

# *A Comparative Study of Filial Piety in The Analects and The Bible*

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**Abstract:** As two classic works of Western and Chinese civilizations, to a large extent the Analects and the Bible can represent the two civilizations. Through textual analysis, the paper finds that filial piety occupies a great position in both the two classics for it is the foundation of personal morality and the precondition of all education. The differences of filial piety in the two classics mainly lay in the different goals and functions. In the *Analects*, filial piety serves as a way to achieve benevolence which is Confucius's core thought and functions to maintain the order of feudal society. While in the *Bible*, filial piety functions as a way for men to achieve their ultimate goal, being loyal and obedient to the supreme God.

**Keywords:** filial piety, The Analects, The Bible, textual analysis

## 1. Introduction

It is generally believed that in Chinese families, the father-son relationship remains the main axis, with filial piety at the core; In Western countries, the focus is on personality development, on the relationship between husband and wife, with love at the core. However, in *The Bible*, which is the source of Western thought and culture, there are actually some explanations about filial piety.

*The Analects* was created in the Spring and Autumn Period when the feudal lords were separated and the heroes were fighting for hegemony. During this period, "family-state thought" was the mainstream of the times, and the concept of family-state unity was deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. In this period, the blood patriarchal system became the basis of the culture of filial piety.

*The Bible* is created based on the ancient Hebrew text, which, together with Greek-Roman civilization, laid the foundation for the dominant Western cultural system. In Western mindset, God is the Creator and man is the created. Therefore, filial piety in the Bible is based on the command of God. In *The Bible* it is proper for people to honor their parents and that it is their duty to do so, and likewise the ancestors should also be honored by people. However, God is unique, holy, and supreme, and parents and ancestors should not be placed in the same level as God, and people should worship God more.

Therefore, this paper chooses *The Analects* translated by Burton Watson and *The Bible* of King James Version as textual materials to compare the similarities and differences of the filial piety in them, with the hope to learn from each other's strengths and promote the healthy development of Chinese filial piety culture.

## 2. Literature Review

There are many studies on the idea of filial piety in *the Analects*, and the general points of discussion are: first, the connotation of the idea of filial piety in *the Analects*; [1] second, the status and significance of filial piety in *the Analects*; [2] and third, the practice of filial piety in *the Analects*. [3]

The study of the Bible in China started late, and there is even less research on the Biblical idea of filial piety. China and the West have different cultures, and Chinese people have followed the traditional culture of Confucianism for thousands of years, so we study filial piety using the traditional culture of Confucianism. *The Bible* is a Christian classic and a Western belief, but the term "filial piety" is a unique Chinese word. Therefore in *the Bible*, there is no precise word for "filial piety", but mostly the words such as "honor" and "obey" are used. Therefore, it is difficult to study the idea of filial piety in *the Bible*, explaining why there are few studies on filial piety in *the Bible*.

In terms of comparative study, there are even fewer studies on the comparison of the filial thought in *the Analects* and *the Bible*, providing a possible research gap for this paper to make efforts to fill.

## 3. Similarities in Filial Piety in *The Analects* and *The Bible*

### 3.1. Foundation of personal morality

"Master You said, A man filial to his parents, a good brother, yet apt to go against his superiors—few are like that! The man who doesn't like to go against his superiors but likes to plot rebellion—no such kind exists! The gentleman operates at the root. When the root is firm, then the Way may proceed. Filial and brotherly conduct—these are the root of humaneness, are they not?" [4] At the beginning of *the Analects*, in the second paragraph of Book One, it is stated that filial piety and fraternal duty are the essence of the Way and the essence of benevolence for the gentleman. A man is born to establish and follow benevolence and morality, and filial piety is the supreme morality. "Someone questioned Confucius, saying, Why aren't you in government? The Master said, The *Book of Documents* says: Filial, only be filial, a friend to elder and younger brothers—this contributes to government. To do this is in fact to take part in government. Why must I be in government?" [4] According to Confucius, filial piety and obedience to parents, friendship and love to brothers, and the influence of this ethos on politics, is the way of government. It can be seen that filial piety is regarded as "the most important virtue", which links personal cultivation, family harmony, social stability, the king's rule and government. Most importantly it lays the foundation of personal morality.

In *the Bible*, filial piety is a moral principle set by God through which one can better serve God by listening to his command and obeying his order for God is the supreme lord in the world. "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee." [5] "That thou mightiest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life." [5] In the Bible, personal morality is established based on God's sacred words. "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word." [5] "I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgments." [5] At the same time, a person must rely on the Holy Spirit to live a noble life. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." [5] In this way, the Holy Spirit will make people gain their noble lives, giving people the energy and motivation to perform filial piety.

### 3.2. Precondition of all education

Confucius believed that filial piety is the precondition of all education. People are not born knowing the meaning of filial piety; they must be educated in filial piety before they can follow the principles of filial piety and perform it well. Only after performing filial piety well, can a man learn anything else. This is well explained in the sixth paragraph of Book One in *the Analects*. “The Master said, Young people should be filial at home, brotherly with others, circumspect, and trustworthy. Let them act kindly toward the populace in general and befriend those of humane character. If, after that, they have energy left over, let them study the arts.” [4] In this way, education of filial piety becomes the precondition of all other kinds of education. Confucius also believed that those in power should to be filial to their parents and kind to their children, through their own filial behaviors as a kind of education, the people will follow their example and be loyal to them, naturally making the people willing to submit to their governance. This is explained by the Confucius when Ji Kangzi ask him about good governance. “Ji Kangzi asked, How can I make the common people respectful, loyal, and diligent in their work? The Master said, If you are strict in overseeing them, they will be respectful. If you are filial and compassionate, they will be loyal. If you promote persons of goodness and teach those who are incompetent, then the people will be diligent.” [4]

Jewish people also pays great attention to education, which is also embodied in *the Bible*. In *the Bible*, education is based on the truth told by God and inspiration from God, teaching people to act according to the gospel. “Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” [5] In education, filial piety occupies an extreme important place and people who did not practice filial piety and do harm to their own parents will get severe punishments from God. “For every one that curseth his father or his mother shall be surely put to death: he hath cursed his father or his mother; his blood shall be upon him.” [5] In the Ten Commandments, God places "honor your parents" as the first commandment after God's relationship with man, showing that filial piety is only secondary to God and more important than other things. Therefore, filial piety becomes the precondition of all education.

## 4. Differences in Filial Piety in *The Analects* and *The Bible*

### 4.1. The ultimate goal of filial piety

The core of Confucius' thought is benevolence, which is not only the root of filial piety, but also the ultimate goal for filial piety. Benevolence is the highest standard of human behavior and a universal principle. But to realize this universal principle, one must start from practicing basic principle, which is filial piety. Confucius connects filial piety with the highest principle of life, benevolence, making it the "essence of benevolence". For Confucius, the practice of benevolence is entirely a conscious act of the individual, and the practice of filial piety (i.e., the fulfillment of ethics in social relations) is the starting point of benevolence. Confucius believed that benevolence is common to all human beings, and that the inherent root of ritual and music is the benevolence of human heart. “The Master said, A human being who lacks humaneness—what is ritual to someone like that? A human being who lacks humaneness—what is music to someone like that?” [4] Thus, filial piety becomes a necessary minimum virtue for every human being. At the same time, Confucius transformed filial piety from a binding act of establishing order among families to the benevolence nature within man. “The Master said, when a gentleman is in mourning, if he ate fine food, it would have no savor; if he listened to music, it would bring no joy; if he lived in ease, it would not feel right. Therefore, he does not do so.” [4] Therefore, filial piety is embodied in the benevolence of deep-rooted human nature. If everyone can practice filial piety well, then the people who rebel against the rulers will be less,

achieving the ultimate goal of benevolence in everyone. Therefore, the ultimate goal of filial piety is universal benevolence.

Different from filial piety in *the Analects*, the ultimate goal of filial piety in *the Bible* is the obedience for God. Every sentence about filial piety in *the Bible* is written by prophets who receive message from God. Therefore, everything about filial piety in *the Bible* is closely related to God. As far as filial piety is concerned, one's love for his parents is one way to show his love for God. In other words, one's love for his parents is a natural extension of his love for God and his love for God is embodied when he practices filial piety to his parents. Therefore, this kind of love between children and parents occupies a lower position compared to one's love towards God. "Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward." [5] In this way, ultimately one's filial piety to his parents is the filial piety to God for children are given to parents by God. Parents are stewards of their children, disciplining and training them on God's behalf, and children ultimately belong to God. Therefore, one's sincere love for God will definitely evoke his love for his parents and one can not claim his love for God if he does not even love his parents. Biblical piety is a kind of covenant love, and man's piety to God is derived from God's love for the world. "Only the LORD had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day." [4] Therefore, filial piety in *the Bible* in nature is the obedience to God, listening to his words and following his orders, only in this way can the sinful men be saved by him.

#### 4.2. The function of filial piety

Confucius lived in a time when rites and music were in ruins and there was no morality in the world. At that time, the world was in decline, evil and tyrannical acts were committed, and some of the ministers betrayed their rulers, and some of the sons even killed their fathers. Mencius believed that the root cause of this era of turmoil and chaos was the unkindness of those kings, the unkindness of the vassals and the unkindness of ordinary people. It was in such an "unkind" era that Confucius used moral principles to rectify the chaotic social order and inverted human relations, inheriting the traditional moral concepts of the Western Zhou Dynasty and establishing an ethical system with "benevolence" as the highest principle and "filial piety and fraternal duty" as its basic norm. Confucius was deeply influenced by the traditional concept of patriarchy, which made it impossible for him to escape from the fact that the patriarchal society was dominated by blood relations. Therefore, he demanded that rulers and ministers, fathers and sons each keep themselves in their given statuses, and put forward the slogan of "loving people" to alleviate the sharp class conflicts at that time. It can be seen that the purpose of "love" he put forward is to serve the rule, to maintain the Zhou ritual system, and to make the people understand that filial piety and fraternal duty is the root of "benevolence". For as long as this is practiced, they will not commit crimes and act beyond their status. Therefore, the key reason why filial piety and fraternal duty is called the root of benevolence is that filial piety is the ethical and spiritual foundation for maintaining the rule of feudal society and social stability. The feudal rulers ruled the world with filial piety, with the aim of consolidating the feudal order.

However, in Christian theology, *the Bible* is the embodiment of God's action, God's arrangement, from which we can only experience God's greatness, immensity and eternity. The Biblical creation myth, the myth of human origins, and the myths of the Flood, the origin of races, and the origin of cultures all indicate that the world, human beings, cultures, and races have their origin in God; that God is decisive and dominant over man, and that man is subordinate and dependent on God. From a Christian theological point of view, an all-wise, all-powerful, and good God created man to love and serve God and to enjoy a relationship with Him. In the Ten Commandments, God places "honor your parents" as the first commandment after God's relationship with man, indicating that a child's relationship with his parents must be based on his relationship with God. Moreover, our relationship

with all other people is also based on our relationship with our parents. Therefore, our relationship with our parents becomes a very important key in the middle of our relationship with God and with other people. If children do not maintain a good relationship with their parents, they cannot have a good relationship with the Father for sure. Therefore, we can tell that filial piety in the Christian system serves as a medium to serve God. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right." [5]

## 5. Conclusion

Through the comparison and contrast of filial piety in *the Analects* and *the Bible* based on the textual materials above, it can be concluded that there are both similarities and differences in the filial piety in the two classics.

As far as similarities are concerned, filial piety occupies an important place in both classics for it is the foundation of personal morality and precondition of all education.

In terms of differences, the filial piety in *the Analects* serves as a basic principle and a starting point to achieve the higher principle in Confucius's thought which is benevolence to all the people. And it functions as a useful method for the rulers to rule their people and maintain the order of a feudal society. While in *the Bible*, with the concept God at its core and as the supreme lord, filial piety serves as a way to show one's obedience to God for practicing filial piety to one's parents is actually a command by God.

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