



The Axial Age

What is the "Axial Age"?

The Axial Age is an era from approximately 800-200 BCE when new religious and philosophical outlooks emerged that continue to dominate our globe today. These transformations occurred in four locations: China, India, Greece, and Israel. Earlier systems of thought do not exhibit the same influence today and in many cases have been completely forgotten.

Pre-Axial religions emphasize:

- i) **sacrificial ritual** (an exchange transaction) that reflects the obvious connections between life and death (especially as you eat meat) with
- ii) **deities/spirits** like us (varied morals, personalities) to
- iii) achieve this-**worldly goods** (health, wealth, longevity, children) and aiming for
- iv) **cosmic maintenance** (not personal transformation).

Pre-Axial traditions are based on embeddedness. People are embedded:

- i) **socially**: people are defined by group identity and not considered as individuals who might go their own way;
- ii) **cosmically**: deities are linked to the land & the physical universe. People too may be considered tied to or part of the land;
- iii) in terms of **human flourishing** as it focuses on this-worldly goods.





- A number of conditions seem to help spawn the axial transformations. All four regions experienced disruption, itinerant thinkers (wandering philosophers), and **expanding literacy**.
- **Writing** is critical. Not only does it allow ideas to be stored, it gives an enormous boost to **analytical thinking** (critique, debate, etc.) and values novel ideas. Oral cultures rely more on narrative thinking as stories are easily memorized. Such narratives do not prize novelty and argumentation but rather **repetition of old** and timeless favourites.



Non-Axial traditions address deities as a social group. Less individualism religiously or otherwise.



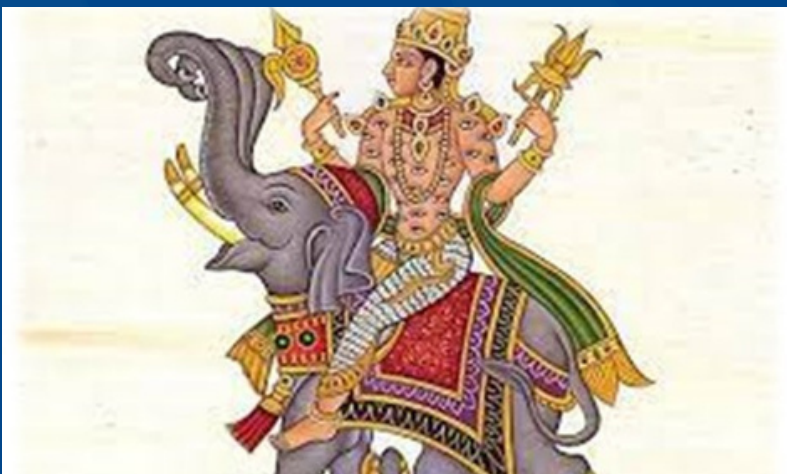
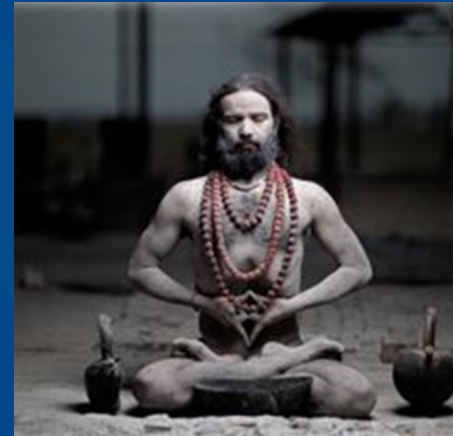
Greek deities, like mortals, have appetites and varying morals.

- Key features of Axial traditions:
 - **Transcendental consciousness**: there is a stepping back from one's culture or circumstances. The result is critique (a kind of quarrel with life rather than acceptance or valuing of the world as is). Also seeks a transcendent or higher good than ordinary human flourishing.
 - **Individualism**: questions about the self, including seeing oneself as an autonomous actor, not constrained by context or culture.
 - Shift in emphasis from cosmic maintenance to **personal transformation**.
- **Caveats**: Such shifts are never total so shifts may not be complete nor eradicate prior ideas. In addition, timewise, **Zoroaster is an outlier** as his outlook fits the Axial Age criteria but he may have lived much earlier.



India

- **1000 BCE:** Pre-axial age, Indian religion focuses on **worship of Indra**, a warrior god, and celebrates cattle poaching & combat. Main festivals feature competitive and aggressive games. Main practice is **animal sacrifice**.
- **800 BCE:** The ritual shifts to less violent and combative rituals. Focus now is on **personal psychology**, using meditation, fasting, hallucinogens, etc. to create a **transformative experience**.
- **500 BCE:** The **Upanishads** are written. They emphasize not the power of ritual to effect material change, but rather personal transformation. They also identify an ultimate force called **Brahmin** that even transcends individual gods. Religion also focuses now on otherworldly goals (**attaining liberation or moksha**). Ritual power has been called into question and stress on personal transformation means **moral karma replaces ritual karma**.
- **500 BCE: Buddhism** emerges and, similar to the Upanishads, replaces ritual with universal ethics and a transcendent goal (**nirvana**).
- **500 BCE: Jainism** emerges and teaches non-violence. **"Conquering" is of oneself** (not others) and the battle is not about cattle poaching but rather against worldly desires.



Indra is a warrior god.

In short, the religious development over a few centuries moves from combative/aggressive values and ritual seeking this worldly benefits to **new systems emphasizing personal transformation, ethical reform, and other worldly goals**.

Greece

- **800 BCE:**

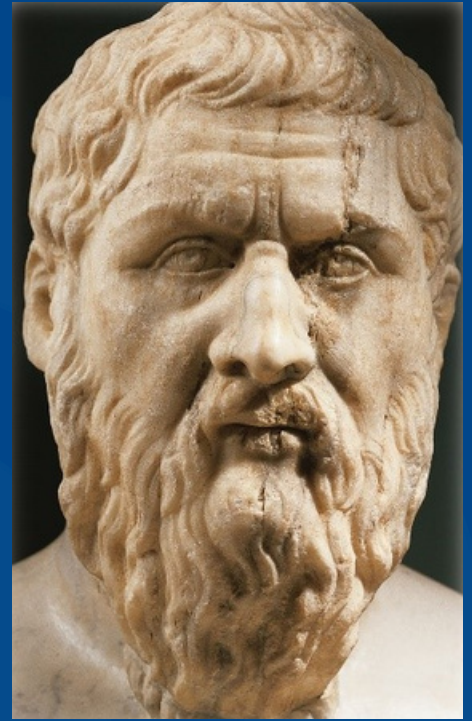
- **Homer** emphasizes **anthropomorphic gods** with varied morals, who are not overly concerned with human well-being.
- His detailed narratives keep the gods alive and present in Greek life so that they survive the axial developments.
- The stories celebrate the **warrior ideal** (esteemed values are **honour/fame**).

- **700 BCE:**

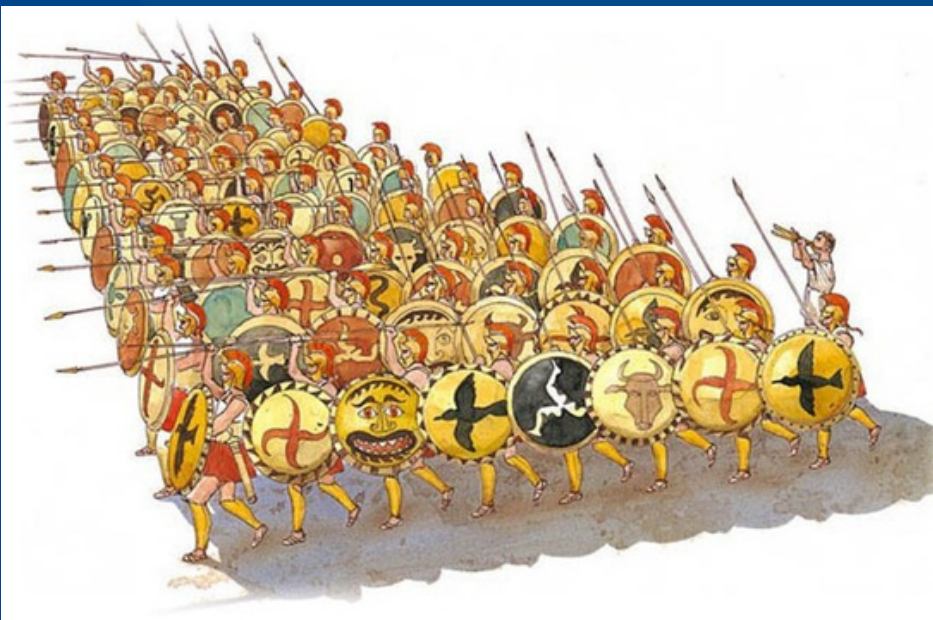
- **Hesiod** writes about the gods but the warrior ideal falls away. Now the gods are more **concerned with justice** than previously.

- **500 BCE:** A **democratic** revolution happens in Athens.

- One factor is the development of the radically **egalitarian Hoplite army**. It values not the individual hero but **teamwork** where every soldier, be they elites or commoners, must stay in formation and do their part.
- **Solon** in Athens sets up a **Council of 400** where artisans, merchants and farmers took turns on the council. All took on responsibilities of citizenship in an entirely new way.



Plato believed reason was the basis of all truth. Wanted to banish myths and plays.



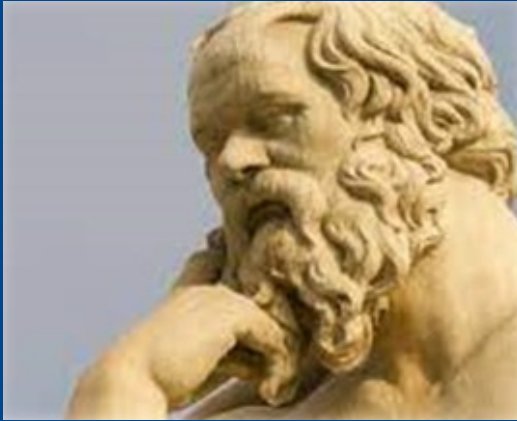
Hoplite army relies on teamwork. Noble and peasant fight side by side.

- Everyone is involved in running government and setting law. Creates a culture of argument, debate and critique. These debates value **logos (reason) over mythos**.



Greece *continued*

- **Greek philosophy** emerges.



Socrates engages in radical questioning and critique.

- Series of critical thinkers who **question** everything including the **existence of the gods**. Radical stepping back, especially by **Plato** who critiques and reimagines an ideal society.
- Engage in **second-order thinking**, meaning thinking about thinking (what is criteria for knowing something is true; do you trust logic or the senses?).
- Aim at higher goods like beauty, truth, the good, or knowing thyself. **Socrates willingly dies** to stay loyal to the truth (**truth is a higher good than living**).

Summary: Greek ideal went from the warrior to the philosopher. Goods sought shifted from things like honour/fame to transcendent ideas of **Truth** or the **Good**. Tremendous amount of critique and stepping back. We saw the growth of **individualism** and **democracy**.

China

- **1000 BCE:**

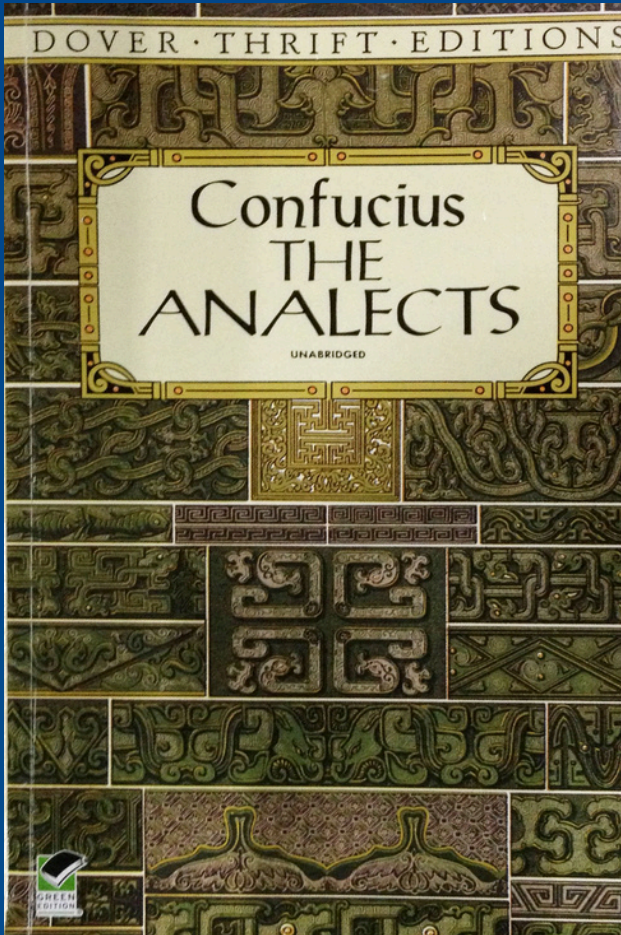
- **Gods are not moral.** Human interactions with gods are akin to business transactions that garner favours.
- Gods appeased by **blood offerings** accomplished through war, hunting, and ritual sacrifices.
- **No separation** of heaven and earth – **Cosmos, earth, China all connected**. People do not seek guidance from some outer force but rather try to conform to Heaven's will which is knowable through nature's processes.
- Order preserved through **ritual**. Power enacted especially through the king's body. He would change diet, clothes, horse, etc. to maintain harmony. We see here early roots of **feng shui**.



Aligning with Tian or "Heaven" is originally about ritual correctness and is transactional. Later alignment comes to mean moral or ethical behavior.



China *continued*



Confucius' The Analects elevates moral qualities over status or lineage

- **500 BCE:**

- Over time, the meaning of ritual shifts from being about manipulating power to being about **transforming the self**. Fully inhabiting the ritual teaches us how to be – ritual becomes a kind of **ethical practice**.
- Terms like **junzi** go from meaning a noble who can offer **blood sacrifices**, to later being about ritual knowledge of how to behave in king's presence, to finally (under Confucius) becoming a **moral trait**. In this final form, anyone can become a junzi (term is now moral and democratic, meaning **open to anyone**).
- Other key terms shift from indicating the magical power of ritual to **questions of character**.

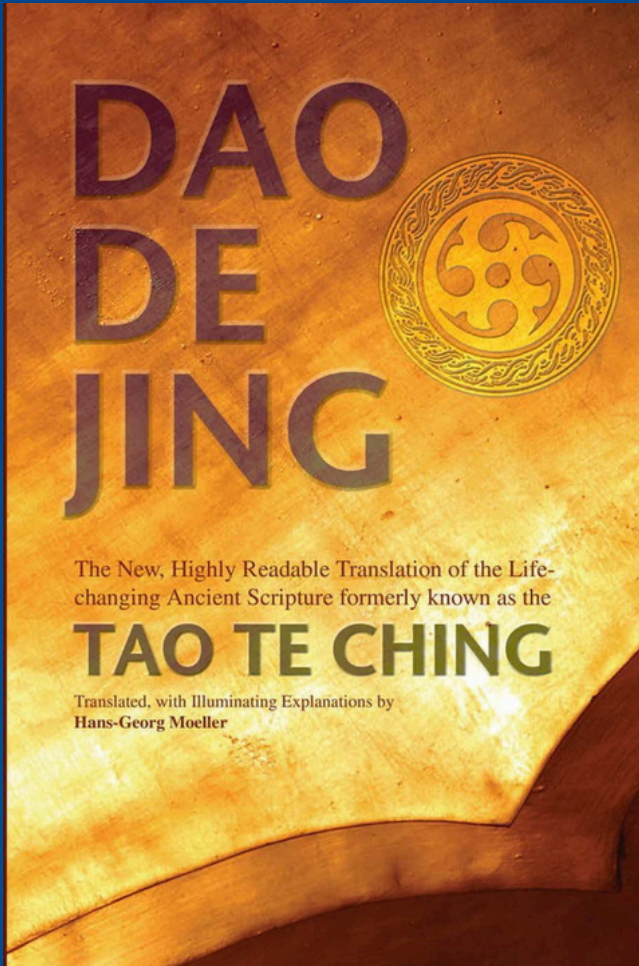
- **400 – 300 BCE:**

- Schools of philosophy develop that question social norms. **Zhuangzi** engages in extensive critique and mocks worldly goals. He engages in extensive second-order thinking by asking **meta questions** about how truth is determined.



China *continued*

- **Daoism** emerges valuing character, not status, and, most notably, focused on a **transcendent ultimate** called **the Dao**.



The Dao De Jing introduces the Dao, which is not a local deity tied to a land formation, but rather a transcendent force that stands beyond and behind everything.



Zhuangzi introduces radical questioning of society and of human knowledge

Summary:

- **Shift** from warring and violent sacrifice **to ritual**.
- Ritual shifts from enhancing nobleman's prestige to **transforming him**.
- Where religion originally upheld hierarchy (king vs. noble vs. commoner), later movements do introduce some **democratizing elements**. Junzi (noble) redefined from lineage to character, opening the category to everyone and offering a **universal path**.
- The emergence of **extensive critique** and **second-order thinking**.
- New notions of **transcendence (Dao)**.



Israel

- **800 BCE:**

- **YHWH** is a national god just as other nations have other gods. He is partly a warrior god (one epithet for him is "**god of armies**").
- YHWH deals with Israel usually as a whole (rather than with individuals). The **whole nation** is **punished or rewarded**.
- Religious goals are **practical** and this worldly (crops, land, peace, prosperity). Afterlife is spent in **Sheol (underworld)**. The idea of spending eternity in heaven does not yet exist.
- Relationship with YHWH is facilitated through **animal sacrifice**.

- **500 BCE:**

- YHWH becomes a **transcendent creator**. He is the only god.



Around 500 BCE, YHWH shifts from a national deity to a transcendent god who created everything.

The temple facilitated a relationship with YHWH based on blood sacrificial offerings.



Israel *continued*

- **200 BCE:**

- Dramatic shift in goals from this-worldly goods (peace, prosperity, land) to radically ambitious goals such as **remaking the world** (via an apocalypse) and a **permanent afterlife in heaven**.
- **Growing individualism:** Men read **Torah** themselves (without intermediaries). Personal prayer grows, with people **communicating with God directly**. **Afterlife is the ultimate reward** and is entirely decided on **individual merits**. Temple priests always identified by birth (lineage) but the **new rabbis are chosen on merit** (learning, virtue).

- **1st Century CE:**

- **Blood sacrifice ends** with Temple destruction. Increasing emphasis on **ethics for atonement**.



In the remade world, the lion would lie down with the lamb.

Summary: YHWH elevated from a national deity (one of many) to the **transcendent creator of the universe**. Connecting to God shifts from communal ritual sacrifices led by an elite caste of priests (who are chosen by lineage) to more **individual connections via reading Torah** oneself, personal prayer and led by **rabbis chosen on merit**. Otherworldly goals (i.e. **afterlife in heaven**) have been added and are decided **on an individual basis**.

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