

THE DAWN OF CONSCIENCE

By

James Henry Breasted

"We think our civilization near its meridian,
but we are yet only at the cock-crowing and the
morning star. In our barbarous society the influ-
ence of character is in its infancy."

EMERSON, *Essay on Politics*.

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
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"Established is the man whose standard is righteousness, who walketh according to its way."

The Grand Vizier Ptahhotep of Memphis, Twenty-seventh Century B.C.

"More acceptable is the virtue of the upright man than the ox of him that doeth iniquity."

Instruction Addressed to Prince Merikere by his Father, an Unknown Pharaoh of Heracleopolis, Twenty-third Century B.C.

"Righteousness is for eternity. It descendeth with him that doeth it into the grave, . . . his name is not effaced on earth, but he is remembered because of right."

The Eloquent Peasant of Heracleopolis, Twenty-third Century B.C.

"A man's virtue is his monument, but forgotten is the man of evil repute."

From an Egyptian Tombstone, about the Twenty-second Century B.C.

"The people of his time shall rejoice, the son of man shall make his name forever and ever, . . . Righteousness shall return to its place, unrighteousness shall be cast out."

Neferrohu, Prophet of Egypt, about 2000 B.C.

"O Amon, thou sweet Well for him that thirsteth in the desert; it is closed to him who speaketh, but it is open to him who is silent. When he who is silent cometh, lo he findeth the Well."

An Ancient Egyptian Wise Man of about 1000 B.C.

FOREWORD

It has now become a sinister commonplace in the life of the post-war generation that man has never had any hesitation in applying his increasing mechanical power to the destruction of his own kind. The World War has now demonstrated the appalling possibilities of man's mechanical power of destruction. The only force that can successfully oppose it is the human conscience—something which the younger generation is accustomed to regard as a fixed group of outworn scruples. Every one knows that man's amazing mechanical power is the product of a long evolution, but it is not commonly realized that this is also true of the social force which we call conscience—although with this important difference: as the oldest known implement-making creature man has been fashioning destructive weapons for possibly a million years, whereas conscience emerged as a social force less than five thousand years ago. One development has far outrun the other; because one is old, while the other has hardly begun and still has infinite possibilities before it. May we not consciously set our hands to the task of further developing this new-born conscience until it becomes a manifestation of good will, strong enough to throttle the surviving savage in us? That task should surely be far less difficult than the one our savage ancestors actually achieved: the creation of a conscience in a world where, in the beginning, none existed.

The most fundamentally important thing in the developing life of man has been the rise of ideals of conduct and the emergence of character, a transformation of human life which can be historically demonstrated to have begun but yesterday. At a time when the younger generation is throwing inherited morals into the discard, it would seem to be worthwhile to re-appraise these ancient values which are being so light-heartedly abandoned. To gain any adequate conception of the value of ideals of conduct to the life of man we must endeavour to disclose the process by which men first gained discernment of character and appreciation of its value. As we look back into human beginnings we discover at once that man began as an *unmoral* savage. How did it come about that he ever gained any moral dictates or eventually submitted to the moral mandate when once it had arisen? How did a world totally without any vision of character rise to social idealism and learn to listen with reverence to voices within? Over against the visible and tangible advantages of material conquests how did it eventually happen that there arose the first generation of men with comprehension of unseen inner values? Why should not the young man or woman of today reject as outworn the inherited moral standards of the past, of whose origin neither of them has any knowledge?

The ancient documents which furnish an answer to these questions, and which reveal the origins of our inherited ideals, are presented in this book in translations accompanied by enough discussion to make them fairly intelligible. They disclose the dawn of conscience, the rise of the earliest ideals of conduct, and the resulting Age of Character—a development not only wonderfully fas-

cinating to follow step by step, but also a new vision of hope in times like these. Some of these ancient sources are delightfully picturesque oriental tales, and such the reader will traverse with ease and even pleasure. Others are not so easily assimilated and if the young reader—for this book is intended especially for the new generation—finds himself mired in rather heavy going and inclined to give it up, I suggest that he read at least the epilogue, which serves to put the amazing human development from barbarism to the Age of Character as disclosed in this book into its proper setting and against its appropriate background.

Like most lads among my boyhood associates I learned the Ten Commandments. I was taught to reverence them because I was assured that they came down from the skies into the hands of Moses, and that obedience to them was therefore sacredly incumbent upon me. I remember that whenever I fibbed I found consolation in the fact that there was no commandment, "Thou shalt not lie," and that the Decalogue forbade lying only as a "false witness" giving testimony before the courts where it might damage one's neighbor. In later years when I was much older, I began to be troubled by the fact that a code of morals which did not forbid lying seemed imperfect; but it was a long time before I raised the interesting question: "How has my own realisation of this imperfection arisen? Where did I myself get the moral yardstick by which I discovered this shortcoming in the Decalogue? When that experience began, it was a dark day for my inherited respect for the theological dogma of "revelation." I had more disquieting experiences before me, when as a young orientalist I found that the Egyptians had possessed a

standard of morals far superior to that of the Decalogue over a thousand years before the Decalogue was written.

Such personal experiences have now become fading memories as I look back upon them across more than forty years of researches carried on in the endeavour to determine what evidences on this fundamental question of the origin of morals have been preserved among the ancient monuments in oriental lands. As these researches have progressed, I have been more and more convinced that the results should be made intelligible to any average reader, and that the present generation of young people, who may be troubled with such fundamental questions as I was, should be able to ascertain the facts. From time to time I have formulated historical sketches of the development of early man's higher life before the rise of civilised Europe, especially summaries of the facts drawn from the monuments of Egypt. In 1912 some of these results went into a simply written historical textbook for American schools. A more mature discussion of the moral and religious development of ancient man was presented in the same year to the students of Union Theological Seminary in the Morse Lectures, and later to the students of Cornell University in the introductory course of the Messenger Lectures under a new foundation devoted to "Evolution," established by Doctor Messenger. Of these two courses the Morse Lectures were duly published.²

Finally at Bryn Mawr College, in the introductory course under the new foundation of the Mary Flexner Lectures, the author undertook a more developed survey

² James Henry Breasted, *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*. (New York, 1912).

of the whole subject, which, however, like the Messenger Lectures at Cornell, has never been published. Fundamental conclusions drawn from those lectures and some of the actual text of the Morse Lectures are included here without quotation marks. For assistance in the arrangement of these earlier materials, in the compilation of the illustrative scheme, and in the preparation of the index, proof-reading, etc., I am greatly indebted to Doctor Edith Williams Ware.

As far back as 1912 in the Morse Lectures then published, the author stated his conviction that a group of Egyptian papyri written in the Feudal Age around 2000 B.C. were more than merely showy literary products, as the prevailing opinion of Egyptologists had at that time long considered them. In the author's opinion these compositions contained clear evidence of being social tracts, the earliest known discussions of society, written by their ancient authors as campaign propaganda in the earliest crusade for social justice. Their authors were thus the first social prophets. Over twenty years of subsequent contemplation of these documents has only confirmed the author's opinion. To accept a social interpretation of these sources is to do for the evolution of Egyptian civilisation what socially enlightened historical critics, the so-called "higher critics," had long ago done for the development of Hebrew civilisation. In the case of Hebrew civilised development, however, historical criticism was very slow to apprehend and accept this social reconstruction and interpretation. The same has been true of the author's interpretation of the social evolution of Egyptian religion and morals, especially on the basis of the above papyri of the Feudal Age. His interpretation

has, however, been hospitably received in France. It was accepted and used by his lamented colleague, Georges Bénédicté of the Louvre and the Institut de France; and has likewise been taken up and elaborated by Alexandre Moret, Maspero's successor in the Collège de France, and Bénédicté's successor in the Institut. It can hardly be doubted that this social interpretation of the Egyptian sources and a social reconstruction of Egyptian religion as the earliest adequately known chapter in the evolution of morals and social idealism will find general acceptance, just as the analogous interpretation of Hebrew history has done.

Since the lectures mentioned above were delivered the discovery of new documents, especially in Egypt, has not only substantially increased our knowledge, but has also made quite certain the social significance of the Feudal Age papyri. The most extraordinary revelation has been the fact that the Wisdom of Amenemope, preserved in an Egyptian papyrus in the British Museum, was translated into Hebrew in ancient times and, circulating in Palestine, was the source for a whole section of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs.

How many modern clergymen, requested to preach before some convention of business men, have taken as text the quotation from the Book of Proverbs "Seest thou a man diligent in business, he shall stand before kings"? It is not likely that any such clergyman ever prefaced his sermon with the observation that this text was taken by the Hebrew editor of Proverbs from a much older Egyptian book of moral wisdom. This discovery has added profound significance to the fact that civilised development in the countries surrounding Palestine was several

thousand years earlier than that of the Hebrews. It is now quite evident that the ripe social and moral development of mankind in the Nile Valley, which is three thousand years older than that of the Hebrews, contributed essentially to the formation of the Hebrew literature which we call the Old Testament. Our moral heritage therefore derives from a wider *human* past enormously older than the Hebrews, and it has come to us rather *through* the Hebrews than *from* them. The rise of man to social idealism took place long before the traditional theologians' "age of revelation" began. It was a result of the social experience of *man himself* and was not projected into the world from the outside.

The fact that the moral ideas of early men were the product of their own social experience is one of profoundest meaning for thinking people of today. Out of prehistoric savagery, on the basis of his own experience, man arose to visions of character. That achievement which transformed advancing life, human or animal, on our globe was one from a characterless universe, as far as it is known to us, to a world of inner values transcending matter—a world for the first time aware of such values, for the first time conscious of character and striving to attain it. With that achievement man had discovered a new country, but he had not yet explored it. The *discovery itself* was an incomparably more difficult achievement than the subsequent explorations. The discovery is a *recent* event and the explorations have consequently but just begun. They are an unfinished process which must be continued by us—by *every* generation.

What we of this generation need more than anything else, therefore, is *confidence in man*. I believe that the

story of his rise is an incomparable basis for full confidence. Among all the conquests which made that rise possible the supreme achievement is the discovery of character. Not projected from the outside into a world of unworthy men by some mystic process called inspiration or revelation, but springing out of man's own life two thousand years before the theologians' "age of revelation" began, illumining the darkness of social disillusionment and inner conflict, a glorious vindication of the worth of man, the dawn of the age of conscience and character broke upon the world. No conception of a spot-light of Divine Providence shining exclusively on Palestine shall despoil man of this crowning glory of his life on earth, the discovery of character. It is the greatest discovery in the whole sweep of the evolutionary process as far as it is known to us.

In the course of that evolution the position of the Hebrews is now historically established, and this volume endeavours to make that position clear. In this connection there are reasons why the author would like to call attention to the fact of his life-long interest in Hebrew studies. For years he taught Hebrew in university classes, and had among his students many future rabbis. Among modern Jews he has many valued friends. The opinions regarding the historical place of Hebrew civilisation set forth in this book are based solely on judicially minded study of the ancient documents; but in a world in which anti-Semitic prejudice is still regrettably evident it seems appropriate to state that the book was not written with the slightest anti-Semitic bias. On the contrary the author's admiration of Hebrew literature, which began in his boyhood, has always been such that his judgment of

it was much more likely to be affected by a favourable bias than otherwise. The ancient civilisation of the Hebrews was a great demonstration of developing human life—of the advance of man toward new visions of character and of social idealism. It is for us now to recognise the larger human process transcending racial boundaries—a process in which the Hebrews occupied an intermediate stage—and to catch the full significance of the fact that man arose to high moral vision two thousand years before the Hebrew nation was born.

JAMES HENRY BREASTED.

BURRO MOUNTAIN HOMESTEAD, NEW MEXICO,
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INTRODUCTION

I BELIEVE it was Diderot who attempted to instruct his daughter in the philosophical bases of moral conduct, as she was passing from childhood into womanhood, and failing to discover any such bases, found himself in an embarrassing dilemma.¹ As a matter of experience in actual living, however, Diderot never relinquished his dauntless belief in the value of virtuous conduct. In an age like ours, in which there are many, who, while not wholly repudiating Diderot's conviction, nevertheless insist on their own personal standards of virtue, one feels the necessity of being able to look back into the remoter reaches of the human career and to discern something of the historical origins of our ideas of moral conduct.

There was a time when man was completely unaware of conduct—when all that he did was a matter of instinct. It was an enormous advance when he first became *aware* of his conduct, and a still greater advance when he reached a point where he discerned conduct as something to be approved or disapproved. The appearance of this discernment was a step towards the emergence of conscience. As conscience developed it finally became a powerful social force, reacting to influence the same society which had earlier produced it.

In the life of the prehistoric hunter, struggling to survive among the fierce and terrible mammals about him, it was a profound change, a fundamental advance, when

¹ The place of this dilemma in Diderot's life has been interestingly discussed by Carl Becker, "The Dilemma of Diderot," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 (January, 1915).

he first began to hear whispers from a new world which was dawning within him. Here was a new trumpet call which, unlike the tug of hunger or the panic call of self-preservation, did not stir one impulse alone while leaving all the others cold, but for the first time marshalled all the battalions of the human soul. What was the source of these new inner voices, how did they gain such mandatory power in the life of the individual man, and how did they rise to become such deep-seated and commanding forces in human society? We repeat that this whole development was a social process, the later stages of which are well within the range of our observation, for they took place within the historic age, that is, within the age of written documents. The decipherment of the lost languages of the Ancient Near East has enabled us to read the written records which disclose the dawn of conscience, the stages by which it became a social force and produced the Age of Character, at the beginning of which we still stand. It required probably not less than a million years of human development for man to build up an enlightened life out of which began to issue the Age of Character. The slow transition to it was an achievement of yesterday, although the man of today is not yet aware that he has so recently entered a new country which he has not yet learned to possess.

His failure to discern that he is wandering in unfamiliar country only very recently entered is in some measure due to his historians. They tell him that human history falls into great periods such as the Age of Monarchy, the Age of the Empires, the Age of Democracy, etc.—useful and instructive distinctions, which however do not penetrate far into the nature of advancing human life. An-

other type of historian recognises the importance of the Mechanised Age and the accompanying Industrial Revolution, while the engineers who tout "technocracy" summarise the advance of man exclusively in terms of power. The archæologists find it convenient to divide the earlier course of human life into several periods: the Stone Age, the Copper Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age; while the palæontologists, after enumerating an impressive series, the successive stages of rising animal life, tell us that we are now reaching the close of the Age of Mammals. Convenient or necessary as these terms all may be, they inevitably remain in some respects superficial. Even the Age of Democracy and the Mechanised Age, as terms, suggest little of the intellectual emancipation which brought them about. Much more instructive and significant designations of the stages of human progress would be the Age of Conscience and Character which began some five thousand years ago, and the Age of Science ushered in by Galileo over three hundred years ago. To these fundamental human developments history-writing has hitherto usually devoted but scanty attention.

Man became the first implement-making creature not later than the beginning of the Ice Age, probably a million years ago, and possibly earlier. At the same time he also became *the first weapon-making creature*. For perhaps a million years therefore he has been improving those weapons; but it is less than five thousand years since men began to feel the power of conscience to such a degree that it became a potent *social force*. Physical force, reinforced by triumphant science during the last three centuries, wielding ever more cunningly devised weapons, has been operating for something like a million years;

higher and more elusive inner capacities arising from social experience have been socially at work for only about five thousand years. The Age of Weapons is thus doubtless a million years old; while the Age of Character made its slow and gradual beginning between four and five thousand years ago. It is time that the modern world should catch something of the profound significance of this fundamental fact; it is time that it should become a part of modern education. It is therefore the purpose of this book to set forth the historical facts and to present the leading ancient records from which they are drawn, showing that we are still standing in the gray dawn of the Age of Character—facts that are a fair basis for dreams of a noonday, still very far away to be sure, but nevertheless yet to follow upon that dawn.

After this book had been written I noticed the prophetic observation which I have placed on the title page, and which my memory of youthful reading of many years ago had failed to retain. By sheer force of intuitive vision as a philosophic seer, the High Priest of New England transcendentalism discerned what is perhaps the most significant truth in the entire range of modern life. In Emerson's day it could not have been demonstrated to be more than a belief or an impression; but since the sage of Concord has passed on, investigation of the ancient history of the Orient has disclosed it as a historical fact. It is the purpose of this volume to make accessible to the average reader the historical evidence upon which our new knowledge of this great fact is based.

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