virtues.

The study arrives at the following conclusions:

- Religion and ethics served as foundational elements in shaping conceptions of authority and governance across Ancient Near Eastern civilizations.
- Religious foundations constituted one of the most significant sources of political legitimacy in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient Persia, where the status of the ruler was bound, to varying degrees, to divine will.
- The functions of authority were not restricted to the political dimension alone, but encompassed religious, judicial, military, and ethical functions; though the nature of this functional overlap and complexity differed from one civilization to another.

- Justice and ethical values occupied a pivotal place in conceptions of righteous governance. In ancient Egypt, righteous governance was bound to the ruler's synthesis of political and religious functions and the consequent preservation of order and justice. In Mesopotamia, it was tied to the intersection of authority, divine will, and legal codes. In ancient Persia, it operated within the ethical framework of the struggle between good and evil.
- The comparative analysis among the three civilizations demonstrates the diversity of ways in which religious frameworks and ethical values were employed to establish political legitimacy, define the functions of governance, and regulate its exercise.
- The comparison further reveals that religion contributed to investing the ruler's person with a sacred character and to the preservation of cosmic, social, and political order in ancient Egypt; was more explicitly bound to royal legitimacy, codification, and the regulation of public life in Mesopotamia; and emerged in Persia as an ethical framework distinguishing between good and evil and defining a body of values intended to guide individual and social conduct.

Evidenced by this, it can be concluded that religion was a foundational element in the establishment of political legitimacy and the interpretation of the ruler's status across all three civilizations, while ethics constituted a normative framework for defining the boundaries of righteous governance and evaluating its practice. It can therefore be affirmed that the civilizations of the Ancient Near East in general, and ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient Persia in particular, were not merely political experiences grounded in political and military power or administrative organization. Rather, they developed integrated conceptions of authority and governance in which the political, religious, ethical, and legal dimensions were deeply overlapped. This underscores the importance of studying these civilizations, offering valuable insight into the earliest foundations of political thought and practice.

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