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978-0-521-11786-9 - Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views

Edited by Markus Bockmuehl and Guy G. Stroumsa

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: the paradise chronotrope

Guy G. Stroumsa

In an old *New Yorker* cartoon, two signs offer to send the newcomer to heaven in two opposite directions. One points to “paradise,” the other to “lectures on paradise.” To be sure, a collection of scholarly essays on ancient perceptions of paradise, such as this one, falls short of a promise to regain long lost paradise. And yet, from Dante’s *Paradiso* to Baudelaire’s *Les paradis artificiels*, powerful attempts have been made, time and again, to reclaim paradise through writing. The central human experience of paradise, it seems, is double: that of nostalgia for an irretrievable loss, and that of the unquenchable expectation for regaining it; what one could call the tension toward paradise, the *epektasis* of paradise. Indeed, paradise never disappeared from Western consciousness, and, despite *Entmythologisierung*, real or imagined, the concept retains in late modernity its force of attraction on earlier generations. “Work on Myth,” (*Arbeit am Mythos*, to use the apt title of the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg’s powerful study of Western culture): the history of paradise in Christian culture may be compared to a kaleidoscope, where images, symbols, mythologoumena and concepts play a major part, and can be rearranged in a series of formations, at once similar and different, but always stimulating.

The word “paradise,” as is well known, stems from Iran. The concept’s career in the cultures issued from the biblical traditions, however, starts with the first chapters of Genesis. Soon, in early Judaism, the paradise from Genesis “blows up,” as it were. Paradise moves back and forth along the axis of time: it can be conceived not only as belonging to the *Urzeit*, but also to the *Endzeit*, when it is reclaimed, or even to the present, in realized eschatology. Moreover, paradise is also mobile in space: it is not only located in different places upon earth (a pastime with a very long *Fortleben*), but also seems to circulate freely between earth and heaven. Paradise, then, can be nowhere and everywhere, and can be reached either never – the asymptotic Messianic times, or at any time – the “paradise now!” of the Gnostics. This fundamental polyvalence of paradise, for

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which I propose to borrow the term *chronotrope* from Bakhtinian poetics, is the essential element of the story of paradise and its transformations not only in Judaism and Christianity, but also in Islam. Although the latter does not share the sacred text of Judaism and Christianity, the conceptions of paradise in the Qur'an and in early Islam reflect the same world of reference as the biblical heritage. "Mapping Paradise," to follow the title of Alessandro Scafi's beautiful book, is not only a matter of latitude and longitude; indeed, it is on the map of European culture and sensitivities that paradise must be drawn.

The social and intellectual vitality of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity was in large part a function of their ability to articulate a viably transcendent hope for the human condition, the redemptive expectation of a world at once restored and new. Often, as perhaps again today, such hopes came to the fore at times of cultural and religious crisis or transition. Without reducing or trivializing concrete teleologies, they concerned the time, and often the place, in which God's final and original purposes would be at one, and human flourishing and aspiration realized. In late antiquity Jews and Christians, and eventually Muslims too, tended to find the narrative of hope wrapped up in the narrative of origins, and above all in the very concrete symbol of the Garden of Delights in the book of Genesis: paradise.

The present volume fits well into a newly vibrant field of interest in ancient eschatology that has produced several recent volumes on paradise with interesting synergies and analogies.¹ Its fifteen chapters offer a series of richly diverse glimpses into the religious world of late antiquity, with a particular focus on Jewish and Christian views of paradise. They study, from different perspectives, the luxuriant transformations of paradise in early Judaism and Christianity, from the Hellenistic times to the end of late antiquity. While early Christian and Jewish sources draw on texts from the same Bible, their perceptions of paradise, although seemingly similar, often reflect the highly different structures of the two sister religions. The collection of these essays highlights the multiple hermeneutical perspectives on the biblical paradise among Jews and Christians, as well as the ongoing dialogue between them, often acrimonious, sometimes unacknowledged, but ever present. At the same time, this volume also reflects the major inward turn of religious attitudes in late antiquity, which left a clear impact on conceptions of paradise.

¹ See e.g. Ashton and Whyte 2001; Delumeau 1995; Kabir 2001; Luttikhuisen 1999; Miller 1996; Psaki and Hindley 2002; Riedweg and Schmid 2008; Scafi 2006; Tabor 1986.

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The early ideas of paradise inherited from the Persians soon started to develop in ancient Jewish literature. In Hellenistic times, a series of Jewish texts from Palestine already reflected attempts at “re-mythologizing” the story of the *hexahemeron* and human origins. Toward the end of that period, the writings of Philo of Alexandria bear witness to the opposite attitude: allegorical hermeneutics of the Genesis text. That does not mean, of course, that Philo forgets all traditional, concrete conceptions of paradise, with the attempts to locate paradise on earth, or to visit it in heaven. The different conceptions of paradise play a complex game, reflecting and echoing one another.

Comparing means, first of all, emphasizing differences. While the reflection of Christian thinkers on the origins of humankind started, like that of their Jewish counterparts, from the biblical text, it is obvious that Jews and Christians were to highlight different elements in these chapters. Moreover, the Christian conception of Jesus Christ as summing up human history since Adam and offering a radical change from the consequences of Adam’s fateful sin, never had a real equivalent among the Rabbis. Hence, realized eschatology, and perceptions of paradise as internalized, always remained more clearly present among the Church Fathers than among the Rabbis. For both Christians and Jews, history was *Heilsgeschichte*, and what would happen at the end of times had much to do with what had happened back then, *in illo tempore*. “Back then” (*illud tempus*) was also “back there” (*ille locus*), and throughout Christian history, discussions of paradise would to a great extent deal not only with its nature, but also with its location on earth; *eutopia*, as it were, rather than utopia.

Both the Christian and the Jewish thinkers of the first centuries, the Fathers of the Church and the Rabbis of the Talmud, however, were struggling to develop and establish some kind of orthodoxy which would underline and reinforce the ecclesial structures they were building.² This drive toward orthodoxy, which also entailed censorship and intellectual control, goes a long way to explain why they regarded with some suspicion those first chapters of Genesis, which had served as the basis for drastic attempts at re-mythologizing (and sectarianism), both in Jewish apocryphal and in Gnostic literature. In some ways, then, both Rabbis and Fathers sought to play down the mythological elements involved with the paradise story and neutralize them, preferring to put the major emphasis on other figures and events of the early history of humankind.

² The following paragraphs follow Stroumsa 2005.

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In the biblical text, the Lord God had expelled Adam from Eden, the “garden of delight” (*ek tou paradeisou tès truphès*), establishing him in front of that garden, now protected by the Cherubs and the fiery sword (Gen. 3.23–24). One can argue that the rabbinic and early Christian understanding of Adam’s exile from paradise both reflect the new conceptions of time and of the person taking shape in late antiquity.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, a number of religious groups offered competing versions of accounts on the same themes. These groups included, at least, the Rabbis, dualists of various shades, such as the Hermetic author of the *Poimandres*, the different Gnostic thinkers and sects, and the Manicheans. Already, Jewish literature from the Second Temple period had reflected at length on the old myths preserved in the first chapters of Genesis. This literature came both from Palestine (mainly the disparate corpus known as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, which had offered a radical remythologization of the elliptic first chapters of Genesis), and from the Diaspora. From the long tradition of Hellenistic Jewish literature, on the other hand, we are mainly left with Philo, who offered an essentially Platonist hermeneutics. To oversimplify a highly complex story, one can say that the Gnostics and the Manicheans followed the path opened by Apocryphal literature, while the Church Fathers followed in Philo’s footsteps.³

The book of Genesis retains various myths pertaining to our topic, from the *hexahemeron* to Cain’s murder of Abel, the tower of Babel, and the Flood. At each point, humanity takes a new start, as it were, and civilization is defined anew. In order to comprehend properly the early Christian understanding of human origins, one should in principle analyze the complete perspective offered by the patristic perception of these myths. This is certainly a study worth undertaking, and which, to the best of my knowledge, is still to be written. Here, however, I shall only focus upon the first stage in this progressive formation of human societies, as reflected in Adam’s sin and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise. This expulsion signifies the very beginning of life on earth as we still know it, i.e. a life of toil, suffering, violence, and death.

In the Greco-Roman literary tradition, there was no single authoritative text which offered one formal, binding myth on the Golden Age and the origins of mankind. This fact highlights the great divide between the

³ On Apocryphal literature as the immediate background from which Gnostic mythology was born, see for instance Stroumsa 1984. On Philo and patristic thought, see for instance Wolfson 1947.

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mainstream of Greco-Roman culture and the biblical tradition. Although the status of Homer (and also, to a certain extent, that of Hesiod) remained foundational in Greek culture through the centuries, the Homeric epics and Hesiod's works never achieved the kind of canonicity pertaining to a single, divine, revealed text. Hence, the various myths of origins and of the Golden Age in the *Urzeit*, or various references to a "paradise" of sorts did not have in the Greek tradition the power equivalent to that of the first chapters of Genesis in Judaism and in Christianity. We know of some traditions of mythical places: Homer refers to the Elysian Fields (*Odyssey* iv) and to the Island of the Phaeacians and the closed garden of Alkinoos (*Odyssey* vii). The Fortunate Islands are mentioned in Pindar's *Second Olympic*, while Diodorus of Sicily alludes to a voyage to a southern Island from Ethiopia. In a sense, Plato's references to Atlantis in *Timaeus* and *Critias* would reverberate in similar ways in ancient literature. But parallel to those, there are also traditions about a paradisiac period at the dawn of time: so Hesiod refers to the Golden Age in the ancient past, while Plato speaks in the *Politicus* about the happy period under the rule of Chronos.

It is not to a golden age at the dawn of history that the Greek perceptions of the Fortunate Islands referred, but rather to a blissful state of affairs happy and free of worries, perhaps not common, but to be found upon earth. Such perceptions were certainly rather common in the Greco-Roman world, and must have influenced the Christian perceptions of paradise. Such perceptions would now emphasize the blissful state to be achieved by the Christian believers, or rather the place in which they would live blissfully after death.

The earliest Christians read the Bible in Greek, and their theology emerged and grew within the Greco-Roman cultural milieu. Hence, it comes as no surprise if such Greek representations of the Golden Age or of the Fortunate Islands or the Elysian Fields would soon be perceived as parallels to the Christian conceptions of paradise. Thus, although the Greek conceptions of time and history are fundamentally different from those developed by the Church Fathers, one can observe a certain amalgam of traditions, which eventually became a fixture of collective imagination. In his *De Paradiso*, for instance, Ambrosius offers a synthesis of the old myth of the Golden Age and Philo's spiritual interpretation of the Genesis story. One can speak of the Christianization of some Greco-Roman myths, and of philosophical reflections on the Golden Age.⁴

⁴ See in particular Delumeau 1992, 11–25.

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There existed in Christian antiquity various attempts to locate paradise, usually in the East, as implied by Genesis 2.8.⁵ These attempts would survive as late as the seventh century, when Isidore of Seville, in his *Etymologies*, still felt the need to argue that the Fortunate Islands, known today as the Canaries, were not identical with the Garden of Eden.⁶ Incidentally, the attempts to locate paradise continued until the modern times. Thus, various authors, in the seventeenth century, look for paradise in various parts of the earth in their ethnological and geographical *curiositas* and their search for societies governed by the law of nature.⁷

From Ezekiel 28.13ff. (“You were in Eden, the garden of God . . . You were on the holy mountain of God . . .”), paradise could easily be construed as a mountain. It was often conceived to be a holy mountain, in particular in the oriental tradition, still reflected in the name of the monastic “Republic” on Mount Athos, *Hagion Horos*. On this holy mountain, a perfect cult, holding soteriological power, is celebrated. Thus, for instance, in the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, as Serge Ruzer has convincingly argued.⁸

Some Christian intellectuals, however, found in the biblical story of Adam and Eve support for a reflection upon primitive life, as it had been analyzed by some trends in the philosophical tradition. For the Greeks, it was precisely to want, or deficiency, *chreia*, that humanity owed its progress at the end of the Golden Age. As Marguerite Harl has shown, for some of the Church Fathers, the parallel moment in the biblical story was Adam’s discovery of his own nudity. To be sure, a majority of the Church Fathers fostered what she calls a “pessimistic” outlook, and saw in human work a punishment for the original sin, an *ascholia* which represented an obstacle to the contemplation of spiritual realities. Some, however, and in particular Origen, supported an “optimistic” understanding of the first chapters of Genesis, and considered as a gift to man his need to set his intelligence to work, arguing that this work prepared him to approach God. Man’s deficiency encouraged him to invent the sciences, and these are a preparation of sorts for the way to God.⁹

The strong “pessimistic” perception of Adam and of his “primordial” sin in early Christian theology is too well known, too predominant, to require analysis here. For the Church Fathers, who were elaborating upon

⁵ Hence the *qibla* toward the East in early Christian prayers. See Dölger 1925, 220–42.

⁶ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, who discusses the question whether paradise is a place or not. See also Ps-Basilus, *Homily*, PG 30, 63–66.

⁷ See Alexandre 1988.

⁸ Ruzer 2001 and Delumeau 1992, 27, for whom most writers, in the East as well as in the West, sustain such views and reject a symbolical reading of the Genesis text.

⁹ Harl 1993.

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Paul's thought, Adam's sin had brought death upon all mankind, and it is only through Christ, the last Adam, and his own sacrifice that the consequences of this curse would be erased. In a sense, then, the first chapters of Genesis were not only perceived as a myth of the *Urzeit*, but given a metaphorical interpretation which emphasized their significance for human nature in general, not only regarding the protoplasts' deeds and fate. In the Christian interpretation, then, the myth of the *Urzeit* was implicitly transformed, to a great extent, into a myth about human nature. If all men had been implicated in Adam's sin, all could be saved by the coming of the second Adam. Adam's fault, in short, was not an unmitigated tragedy. Indeed it would be called by Augustine (who did not propound an exactly optimistic and light vision of history and of human nature) a *felix culpa*. Through his sin, Adam had unwittingly permitted the future coming of the Savior. His expulsion from paradise should thus be perceived as only a temporary, rather than a permanent, feature of human life. Paradise, then, is not lost forever: it can indeed be reclaimed, not only in the eschatological time, but also *hic et nunc*. This amounted to nothing less than a dramatic transformation of the meaning of the biblical myth of the *Urzeit*.

Notwithstanding their diversity, Greek ideas about time have often been perceived as essentially cyclical in nature, and hence diametrically opposed to the Jewish and Christian linear conceptions of time, which are predicated upon the creation of the universe and the expectation of the end of the world.¹⁰ Such a perception of things, according to which Judeo-Christian thought, but not Greek thought, would be fundamentally endowed with a real historical dimension, is of course too simplistic to be heuristically useful. The hermeneutics of Adam's expulsion from paradise reflect the complex, ambivalent attitude of the early Christian thinkers to the *Urzeit*.

It is mainly through Jewish lenses that the early Christian thinkers learned to reflect about human origins. But they adapted these lenses to the new requirements of their own self-perception and mythology. It is thus only to a certain extent that the Rabbis and the Fathers can be said to reflect on the same text, although both offered an exegesis of Genesis. For the Jews, the beginnings of mankind were the prelude to the birth of Israel and the development of *Heilsgeschichte*, ending in eschatological messianism. When reflecting on origins, the Jews were inclined to stress the historical roots of their own peoplehood. It is within this frame that eschatology

¹⁰ The classic comparative study is Boman 1960. See also Puech 1978, 1.1–24 and 215–70; and Stroumsa 1992b, 85–98.

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and soteriology, i.e. messianism, found their meaning. Important as it was, the story of Adam and Eve in paradise, as echoed in *Genesis Rabbah*, for instance, seems to have been less significant for the Rabbis than Israel's exodus from Egypt and its Sinaitic sequel.

Christian intellectuals, on the other hand, perceived themselves to be *verus Israel*, the true Israel. Yet, their conception of peoplehood was deeply different from that of the Jews: they were, in the language of the *Epistle of Diognetus* in the second century, and in that of Aphrahat in the fourth, "a nation from among the nations." Moreover, for the Christians, the story of Adam and Eve provided the justification for the coming of Jesus Christ, and was to be understood in the light of His saving mission. Since Paul, who had announced that death, brought in by Adam, had been vanquished by Christ (Roms 5.12), Christian soteriology had insisted on the direct line from the first to the last Adam. Such a perception obviously trivialized the place of Israel in the history of salvation.

This fundamental difference between the Jewish and the Christian approach to the myth of paradise is reflected in the dual structure of the Christian Scriptures, and in the very specific intertextuality that they demand. The Old and the New Testament are to be interpreted in the light of one another. As *sacramenta futuri*, the tales and figures of the Old Testament are not to be understood in and by themselves, but should rather be seen as alluding, in veiled form, to the perfect, final expression of divine revelation in the figure of Jesus Christ.¹¹ Quite clearly, then, such a conception entails a certain blurring of the historical dimension of these tales and figures. This blurring is perhaps nowhere as striking as in the interpretation of Adam's *felix culpa*.

In the New Testament and in the earliest Christian writings, the story of Adam and Eve in paradise plays a very minor role, and this role seems to reflect its place in contemporary Jewish literature.¹² One should insist upon the fact that for Jesus and his disciples, the story of the Garden of Eden is not very significant.¹³ For both Jews and Christians, reflection on the *Urzeit* was focused upon the story of creation itself, the *hexahemeron*, since

¹¹ For an example of how this conception is reflected in patristic biblical hermeneutics, see Stroumsa 1992a.

¹² For some iconographic references, see Schubert and Schubert 1975. The authors show that the iconography reflects the reading of the Targum of Gen. 3.24, which points to an eschatological understanding of paradise.

¹³ See for instance Luke 23.43, where Jesus tells the good thief that he will soon be with him in paradise; see Luke 16.19–31 on the rich man and the poor Lazarus. See Galling 1949; Jeremias 1954. See further Bietenhard 1951, 161–91. Paul's mystical ascent to the third heaven (1 Cors 12) was also interpreted as a vision of paradise. See de Vuippens 1925.

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in the Greco-Roman world, *creatio ex nihilo* was the most dramatic claim to originality of the biblical *Weltanschauung*. But *Gan Eden* and *paradeisos* had also begun to acquire in Jewish and in Christian writings a new, metaphorical meaning, referring to the place of the Just at the *Endzeit*. In a sense, one can say that for both Christians and Jews, the coming kingdom of God in the millennium would be the new paradise.

For the Christians, however, the power of the paradise story was affected by another aspect of their soteriology. The centrality of Jesus Christ for the new religion weakened the weight of eschatology, since the central messianic expectation had already been fulfilled. This “realized eschatology,” to use theological jargon, permitted the progressive disengagement from the eschatological expectation of the Second Coming, from the second to the fourth century. The Christians would then, more and more, think of paradise in terms of the Kingdom of God – and Ephrem, for instance, would identify both concepts. “Paradise” soon became associated with the blissful state of the elect, which would eventually be graphically reconstituted in the monastic cloister: already for Jerome, the monastery was identified with a paradise.¹⁴ Among the early Christian thinkers, then, one can distinguish two main trends. For some Fathers, such as Epiphanius, Chrysostom, or Lactantius, who, as says Augustine (*De Gen. ad Lit.* 8.1–2, 5), read the *Genesis* text *corporaliter*, paradise is a concrete place upon the earth. For others, on the other hand, who read it *spiritualiter* (mainly Origen) it is a state of bliss. In both cases, however, paradise is certainly not confined to the *Urzeit*. A third trend, stemming from Philo, and to which Augustine himself belongs, together with Theophilus of Antioch and Ambrosius, thinks that paradise should be understood *utroque modo*.¹⁵

The Christian demythologization of paradise grew from a complex background. Its most obvious origin is probably directly related to the transformation, or rather the realization, of the Jewish concept of Messiah. Jesus Christ had offered salvation, and yet history was far from having ended. Hence, the Jewish linear vision of history was profoundly modified. If there was no clear end to *Heilsgeschichte*, its beginning in time, too, would be blurred. The one real focal point of world history was neither its beginning nor its end, but rather its middle, the coming of Jesus Christ upon the earth, His life, death and resurrection, which must be perceived by the Christian believer as constantly occurring in the present.

¹⁴ Jerome, *Epistle* 125, 7ff. Reference in Louth 1995; see also bibliography there. See further Sagne 1984.

¹⁵ See Miquel 1984.

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From such a perspective, as we have seen, Adam was the first *sacramentum salutis*, or *figura* of Christ, in the biblical text – although his sin and punishment only highlighted the discrepancy between him and the recapitulation of history in Jesus Christ: sin, punishment, and salvation. The early Christian traditions about Adam's skull lying at the foot of the cross on Golgotha reflect precisely this direct link between Adam and the Son of Man, the last Adam.¹⁶ One can perhaps say, then, that the Christians overcame Adam through his last avatar, from above, as it were.

The Jews, on their part, seem to have harbored a rather similar ambivalence in their feelings toward the figure of Adam. Yet, it is before Adam (or from below) that they discover another mythological figure, the Primordial Adam, or *Adam Kadmon*, later to become a protagonist in Kabbalistic literature. *Adam Kadmon*, however, remains a rather weak figure in mid-rashic literature. In *Genesis Rabbah*, for instance, he never achieves a really prominent status.

It is only with the Gnostic trends as reflected in texts dating from the second or third centuries, and later on in Manichaean traditions, that one finds a consistent remythologization of the protoplasts' story in paradise. This complex and baroque myth-making lies beyond the scope of this paper, but I wish at least to quote from one of the most powerful texts, the so-called *Hypostasis of the Archons* found at Nag Hammadi:

From that day, the Snake came to be under the curse of the Authorities, until the All-powerful Man was to come, that curse fell upon the Snake.

They turned to their Adam and took him and expelled him from the Garden (*paradeisos*) along with his wife, for they have no blessing, since they too are beneath the curse.

Moreover, they threw Mankind into great distraction (*perispasmos*) and into a life of toil, so that their Mankind may be occupied by worldly affairs, and might not have the opportunity (*scholazein*) of being devoted to the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

In their dramatic struggle against the Gnostic radical remythologization of cosmogony and anthropogony, second-century Christian theologians were bound to put less emphasis than their competitors on the interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. The best strategy against Gnostic myth-making was to avoid discussing the same issues at great length, and to move the focus elsewhere.¹⁸ Similar attitudes would be reflected in the

¹⁶ On Christ as the last Adam, see Daniélou 1950, 3–44. The most dramatic classic iconographic treatment is perhaps Piero della Francesca's fresco about Adam's death in Assisi.

¹⁷ *CG* II, 91; I quote according to the translation of Layton 1974. See his commentary, Layton 1976, esp. 59–60 nn. 79–80, which does not add much for our perspective.

¹⁸ This method was applied in a much more radical way by the Rabbis, who knew to kill their opponents by silence – whereas the patristic heresiographers expounded the heretics' views at great length before refuting them.