The Dignity of the Human Person and Social Justice in the Ancient Mediterranean World

By Leo D. Lefebure

The dignity of the human person is among the most important concerns of contemporary thought, with particular importance for the quest for social justice and the assertion of human rights. There is, however, no universally agreed framework for pondering the meaning and significance of the human person. Modern personalism presents an exalted view of the unique value of each individual that is always to be respected. One of the leading proponents of personalist philosophy, Emmanuel Mounier, proposed an influential description of the human person as a unique, dynamic process eluding external definition or control:

> There are not, then, stones, animals, trees--and persons, the last being like mobile trees or a more astute kind of animals. The person is not the most marvelous object in the world, nor anything else that we can know from the outside. It is the one reality that we know, and that we are at the same time fashioning, from within. […] It is the living activity of self-creation, of communication and of attachment, that grasps and knows itself, in the act, as the *movement* of *becoming personal.* To this experience no one can be conditioned nor compelled.[1]

Critics have questioned Mounier's assumptions and strenuously challenged personalism as an intellectual movement.[2] Recently, however, in a probing exploration of modern European philosophy, David Walsh has strongly affirmed the transcendent dignity of the human person, tracing the roots of this belief to ancient Greek philosophy and early Christianity:

> How is a universal language of rights to avoid a collapse into incoherence in the absence of any overarching intellectual framework? […] We no more live in a world of instrumentalized rationality than we live in a world of individualized chaos. Our lives are spent within the eschatological openness that is the indefinable mystery of the personal. What makes it possible for us to build cooperatively the world that is sustained by just such efforts is that we are not simply entities within that world. Over and above all that is done in history is the singular person that transcends it all. That insight is not by any means new, for it is present at the very inception of philosophy and Christianity.[3]

In recent years, the claim that the ancient Mediterranean world, especially Greece, Israel, and early Christianity, offers precedents for the notions of human dignity and universal human rights has been both vigorously asserted and contested.[4] The purpose of this essay is not to

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[1] Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism,* trans. Philip Mairet (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952), xvii, xviii.

[2] *Personalism Revisited: Its Proponents and Critics*, ed. Thomas O. Buford and Harold H. Oliver, (Amsterdam and New York: Rudopi, 2002). For a very different approach to persons than Mounier's, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1986). Charles Taylor considers the gap between modern Western culture's moral intuitions and its sense of the self in *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[3] David Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xii.

[4] Elaine Pagels, "Human Rights: Legitimizing a Recent Concept," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 442 (1979): 57-62; Kirsten Sellars, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights* (Stroud, U.K.: Sutton Publishing, 2002); Jack Mahoney, *The Challenge of Human Rights: Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Arvind Sharma, *Are Human*

review the contemporary philosophical debate but to examine what precedents there may be in ancient Mediterranean literature for modern affirmations of human dignity, human rights, and social justice. The ancient Mediterranean records are complex and conflicting, offering both continuities and discontinuities with contemporary perspectives on the human person. Philosopher Christopher Gill comments aptly on the relation of modern notions of personality and selfhood to ancient Greek philosophy: "On the one hand, these notions are so central to our thinking that it is virtually inconceivable that they have *no* equivalent in Greek thought. On the other, it is clearly unacceptable to assume that we can transpose our conceptual vocabulary wholesale (with all its implied ideological and metaphysical associations) into the ancient Greek context."[5]

Ancient Mediterranean understandings of the dignity of the human person and social justice are often rather different from contemporary understandings. For example, when considering the demands of justice, ancient Mediterranean societies generally assumed that slavery was a natural part of the social and political order and was fully in accordance with the will of God or the gods. From different vantage points, the Torah of ancient Israel (Ex 21:1-11), the New Testament (Eph 6:5-8), and the *Politics* of Aristotle (1.2-7) accepted the ownership of some human beings by others as in harmony with justice, a perspective shared by many signers of the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 1776 but widely rejected today. While it would be anachronistic to read modern notions of the human person and social justice in their current form back into the ancient texts, nonetheless, it remains true that modern Western culture draws profoundly upon the resources of its ancient heritage in pondering the dignity of the human person and social justice today.

Egypt: The Equality of Humans and the Eloquent Peasant

Long before the era of Greek philosophers and Hebrew prophets, writers in Egypt affirmed that justice is embedded in the cosmos, and they robustly challenged earthly rulers on behalf of those mistreated. While ancient Egypt does not propose an abstract, philosophical definition of the human person, texts from the Middle Kingdom about the year 2000 B.C.E., forcefully affirm the equality of all humans in creation and demand justice for all humans across social classes. Many years ago James Henry Breasted argued that early Egypt produced "The Dawn of Conscience."[6]

The Egyptian creation account that John A. Wilson translated under the English title, "All Men Created Equal in Opportunity," dated to about 2000 B.C.E., asserts that god created all humans with equal rights and interprets social inequality as the result of human failings:

> The All-Lord says in the presence of those stilled from tumult on the journey of the court: 'Pray, be prosperous in peace! I repeat for you four good deeds which my own heart did for me in the midst of the serpent-coil, in order to still evil. I did four good deeds within the portal of the horizon.
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> I made the four winds that every man might breathe thereof *like his fellow* in his time. That is (one) deed thereof.

Rights Western? A Contribution to the Dialogue of Civilizations (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007)..

[5] Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1996), 3,

[6] James Henry Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933, 1968). See also H. and H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, William A. Irwin, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1946, 1972).

> I made the great inundation that the poor man might have rights therein like the great man. That is (one) deed thereof.
>
> I made every man like his fellow. I did not command that they do evil, (but) it was their hearts which violated what I had said. That is one deed thereof.[7]

This text grounds the fundamental equality and rights of all human beings in god's creative action. John A. Wilson comments that for this creation account, "the juxtaposition of god's equalitarian creation and this statement of man's disobedience of god's command means that man—and not god—is responsible for social inequality."[8] Elsewhere Wilson called attention to the proto-democratic context of this text in the history of Egypt: "It is significant that so sweeping a statement of the ultimate opportunity of every man is known only from that period which came closest to democratic realization."[9]

During the Old Kingdom, Egypt developed a sense of cosmic justice in the figure of *Maat*, "truth, justice, righteousness, right dealing, order."[10] Beginning in the middle of the third millennium B.C.E., Maat played a role in creation, represented the norm for justice in human society, and she weighed the souls after death to determine their fate.

One of the most powerful Egyptian assertions of human dignity and rights appears not in the form of an abstract treatise but in a gripping, concrete narrative. The tale from about 2100 B.C.E. named "The Protests of the Eloquent Peasant" teaches the principles of social justice through the story of a peasant named Khun Anup who decided to go to Egypt to obtain food for his children. He loaded his donkeys full of plants and salt and leopard skins and wolf hides, plus pebbles and does, bringing every type of good that he could offer in trade to obtain food from Egypt. As Khun Anup was journeying to Herakleopolis, a vassal of the Chief Steward, a member of the upper class, Thut-nakht, saw him with all his donkeys laden down with goods. That-nakht envied the peasant's goods and plotted to steal them. That-nakht's house was situated near a very narrow path along a riverbank, with water on the one side and grain on the other. That-nakht instructed his servant to bring a large sheet from his house and spread it across the pathway so that it completely blocked the way. When Khun Anup came along, That-nakht ordered him not to tread upon his sheet. Since the pathway was blocked, the two debated. As they were arguing back and forth, one of the donkeys ate a piece of the grain, which was exactly what That-nakht was waiting for. He began to beat the peasant and had his servants take his donkeys and all his goods.

Khun Anup, beaten and robbed of his goods, wept greatly and cried out for justice. For ten days, Khun Anup pleaded with Thut-nakht for the return of his goods. Then he went to the capital, to the home of the Chief Steward, Rensi, one of the chief officials of the King and told his story. He pleaded, "Because thou art the father of the orphan, the husband of the widow, the brother of the divorcee, the apron of him that is motherless. Let me make thy name in this land according to every good law: a leader free from covetousness, a great man free from wrongdoing, one who destroys falsehood and brings justice into being."[11]

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[7] "All Men Created Equal in Opportunity," trans. John A. Wilson, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (3rd ed. with supplement; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 7-8.

[8] John A. Wilson, notes to "All Men Created Equal in Opportunity," p. 8, n. 4.

[9] John A. Wilson, *The Burden of Egypt: An Interpretation of Ancient Egyptian Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1967), 118.

[10] Wilson, *Burden of Egypt*, 119.

[11] "The Protests of the Eloquent Peasant," trans. John A. Wilson, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (3rd ed. with supplement; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 408.

The official was fascinated by how well Khun Anup spoke, and so he told King Neb-kau-Re about him. The king was fascinated as well and ordered the peasant to be kept at court. He ordered that he be given food every day and that his wife and children be given food as well. The king directed the official to keep Khun Anup talking and to write down everything that he said so that the king could hear it, but the official was not to answer anything to the peasant. For nine days Khun Anup made his eloquent appeal, "Do justice for the sake of the Lord of Justice" (410). Each day he would receive no answer. On the ninth day, he repeated his appeal with even more desperation than before and concluded by warning the official not to judge according to a person's wealth or poverty but according to the rights of justice. "For those who are now esteemed may become sufferers" (410). He concluded by saying he would take his appeal to God who judges the dead. Khun Anup then turned away, ready to die in despair. The official sent two guardsmen to bring him back. Khun Anup was afraid, thinking they would punish him for what he had said. But the official told him, "Do not be afraid. From now on, you will live with me." The official ordered that That-nakht be brought to court. The official confronted That-nakht for having stolen from the peasant, made a list of all That-nakht's property, and gave it to the peasant. This is among the first cases that we know of where a member of a poorer class appeals to a ruler against a member of a higher class in the name of justice before God and is heard. It is the first case we know where the ruler punished a rich man who had stolen from a poor man. Wilson comments: "*Maat* here was the positive force of social justice, of man's humanity to man. […] In this near-democratic age, the emphasis was not upon the rights of the ruler but upon the rights of the ruled. […] The point of the tale is that even the humblest of men may rise up and demand his rights."[12] This is what Breasted meant by the dawn of conscience. For the first time in the literary record of humanity, the high ideal of justice to the poor and oppressed challenged the social thinking of the ruling class.

Wilson cautiously applies the word "democracy" to these developments, but not in the sense of political sovereignty residing in the people at large; rather, Wilson claims this was "ancient Egypt's democratic age" in "the secondary but common meaning of social equalitarianism, the disregard of political or economic barriers in the belief that all men have equal rights and opportunities—or should have such. It seems clear from the texts which we have cited that there was a belief in social justice for everybody at this time and that even the poorest man had rights to the gifts of the gods because the creator-god 'made every man like his fellow.'"[13]

The teachings on justice in ancient Egypt had a major influence upon ancient Israel, especially upon the Israelite wisdom tradition.[14] The Egyptian Instruction of Amenope, which presents the teaching of Maat, served as the major source for Proverbs 22:17-24:22.[15]

The Bible

The Bible continues and develops the concern for social justice expressed by the Egyptian creation account and the Eloquent Peasant. Commenting on the Hebrew Bible, John J. Collins argues that "no other collection of documents from the ancient world, and scarcely any other documents at all, speak with such passionate urgency on the subject of social justice. The

[12] Wilson, *Burden of Egypt,* 122.

[13] Wilson, *Burden of Egypt,* 123.

[14] Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008); G.E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* (Lewisburg/London: Bucknell University/Associated University, 1979).

[15] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation, with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 753-67.

primary voices in this respect are those of the Hebrew prophets, but the law codes of the Pentateuch are also of fundamental importance for our understanding of human rights."[16] While Collins does acknowledge the profound gulf between ancient Israelite notions of human rights and the contemporary world, he nonetheless maintains that "the concern for the unfortunate of society in these books is remarkable, and often stands as a reproach to the modern Western world."[17] Like the Eloquent Peasant, Amos and other prophets in Israel directly challenged the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy, threatening them with dire punishments. Kings in ancient Israel had the responsibility before God to care and provide justice for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, i.e., those most vulnerable to being exploited and deprived of justice.

The Hebrew Bible does not offer abstract philosophical reflection on the human person, but it does offer grounds for defending the dignity and rights of all in society. The book of Genesis presents all humans as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1). Usually, ancient societies viewed the king as the image or representative of God, but Genesis extends this dignity to every human being without exception. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of the British Commonwealth, draws out the implication of this perspective for engaging human differences: "The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone else who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideas, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his."[18] In a world where slaves usually had few rights, observance of the Sabbath (Ex 20) commanded that even slaves be given a day free from labor to worship God. On the Sabbath, humans cease from their economic roles in society and remember their status as creatures before God. Psalm 8:5 dramatically presents the dignity of humans as "a little lower than God."

While ancient Israel did not engage in philosophical reflection in the style of ancient Greece, nonetheless the biblical wisdom tradition approaches philosophy with its concern for the regular patterns in human experience and the cosmic context of human life. The figure of *chokmah*, cosmic Lady Wisdom personified as a woman in the Hebrew Bible, may have been inspired by the model of Maat in Egypt. She plays in the creation of the world, is more valuable than jewels, and she guides kings and calls them to account for their exercise of authority (Prov 8).

The deutero-canonical books of Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon relate the universal, cosmic role of personified Wisdom to the specific historical religious experience of Israel in receiving the Torah. Sirach 24 interprets the Torah given through Moses as cosmic Lady Wisdom coming to dwell in Israel. William A. Irwin reflects on the assumption of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) regarding the cosmic sense of justice represented by Lady Wisdom: "But beyond and subsuming this ["positive law"] is the invisible, unwritten law, the universal sense of right which has reality only in human thought and ideals but expresses itself in a mood of judgment upon positive law as well as in just and right action that transcends legal requirements. It will be apparent, then, that Ecclesiasticus' identification of the divine wisdom with the Torah is a statement of the anterior relation of natural law."[19] While Irwin acknowledges that Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon are clearly aware of Greek literature, he rightly insists: "The concept of natural law here expressed is Israel's own achievement; its relation to that of Greece must be sought in other directions than one of dependence."[20]

The Hebrew word *nephesh* is usually translated as "soul," but it refers to the entire human person, not to a Platonic soul that indwells a body. In the Hebrew Bible the heart (*lev*) is the center of human identity, the seat of both thought and emotion. There is a mystery to the human

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[16] John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 603.
[17] Collins, *Introduction*, 604..
[18] Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002), 201.
[19] William A. Irwin, "The Hebrews," in *Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man,* 295.
[20] Irwin, "Hebrews," 295.

heart that God alone understands. The corresponding Greek term in the New Testament is *psyche.* The deutero-canonical book, the Wisdom of Solomon, composed in Greek in Alexandria and accepted as part of the First Testament in the Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox Bibles, develops the ancient Jewish wisdom tradition in dialogue with Greek thought and presents a dualistic view of the human person, "for a perishable body weighs down the soul" (9:15).[21]

The Wisdom of Solomon develops the understanding of *chokmah,* now translated into Greek as *Sophia,* by drawing explicitly upon the concepts of Hellenistic philosophy. Writing under the pseudonym of King Solomon, the Greek-speaking Jewish author, probably from Alexandria, Egypt, admonishes the rulers of his day: "Love justice, you who rule on earth" (Wis 1:1). He sternly warns that even if earthly rulers get away with murder in this world, as in the account of the persecution and killing of a just man, they will be held to account in the afterlife, where the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished (Wis 1:16-3:19).

The New Testament continues and develops the concern for human dignity and social justice of ancient Jewish religion in relation to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus develops and transforms the roles of prophet and sage, continuing the concern for justice, especially for the poor. The Christological hymns in John 1 and Colossians 1 attribute to the cosmic Christ the ordering role of Lady Wisdom in creation.

The Concept of the Person and Social Justice in ancient Greece and Rome

The English word "person" comes from the Latin noun *persona,* which referred to the mask worn by actors in Greek and Latin dramas. The Latin noun in turn comes from the verb *personare,* literally, "to sound through," or "to make a loud, continuous, or pervasive noise."[22] The first meaning of *persona* was the mask that actors wore and through which they spoke; from this came a second meaning referring to the character being represented in a drama (English-language publications of plays traditionally list the "Dramatis Personae," i.e., the characters of the drama). The term could also mean the role played by a person in life or the actual being of an individual; in a legal context *persona* could refer to an individual involved in a case; the word could also attribute personality to an abstraction or a personification.[23] Roman Stoics developed a theory of roles or *personae*, which functioned to identify certain "normative reference-points in rational moral choice," a framework that strongly influenced Cicero.[24]

The corresponding Greek term was *prosōpon*, literally, "before the eyes." The primary meaning of *prosōpon* was the face or visage; it could refer to one's look or countenance; this term also referred to an actor's mask, accenting the visual position of the mask in front of the face. The word could also mean a person, including the sense of a legal personality.[25] Both *persona* and *prosōpon* could refer in various contexts either to masks or to roles played or to individual humans. "Persona" in contemporary English can still refer to the image or role that an individual presents to others in a particular context.

The Christian trinitarian and Christological debates in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. profoundly transformed the meaning of *persona* and *prosōpon* and influenced all later Christian

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[21] All biblical quotations are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible,* ed. Michael D. Coogan (augmented 3rd ed.; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[22] *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1982), 1357.

[23] *The Classic Latin Dictionary* Chicago: Follett Publishing Co., 1931), 410; *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1356.

[24] Christopher Gill, "Personhood and Personality: The Four-*personae* Theory in Cicero, *de Officiis I*, in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy,* vol. VI, ed. Julia Annas (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1988), 176. See also Gretchen Reydams-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 93.

[25] *A Greek-English Lexicon, compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott* (revised with supplement: Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1533.

reflection.[26] For the third-century writer Sabellius, who denied any internal distinction in God, *prosōpon* referred to the different roles that God plays in relation to humans, variously as Father, Son, and Spirit, analogous to a human actor playing various roles in a drama. A century later, in response to Christian critics who challenged him concerning the status of God the Father, Gregory of Nazianzus rejected the application of the terminology of either substance or accident; instead, Gregory defined the meaning of person in the Trinity in terms of a relation. From this point on, for the later Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox traditions, a Trinitarian person is neither a substance nor an accident but rather is a relationship. Gregory of Nazianzus's breakthrough flowed into Augustine's reflections on the human person as created in the image of God according to the relationships of *memoria, intelligentia, et voluntas* (memory, understanding, and will). Augustine described his reflection on his identity as a labor (*Confessions* 10.16.25).

The ancient sources for understanding the dignity of the human person in relation to the quest for justice are far broader than the explicit Latin and Greek concepts of *persona* and *prosōpon.* Separately from discussions of the meaning of *prosōpon,* ancient Greek thinkers stressed the necessity of *epimeleia heautou* (in Latin, *cura sui*), i.e., "the care of self." From Socrates to Hellenistic philosophers to early Christian authors, many ancient thinkers anticipated Mounier in viewing human identity as a dynamic project to be fashioned, or in Augustine's term, as a labor. Studying this trajectory, Michel Foucault found that *epimeleia* involves much more than mere attention to oneself, for the term "also always designates a number of actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself."[27] The ancient philosophers generally supposed that knowledge of the truth demanded a transformation of the self through a conversion.[28]

Complementing the spiritual exercises for the care of self, the Stoics developed a theory of natural law that would be crucial for modern understandings of human rights. The Stoics believed that the natural law pervades the cosmos and is common to all humans; they stressed that humans have a responsibility to live according to their reason, which corresponds to the universal natural law. However, Stoics did not develop from this a theory of human rights. Susan Ford Wiltshire rightly comments: "We strain to see in Stoicism a basis for a belief in individual rights. […] Self-sufficient individuals act in accordance with nature, but nature owes them nothing back. Certainly nature has not endowed them with 'unalienable rights.'"[29] Nonetheless, Wiltshire continues, the Stoics prepared for later theories of human rights in three ways: (1) by identifying persons not in terms of their city but rather in terms of the cosmos; (2) by stressing "the individual as a moral agent"; and (3) by developing the understanding of natural law as a measure for human decisions (p. 17).

Cicero incorporated Stoic ideas on the universally valid natural law into the Roman legal world, assuming that Roman law was coequal with the natural law. For Cicero and his contemporaries, it was unthinkable to appeal to the natural law as a basis for revolution against Roman law, but modern readers in later centuries would see the relationship differently. Wiltshire acknowledges that Roman jurisprudence did not accord the individual "any absolute value simply by virtue of being a human being" (p. 28). Nonetheless, it made a major step in developing the notion of a universal natural law: "While Roman law contains only the seeds of a theory of individual rights, there could be no such rights at all apart from a prior commitment to

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[26] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press).

[27] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82,* ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). 11.

[28] Foucault, 15-17.

[29] Susan Ford Wiltshire, *Greece, Rome, and the Bill of Rights* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 16, 17.

the rule of law. That is what Romans confirmed for the world, dignified and ameliorated by the humane claims of Stoicism" (p. 29). Ambrose of Milan combined the Stoic notion of natural law with the Law of the Old Testament, paving the way for medieval Christian theories of natural law that drew from both pagan legal wisdom and also the Jewish heritage. (Wiltshire, p. 32-33).

The ancient Mediterranean reflections on the dignity of the human person and social justice set in motion a process of critical reflection upon social, economic and political relationships that continues to the present day. From Maat in Egypt to Wisdom in Israel to the natural law of the Stoics, belief in a universal order of justice embedded in creation challenged successive societies to reflect on the uses and abuses of power, especially in relation to the poor and the vulnerable. These principles are not simply part of our past but continue to challenge us today. As Hans-Georg Gadamer argued, classic works have the power to transcend their original context and to speak directly to later ages across all the differences of cultures, politics, and religions, exerting a demand for attention and at times for change.[30] Even though succeeding ages and different cultures may understand the demand for justice in very different ways, there is a restless ongoing movement in the quest to respect human dignity and shape a more just society. Precisely because no society has ever perfectly achieved justice, the task continues in ever-changing circumstances. According to the written records that have come down to us, the call for justice sounded first in Africa. It echoes still.

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[30] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2nd, revised ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1989).