



## Teaching Leaflet

### Legacies of Care

#### Lesson Three: Ancient Roots of Care

#### “Systems of Care Overview”

##### The Egyptians

The Egyptian civilization, the oldest with a large written record, formed in the Nile River Delta as Egyptians settled along the river to gain access to water for their crops and animals. A sophisticated culture developed out of this humble beginning. Because the culture depended on crops for their survival, they worshipped gods who controlled crop success and failure, sun and rain, as well as life and death. In order to maintain order in the society and appease their gods, the Egyptians developed a religious system that governed their daily life and patterns of relating to people as well as their worship.

Egyptian society operated within an authoritarian hierarchy, and the Pharaoh, who was believed to be a god, ruled from the top. Most of the writings that have been discovered offer instructions and sayings for the Pharaoh and other rulers to follow in order to encourage them to exercise their power with justice. Those in power were expected to care for those in need without an expectation for a return favor. Those who were not in authority did not appear to have any rights of their own, and so justice was defined in the context of the weak depending on the strong who would help them.

Egyptians believed that their actions in this life affected the quality of their life after death. The Book of the Dead, among other things, recorded these actions so that they could help the dead succeed in their after life. When a person died, Egyptians believed they had to make confessions in order to gain rebirth, and these confessions came from what they did and did not do in their lives on earth. Negative confessions were statements about acts they did not commit: “I have not defrauded the poor of their property. I have not done what the gods abominate. I have not caused harm to be done to a servant by his master. I have not caused pain. I have caused no man to hunger. I have made no one weep” (Hooker, 1996). They gained credit for good and just behavior simply by not doing something to hurt someone. These Acts of Mercy were predicated on an absence of harm to the persons in need. Acts of Mercy such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, providing shelter, caring for the sick, caring for criminals, and burying the dead were considered important, however, and these acts were recorded upon a person’s death and sent to their grave with them. Although positive actions to help were important, justice often meant that a person had successfully avoided hurting another individual rather than that they had actively helped to alleviate a need.

##### The Greeks

Greek life was characterized by developments in philosophy and science — and these were not necessarily thoughts rooted in religious belief. The government was organized primarily in small city-states rather than around one major city-state. Small elite groups exercised control over the rest of society. True democracy existed only for a relatively small percentage of the population.

The majority of Greek citizens were either slave or artisan. The artisans were people who worked with their hands and who, many times, had their own businesses. Typical Greek thought for this time period suggested that any individual forced to work with his or her hands was poor, but because they worked, they were considered to be the “worthy” poor. Still, others were categorized as poor based on issues of gender, age or illness. Able-bodied citizens who chose to beg were viewed as the “undeserving”



or “unworthy” poor. Aid of any form usually was reserved for those overwhelmed by unavoidable disaster.

Most surviving documents from this time period deal with the exchange of goods between individuals. The giving of gifts or help could be considered as self-serving in that the giver anticipated something in return. These earliest forms of philanthropy served as a way to build friendships and form social cohesion among the wealthy. Originally, philanthropy was meant to benefit the community and city-state. The elite provided gifts to the city-states with the understanding that they, the elite, would be honored at a later date. Many times individual artisans would benefit from trickle-down effects of philanthropy, i.e., money loaned might permit an individual to keep and continue with his or her job. However, any aid received also came with the understanding that the individual would give back to the community.

As early as 400 B.C.E., Greek culture had so shifted away from the idea of reciprocity that it was no longer considered suitable for the giver to expect a return. The philosopher Aristotle even went so far as to suggest that the value of a gift was not to be judged by its worth but by the spirit of the giver.

### **The Romans**

Rome was a worldwide empire with people of many different races and classes. As a multicultural and expanding society, citizenship was extended to nonslave members in Rome and in its provinces. The state began to blur the division between family and stranger (people not considered to be citizens of Rome). Care was provided to citizens who were poor or in need by both the state and personally by individuals who were wealthy. The pride that Romans took in their city and the pressure to benefit the city motivated the people to care for and help those who were considered dependents. The type of help, if any, that a person received was predicated on being a citizen of Rome.

There was a sense of obligation for those who were patricians, the wealthy original citizens of Rome, to help those who were considered plebeians, the lower working class. A former slave was free to return to his patron's, his former master's, home every day for work or some type of gift. Wealthy patrons were also expected to provide for poor, extended family members on a daily basis if necessary.

There was also public assistance available to the people residing in Rome. Grain and oil, considered the basic necessities of life, were the most commonly distributed food sources. Originally designed to aid those considered Roman citizens, food was eventually being distributed at no cost to all of the poor living in the city. People who were considered citizens did, however, receive help as a right of their citizenship, not because of their individual need.

The Romans valued self-reliance and independence. The widows, the orphans, and those who were victims of war were treated with sympathy and offered means of care. Those who were able to work but remained poor were not well-respected. The recipient's appreciation of the patron's way of life was in part what motivated the giver to help. Reciprocity remained an important ideal in Roman society. Pity was considered dangerous to the welfare of the Roman state, but reciprocity was valued because the giver and receiver maintained their respect when there was some sense of obligation on behalf of everyone involved.

### **Jewish Society**

Although the history of the nation of Israel predates the Greeks and the Romans, we include it here because it sets the stage for the early Christian church. Israel, made up of many tribes and clans, had to fight to keep itself unified in the middle of intertribal conflict and attacks from outside. Laws given in the Hebrew Testament defined how individuals in the culture should relate to each other in their daily routine in order to keep peace and ensure survival. The Hebrew Testament was the first document to describe these types of ethical laws in this much detail.

In contrast with the previous cultures studied who believed in many gods controlling their lives, the Hebrew culture believed that life was governed by one God who is both loving and just and that God's pattern of relating to humankind should be the model for the way they related to each other. The



Hebrew laws directed people to actively work to do good for others, especially those who were unable to help themselves like strangers, widows and orphans. Sin was both an individual act and an act of the whole group when the community had enough but did not help the poor who did not. Helping, then, was a positive act and not just a passive choice to refrain from hurting others, as in Egyptian culture. Doing justice and being merciful to others was more acceptable than sacrifice.

The Hebrew culture developed several ideas about caring that were somewhat unique to their culture. In order to survive and have enough food, cultures tended to provide for only those who belonged to their family and clan. Anyone, like a stranger, widow or orphan who did not have a connection to families and clans would be left without provision. Hebrew law specifically dictated that individuals and families provide for those outside of their group so that all would have enough. This commitment to the stranger came, in part, as a response to Israel's experience as slaves in Egypt: they did not want to treat others as they were treated. Commitment to the stranger also came from their belief that all people, no matter their status or role, were sojourners in a land that belonged to God and not to them. In fact, the Hebrews believed that everything they had, including their lives, was a gift from God to be shared freely. If people had needs, they received help without any other requirements. Finally, the Hebrew law stressed that caring in a way that would maintain people's dignity was as important as obeying the command to care. These attitudes prepared the foundation for the attitudes of the early church.

### **Early Christian Church**

During his ministry on earth, Jesus set the example for the church on how to care for others. Jesus connected love for God with love for others. He declared that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord, but the second is to love our neighbors as yourself (Matthew 22:36-40). In John 13:34, Jesus declares that we are to love others as He has loved us, and in this way others will know that we are Christians. Time and time again, Jesus challenges the religious authorities by choosing to do good instead of evil (Mark 3:4). He heals on the Sabbath, he dines with the prostitute, and he saves the adulterous woman from being stoned to death. He consistently chooses love in his encounters with those who are needy.

The early church followed Jesus' commands to care for and love others. They sold their possessions and gave the money to the poor as Jesus instructed (Luke 12:33; Acts 2:45). They shared everything that they had, and there was not a person in need among them (Acts 4:32-34). They worshiped and celebrated together in one another's homes. Their way of life led many people to follow Christ.

As the number of Christians increased so did the number of people who needed help. The Grecian Jews thought their widows were being overlooked by the Hebraic Jews in their daily giving of food. These widows had lost their human support system of family when they converted to Christianity. They were considered to be humanly dead to their families, thus shifting responsibility for their care to the "family of God" – the early church. The disciples convened and decided they would be neglecting their work of teaching, preaching, and prayer if they also served food. They selected seven men who were "full of the Spirit" and considered wise who would be responsible for caring for the poor among them (Acts 6:1-7). This is the first division of focus involving two gospel imperatives: providing for needs and study of the scriptures. The disciples discerned both were fundamental in the life of those following Christ.

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