

Margaret Barker

Paradise Lost: Adamic Imagery and the Environment

Religion, Science, & the Environment Symposium IV:
The Adriatic (under the auspices of the Patriarch of
Constantinople, 5-11 June 2002)

ADAM. THE WORD SIMPLY MEANS A HUMAN BEING. The Hebrew text of the Book of Genesis says, literally: 'God created the *adam* in his image, ... male and female he created them.' (Genesis 1.27). The stories of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden (*Eden* means 'delight') stand at the beginning of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, and they have been pondered by interpreters of Scripture ever since they were written. They are evidence that the issues which will concern us during this symposium are the fundamental issues.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, when archaeologists discovered the creation story of ancient Babylon, the initial reaction was one of alarm. The story was similar to the story in Genesis, so how could the Babylonians have known it? Did the writer of Genesis take stories from another culture? Was the Bible not unique? Closer study, however, showed that the apparently similar stories were saying two very different things about the nature of the human being and the human's place in the world.

Why am I telling you this? Because the Adam stories in Genesis must be read for what they are— not just a primitive description of how the world came to be made, but the means by which profound issues were addressed in a culture which had storytellers rather than philosophers. The Adam stories passed into Jewish and Christian culture (and Muslim, but I have no expert knowledge of Islam) as the setting within which the great questions were discussed. The implications of the Genesis stories are often accepted even by those who would deny any knowledge of the Bible. Why do people in the West think that the world should be a good and pleasant place to live?. Is it perhaps because there is some deep memory of the biblical story and the words 'God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good' (Genesis 1.31)? Is there a memory of Paradise Lost?

The Bible begins with the story of creation. This is the biblical word for environment, the word we use now because everyone else is using it. But environment can imply that we humans are at the centre, and everything happens around us. The biblical idea of creation constantly reminds us of the Creator, and in the Bible, the act of creation is something unique to God. The special verb used in the biblical stories, *bara'*, is never used of human activity. God creates.

Later tradition recorded that both the temple in Jerusalem and the tabernacle which Moses had built in the desert represented the creation. The tabernacle had been erected in obedience to the Lord's command to Moses: 'Build me a holy place so that I may 'dwell' (in the Greek translation this is 'be seen') in your midst (Exodus 25.8). In their place of worship, then, they acknowledged that it was the Creator who was at the heart of the creation, not the human. As the story was later told, Adam was the first high priest of this temple, and care of the creation was his liturgy. This word 'liturgy' originally meant a public service performed for a master, or for the state, but in the case of priests, it meant their service for God. The temple was the creation and, as later interpreters taught, the creation was the temple.

The Hebrew storyteller also said that Adam was made in the image (*tselem*) and after the likeness (*demut*) of God, a startling statement when you consider the second of the ten commandments: 'You shall not make for yourself any graven image (*pesel*), nor any likeness (*temunah*) of anything in the heaven above or the earth beneath or the water under the earth...' (Exodus 20.4). Although the second commandment uses different Hebrew words for image and likeness, the meaning was understood to be the same. In what way, then, could Adam have been made in the image of God and after the likeness?

Again, there have been countless attempts to explain these words, not just because the interpreter was trying to make sense of Scripture, but because these were the terms by which the underlying question was addressed. What was different about human beings? Some modern scholars have suggested that the word used for Adam being 'the image' was one which did not have associations with idol worship, and so would not have been offensive. This is probably correct. Nevertheless, the early Jewish teachers were uneasy about the word 'image', and when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Aramaic [the Targums], they were careful to avoid any suggestion that the human form was the likeness of God.

Philo, a great Jewish scholar who lived in the first century CE and had been much influenced by Greek ideas, argued that the image of God was the human mind, insofar as it was able to understand the things of God. This interpretation passed into the Church, the teachers of the eastern church distinguishing between the image, 'which

indicates rationality and freedom', and the likeness 'which indicates the assimilation to God through virtue' (St John of Damascus). By free choice, the human is able to make good decisions and thus draw nearer to the likeness of God.

Often, though, people simply pondered the implication of the human being's special status, rather than trying to define it too closely. R. Akiba, the Jewish teacher who lived in the early part of the second century CE, taught: 'Beloved is man for he was created in the image; still greater was the love that let him know he was created in the image (*Mishnah Pirke Aboth* 3.15). Jesus used the belief about Adam as the image of God in his parable of the sheep and the goats on the Day of Judgement, which has become the basis for Christian teaching about social responsibility. As the King divides the sheep from the goats, and brings the blessed ones into his Kingdom, he tells them that they have been generous to him and helped him. The blessed ones are surprised, because they have never seen the Lord in need of anything, and are not aware of having helped him; 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or a stranger and welcome you?' Jesus' reply to them is based on the belief that Adam was made in the image of God: 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Matthew 25.31-46). Notice that the question asked at the great judgement was not one of belief, beyond that of recognising that the image of God was to be seen in every human being.

Adam was also given dominion— 'over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that dwells on the earth' (Genesis 1.28). *Dominion*. So much has been written about that word, especially since an article published in America in 1967, which claimed that Christianity was responsible for the current ecological crisis. Lynn White's influential article 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis' (*Science* 155 10th March 1967 pp 1203-7) claimed that Christianity taught it was God's will for man to exploit nature for his own purposes. He wrote of 'Christian arrogance towards nature' and saw the root of the disaster in Adam's 'dominion'. This started a huge debate. It is true that some Protestants (Calvinists) had taught that 'God ordained all things for our profit and salvation...' and that Adam was created last of all, when everything had been made ready for him (Calvin Institutes 1.14.22), but to suggest that all exploitation and greed was a Protestant prerogative was not accurate.

As the debate gathered momentum, the arguments were expanded with reference to the theses of M. Weber and R.H. Tawney, that the Protestant work ethic had been a major factor in the exploitation and destruction of the earth. The older Christian understanding, that the image of God had been Adam's soul or his rationality, was abandoned, and it was stated that the image of God meant Adam's dominion over nature. The original story, you will recall, tells only of Adam's dominion over the creatures. Now there is of course a connection between the image of God and the dominion, but the dominion is

not because Adam is in the image of God. The relationship is one of consequence: since Adam is made in the image of God, he is fit to have dominion.

Several people, who were not biblical scholars but nevertheless wrote on this topic, were influenced by one opinion as to the exact meaning of the Hebrew words. To have dominion— *radah*— they said, was a strong term, as was *kabash*, subdue, 'a word used elsewhere for the subjugation of conquered territory, and it clearly implies reliance on force' 'It is a very powerful expression of man's attitude to nature and suggests he sees himself in a position of absolute command'. (J.Black, *The Dominion of Man*: Edinburgh 1970 p.37) But is this what those words meant? Adam's dominion over the animals did not allow him to eat them for food; Adam was allowed to eat only plants, grains and fruits (Genesis 1.29). The verb 'have dominion' can mean simply to exercise a peaceful rule. Solomon 'had dominion' over a wide area and there was peace on all sides (1 Kings 4.24). 'Subdue' in the Hebrew is a word that implies 'binding' or 'harnessing', and so Adam subduing the earth probably meant no more than making the soil productive.

The tendency nowadays is to use the word stewardship instead of dominion. Adam was put in the Garden— and here the Hebrew words are very interesting— Adam was put into the Garden to serve it (*abad*) and to guard or preserve it (*shamar*, Genesis 2.15). Adam was the servant of the Garden, and his work there was his 'liturgy'. The words are interchangeable. His role was to guard and protect, and so stewardship is a better word than dominion.

By allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, we see from Psalm 8 what type of human was set to rule over the creatures of the earth. 'What is Man?' asked the psalmist, Man who has been made almost like the angels and then given dominion over the creatures. It is the Man who has first looked up to the stars, and realised how small he is in comparison with the glory of the heavens. It is the Man who knows his place in the creation. And so the Psalmist wrote: 'When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established, what is man? And yet thou hast made him a little less than the angels... and given him dominion' (Psalm 8). This Adam is no strong ruler, trampling the earth; this is the shepherd king or the gardener.

Adam was made from dust. Then the Lord God breathed into him and he began to live. This description of the creation of the first human is a good illustration of the difference between the biblical account and that Babylonian creation story which caused such alarm. The Babylonian version also described how the first human was made from dust, but it was dust coagulated with the blood of a defeated god named Kingu (*Babylonian Creation Epic* 6:22ff). This is very different from saying that the dust was transformed by the breath of the Living God. Babylonian mythology did not need to explain the ills of human life, as humans were doomed from the beginning. The biblical story reveals the

Hebrew belief about the nature of Adam, that he was far more than just a body formed from the earth. (Earth and Adam are similar words in Hebrew). There was something of the living God in him, and so he was the link between the Creator and the creatures. From such a fine beginning, how did everything go so wrong?

The problem was knowledge. The knowledge of good and evil from the tree which had been forbidden. The Garden of Eden was full of trees, but the storyteller named only two— the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life— and only one of them was forbidden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Similar myths have only one tree, and so we recognise that this is the point to investigate. Why two trees? Those who first heard this story would have known that the tree of life was also the source of knowledge, so why does the storyteller describe two trees, both of them sources of knowledge, but one of them forbidden? The tree of life was not forbidden to Adam until he had chosen to eat from the other tree. Adam could not eat from both trees.

The tree of knowledge appears nowhere else in the Bible, but the tree of life is elsewhere described as Wisdom (Proverbs 3.18). In the vision of the Book of Revelation, the fruit of the tree of life is promised as a reward for the faithful, and there are other ancient texts in the Hebrew tradition which describe the beautiful perfume of the tree of life and how its fruit would one day be given to the righteous (1 Enoch 25). This fruit is described as the 'sevenfold instruction concerning his creation' (1 Enoch 93.10). The tree of life was a source of knowledge about the creation, it was the source of life, and, as we shall see, it was the source of healing and renewal.

It has sometimes been said that the story of Adam and the forbidden tree shows that the biblical tradition did not want humans to have knowledge. The Adam story would then have been the Hebrew version of the Prometheus myth, with Adam trying to wrest secrets from a jealous God. This is not correct. The position was far more subtle. The fruit of the tree of life gave 'sevenfold instruction concerning his creation', and the writings of the Hebrew wise men are full of lists which can be regarded as summaries of the scientific knowledge of their time: 'the breadth and length of the earth and how it was founded and the number of the stars and where they rest' (1 Enoch 93.13-14). Detailed astronomy texts have survived. The story of the two trees saw the problem with knowledge in terms of the source of the knowledge, the attitude to its possession, and how it was used.

Side by side with the story of the tree of knowledge and the serpent who seduced Eve with his promises, there was the story of the fallen angels. Until the beginning of the Christian era, this was the story used to explain the origin of evil and how the creation had been corrupted. Two hundred angels, mighty beings who knew all the secrets of the creation, rebelled against the Great Holy One and brought their knowledge to earth.

They seduced human women and revealed their knowledge as part of the rebellion. The similarities to the Eden story are clear. Eve was seduced by the evil one with the offer of knowledge, and this was part of a wider rebellion.

The knowledge which the angels brought was listed, and it included metalworking to make weapons, the knowledge of medicine and astrology, in fact, the scientific knowledge of that time, and it was that knowledge, wrenched from its source, which 'caused much bloodshed on the earth'. Eventually the stricken earth cried out to heaven (1 Enoch 8), and the archangels were sent to destroy the evil and to heal the earth from the effects of the abuse of angel knowledge. This is the oldest version of the story of the fallen angels, as it is told in the Book of Enoch. It is remarkable because storytellers living in the iron age had recognised that the corruption of the creation, even as they had experienced it, was caused by the abuse of knowledge. Those who chose the tree of life also acquired knowledge, but they acquired it as Wisdom. And so, when the storytellers told of the Garden of Eden, they described not one tree but two, and they knew that Adam and Eve had chosen the wrong tree. When they ate the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened, and what they actually learned was that they were mortal and would die.

There have been countless interpretations of this story, all concerned with the role of the human beings and their attitude to knowledge, its effect on their own lives and the fate of the creation which was left in their care. The problem and the questions remain: the nature of human beings, how they acquire and use their knowledge, and how this affects the world in which they live.

Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden, and they found themselves in a place of thorns and thistles, where the ground was cursed, and where their only future prospect was to return to the dust from which they were made. 'Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return'. The Eden imagery and the Adam stories continued to be the medium for the debate. The prophet Isaiah described how Eden would be restored. There would be no more hurt or destruction, the wolf would dwell with the lamb and the leopard with the kid, but only when the whole earth was full of the knowledge the Lord. The human who would restore Eden would be anointed, the biblical symbol for the gift of Wisdom, since the perfumed anointing oil was drawn from the tree of life, and thus his mind would be transformed. He would see with anointed eyes and hear with anointed ears, and as a result, his judgements would be different. They would be wise. Then, and only then, would Paradise be restored (Isaiah 11).

There are many other Eden stories, apart from those in the Book of Genesis. One story tells how, when Adam and Eve left the Garden, the mouths of all the other creatures were closed, and they could no longer speak with humans (Jubilees 3.28). Another says that when the human pair left the Garden, they were allowed to take with them seeds so

that they could grow food, and also the seeds of the aromatic plants to make incense, so they could have the perfume of Paradise in their worship (Life of Adam and Eve 43, with parallel in Apocalypse Moses 29). The whole of the Book of Revelation is about the return to Paradise. At the end of his vision, John sees the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God. He sees the tree of life growing in those waters, 'and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations' (Revelation 22.2).

In Christian tradition, the tree of life has often been represented as the cross, and the cross as the tree of life. In the church where we shall gather to worship on Sunday there is in the apse a beautiful mosaic of the transfiguration, with the mountain depicted as a Paradise place: the trees, the plants, the flowers and the birds. In the centre, representing Christ, is the cross, in the place of the tree of life. The transfiguration offers a glimpse of the Paradise state to which we are returning.

This article was originally located at www.orthodoxeurope.org/theospirit/000016.php.

It is not at all clear why the mosaic referred to in the last paragraph, which is at the church of San' Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna, depicts the Transfiguration, apart from the fact that the 'experts' have all quoted each other for many years now and said it is so. But there is in this mosaic no mountain, no Christ (except as a small bust depicted at the center of the Cross), and no disciples, unless three sheep standing at the foot of the Cross are taken as Peter, James, and John— but there is no reason to say that, unless one has already decided that the image depicts the Transfiguration. The scene actually shows a (flat) Paradise, with a luminous Cross in the midst of it, and a bishop standing orant in the foreground, leading a flock of sheep to this Tree of Life in Paradise. Nothing, in other words, even hints at the Transfiguration except perhaps the three sheep and the radiant halo of the Cross, and a number of elements appear (bishop, sheep, Cross, flat ground, and numerous trees) which have nothing to do with the Transfiguration. The correct interpretation? The bishop, surrounded by his flock, in prayer, and about to eat from the Tree of Life in Paradise: What a transparent image of the Church, and of the Liturgy— but not of the Transfiguration!