

## Socrates and Confucius: Precursors to Jesus

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In his work, *The Republic*, Plato advocated for a polity led by a philosopher king who would guide the state with wisdom and magnanimity. Plato's mentor, Socrates, was born within a decade of the passing of Confucius and Buddha. Socrates aspired for a civilization characterized by a thoughtful inquiry into truth and a life informed by civic virtue.

The leaders of Athens turned against Socrates in 399 B.C. for allegedly challenging the city-state's worldview, inciting corruption, and threatening the existing order. Socrates accepted the verdict that befell him. He was charged as guilty by a total of 30 votes out of the more than 1,000 votes cast. Socrates insisted that, as prescribed by the legal code, he be subjected to the death penalty, even though the opposition would have preferred only to banish him from Athens.

Until his final moment, Socrates remained committed to the law and to the principles that he taught. Those who had opposed him undoubtedly trembled in shame and self-judgment, as he partook of the cup of hemlock rather than accept exile. The consistency of Socrates' devotion to civic virtue was punctuated by his final words to his accusers and followers alike:

When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing -- then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.

Socrates lamented the paths chosen by those who held the reins of power at the time. Jesus who appeared four centuries after Socrates' passing would do the same. It was Socrates who inspired Plato's composition of *The Republic*, in which a Philosopher-King was seen as the ideal leader of the state. The Philosopher-King characterized by virtue could be said to represent a messianic type figure.

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Back in China, Confucius abandoned his post as a principal minister of government and mentor to duchies in China because of the corruption he saw there. Lamenting the absence of virtue among the leaders of his time, he chose instead to become an itinerant teacher. Confucius aspired to elevate the human condition. He frequently alluded to a "Superior man" and to the qualities of such a person. His followers found those qualities within him:

There were four things from which the Master was entirely free. He had no foregone conclusions, no arbitrary predeterminations, no obstinacy, and no egoism.

Confucius advocated for self-cultivation. The unnamed "Superior Man" whom he pointed to as the model of leadership had a Messianic dimension. Confucius spoke of and aspired to become a Superior Man, indeed a perfected man, what Christ has long been seen as. *Analects* chronicles Confucius' description of the evolution of his character:

The Master said, "At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right."

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China emerged as the world's most developed civilization and remained so for many centuries centered on the traditions brought forth by Confucius. Confucius insisted to his students that he had created nothing new; he only made evident what already existed and merely had to be observed. During Jesus' lifetime, the Han dynasty and other such great dynasties, stood at the center of a number of tributary nations that continued to recognize and emulate China as the model civilization. The wares of the Han dynasty made their way West to Rome's markets, making Rome play a similar role as China. As we can see, Rome left a legacy that would last generations.