

tion between divinity and humanity was considered "an irrevocable event." The early Chinese expressed considerable regret that they "had no way by which they might. . . bring back their original condition." And in South America, several Indian tribes still lament that they "no longer know the route to this 'Happy Place.'"

In conclusion, if the idea of a primordial paradise originated in the imagination of one individual or nation, one would simply not expect to find it so firmly implanted in the minds and hearts of peoples everywhere. After all, it is not only widely known, but widely believed, and there is a difference. This tradition has not been transmitted as an interesting tale told by an exotic traveler; it has been preserved, without exception, as the record of an actual historical time and place. The primordial paradise is more memory than myth.

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# ...If you call out for Insight...

You will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.  
Based on Proverbs 2:3-5

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## Worldwide Traditions of Primordial Paradise

by Alene D. Oestreicher MLA

The Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis and the Golden Age story of the Greek poet Hesiod are perhaps the two best-known accounts of a primordial paradise. But the idea of an original, perfect society—one of peace and plenty, devoid of disease or death, and in which humanity communed freely with their God or gods—is found in many forms around the globe. For all their variations in form and focus, these traditions relate remarkably similar circumstances.

Compare the Biblical account given in Genesis 2:8-10, 16, 17 with the version penned by Hesiod (fl. 8th century B.C.):

**At first the immortals who dwell on Olympus created a golden race of mortal men. That was when Kronos was king of the sky, and they lived like gods, carefree in their hearts, shielded from pain and misery. Helpless old age did not exist, and with limbs of unsagging vigor they enjoyed the delights of feasts, out of evil's reach. A sleeplike death subdued them, and every good thing was theirs; the barley-giving earth asked for no toil to bring forth a rich and plentiful harvest. They knew no constraint and lived in peace and abundance as lords of their lands, rich in flocks and dear to the blessed sods (lines 110-121).<sup>1</sup>**

Just as in the Garden of Eden, Adam did not have to "toil" in order to eat (Genesis 3:17). Foodstuffs seemingly grew of their own accord. Adam and Eve were apparently meant to be immortal; the first mortals of Greek Mythology did not grow old, though they did eventually die. And, as the Lord God could be found "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8), the "golden" men lived in close proximity to the Olympian gods. Furthermore, in a striking parallel with the Biblical story in which the first woman is held responsible for the Fall of mankind (Genesis 3:10), a curious Pandora "with her hands removed the great lid of the jar and scattered its contents, bringing grief and cares to men" (lines 95, 96), hence putting an end to the Golden Age.

The Hebrew and Greek accounts are not alone in the literature of the ancient Near East. Mesopotamian civilization and culture are considered to have begun at Sumer, and the Sumerians had a paradise myth, composed in the 3rd or 2nd millennium B.C., it consists of an unmistakable parallel with the Biblical account.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in ancient Egypt, the theme of an original paradise was

pervasive. "There was plenty of food in the bellies of the people; there was no sin on the earth; the crocodile did not seize prey, the serpent did not bite in the age of the primeval gods"<sup>3</sup>— a time when men and gods lived together and man was immortal.

This idea was not limited to the Near East. It is found in the earliest traditions of the Far East as well. In China, the great Taoist teacher, Kwang-tze (fl. 4th century B.C.), told of an ancient age when

**Birds and beasts multiplied to flocks and herds; the grass and trees grew luxuriant and long. In this condition the birds and beasts might be led about without feeling the constraint; the nest of the magpie might be climbed to, and peered into. Yes, in the age of perfect virtue, men lived in common with birds and beasts, and were on terms of equality with all creatures, as forming one family.... Equally without knowledge, they did not leave (the path of) their natural virtue; equally free from desires, they were in a state of pure simplicity. In that state. . the nature of the people was what it ought to be.**<sup>4</sup>

The "luxuriant" growth of plants is once again noted, and the willing submission of animals to humans is reminiscent of the "dominion" Adam was given over the animals. Kwang-tze further explained that it was the excessive "practice of ceremonies" by "sagely men" which caused people "to be separated from one another." In other words, worship and sacrifice were not necessary in the "age of perfect virtue," for man was already at one with the Tao (the Way) and with his earthly fellow creatures. As in the Garden of Eden, it was an unquenchable thirst for knowledge that destroyed the tranquillity—"Great indeed is the disorder produced in the world by the love of knowledge" (Writings, p.289). And in at least one Chinese source it was a "woman, by an ambitious desire of knowledge," that brought "misery" upon the human race.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, in the jungles of ancient Mesoamerica, a similar account was preserved:

**And in this way they (the Creators and Makers) were filled with joy, because they had found a beautiful land, full of pleasures.... There were foods of every kind.... They (the first four men) were endowed with intelligence.. they succeeded in knowing all that there is in the world. When they looked, instantly they saw all around them, and they contemplated in turn the arch of heaven and the round face of the earth (Part 3, pp. 166-168).**<sup>7</sup>

This paradise, like the others, was filled with good things to eat. But the predicament in which the gods found themselves—that the "created" possessed knowledge and vision equaling that of the "creators"—was not to be tolerated for long. Holding council, they resolved to remove these powers from the realm of mankind (p.169). This divine dilemma is almost identical to the one described in Genesis 3:22. Later the first Quiché women were formed while the men slept (p.170).

These accounts of a primordial paradise are but a representative sampling of those which survive. It can be demonstrated that the same story is an integral part of tribal traditions in places as diverse as Africa, Iceland, India, the Americas, and Australia.<sup>8</sup>

In our comparisons of the above accounts, many conditions were found to be common to most or all of them. Food was always abundant and animals had no fear of man. And man had no fear of God or gods, for he lived not only with Him or them, but he lived as one himself, tasting of neither infirmity nor death. But in every case this blissful state came to an abrupt end, usually through human action.

Thus the primordial paradise, like the creation of the universe and mankind, was a singular event in prehistory, and, as such, cannot be verified by science. This is not to imply that a judicious application of the scientific method of inquiry is of no value here.

Modern theories of mythology are many and complex, but they ultimately fall into one of two categories—the myths are either judged to contain historical truth or they do not. In the case of a primordial paradise, no contemporary mythologist seems willing even to allow for the possibility that it might have been an actual state of human affairs at one time. The idea is therefore hastily relegated to the status of pseudo-history or allegory—symbolic means of explaining the "human condition" or expressing the strivings of the human spirit. It then follows that its nearly universal currency is due to one of two factors—either it was everywhere borrowed from another culture (or inherited from an earlier one) or, conversely, it independently arose the world over in obeisance to the "psychological unity of mankind," that is, that all human beings in the final analysis think alike.<sup>9</sup>

The reason for dismissing the Golden Age as fiction is, in fact, based not so much on the laws of human nature as on presently accepted theories of human origins. Evolutionary science claims that man has risen from a primitive form, and has not fallen from a higher form at all. But Darwinian evolution today has critics within its own ranks. And evidence is mounting which proves that ancient civilizations in both hemispheres were far more sophisticated than had been previously believed. "Prehistoric" or "primordial" does not have to mean "primitive."

Appraising the paradise myth with regard to the above theories brings to light numerous difficulties. Interpreted as pseudo-history, it should come as a surprise that there are so many similar stories, for it seems highly unlikely that people in Greece and Guatemala would invent the same scenario in order to reconstruct their respective racial origins. And to ask for "psychological unity" is, scientifically speaking, asking a lot.

If looked upon as an allegory, the same myth would be expected to convey more or less the same message, for it would have been composed with a specific purpose in mind. Yet we find that in each case the "moral" of the story is different, and that it appears in a different context within each culture. Thus the Genesis version focuses on mankind's separation from God, Hesiod is extolling the virtues of honest labor, and Kwang-tze is condemning the prevailing social class structure. These examples support the view that the tradition itself is of great antiquity—and that its "truth" is more than poetic.

Some scholars have suggested that the story was diffused worldwide from a single Sumerian source, either by direct or indirect borrowing. But when the Sumerian "original" is placed side by side with its supposed offspring, it is immediately evident that it does not contain all of the elements central to the story. As it turns out, no single surviving version contains all important features found in others. Furthermore, the logistical problems of global distribution are great.

Historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, has supposed that the tradition of a primordial paradise reflects a "nostalgia" for a mythical time when heaven and earth were either closer together or actually connected, facilitating direct communication between the gods and man. He observes that the shamans of Asia regularly engage in rituals devised to restore this "paradisial life."<sup>10</sup> In ancient Egypt, this sharp separa-