

The Garden of Eden Interpreted As an Allegory in the Evolution of Humankind

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The book of Genesis in the Holy Bible recounts a story of humans living in a wonderful garden provided by God. Like most of what is in the Christian Bible, the story of the Garden of Eden is cryptic and gleaned from different writers. The Bible is often viewed as containing the answers to all human questions and the solution to all of our problems. This view is supported by the myriad of stories that the Bible contains and its most salient characteristic: the lack of consistency. Religious leaders and theologians are free to construct support based in the Bible for almost any desired conclusion. With that being stated, let us consider an interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden that seeks its verification not within a religious framework but from the broader framework of science.

The story of the Garden of Eden is, like most allegories, deceptively simple. In the genesis, humans live an idyllic life in a world where all is provided by God. As with possibly all religions, humans are assigned the highest position in the world. In Genesis 1:26, *“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”* The Genesis story is ambiguous as to whether the early humans were omnivorous. Genesis 1:29 says, *“And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.”* Indeed, Genesis 1:30 implies that all other creatures are herbivores, *“And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.”*

Regardless of what humans ate, in the early world of humans food was readily available and plentiful. Humans seem to have been able to frolic through their lives. The only specific work task mentioned in the story is the naming of all the beasts in Genesis 2:20, *“And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.”* And in Genesis 2:18, *“And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him.”* This help meet was a female human. Genesis 1:27-28 states, *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, ... “*

The story takes a radical turn. Genesis 2:15-17 says, *“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”* A new sentient being is introduced, the serpent. In Genesis 3:1, the serpent is described as being *“more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.”* The story relates that the serpent uses words to seduce the female and convinces her to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Genesis 3:4 the serpent tells her, *“For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”*

Genesis 3:6-7 says, *“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.”*

God learns that humans had eaten the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and is not pleased. The male blames his transgression upon God and the female in Genesis 3: 12 by saying *“... The*

woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” The female blames the serpent.

In Genesis 3:22 God reasons, *“Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever ...”* So God pronounces punishment upon the female in Genesis 3:16 saying, *“... I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”* In Genesis 3:17-19, God says to the male, *“... Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”*

The humans are cast out of the Garden of Eden and barred from returning.

The Christian religion is based upon the salvation of humans. All humans are presumed to be inherently sinful. The source of this sin is most often attributed to the fruit-eating transgression related in the story of the Garden of Eden. In essence, the Christian take away from the story is that humans are special to God and that, because of their disobedience, humans require salvation in order to return into God’s favor. Ignored in Christianity is the prominent point that what the humans ate was fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Through eating of this forbidden fruit, the humans became wise. However, having wisdom is generally considered to be a **good quality**.

Let us step away from religion, and describe how the humans lived before the transgression. They simply moved about gathering abundant food with little effort. Sex was not a major obsession. Clothing was not a necessity. No mention

is made of social structure or human laws. There is no mention of large groups of humans. In anthropological terms, humans were living as hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherers live in small groups with few children. They did not build substantial houses.

Following the transgression, humans were farmers. They worked hard to till soil, plant seed, and process food. They had more children and lived in large groups. They wore clothing. They built houses. Their bodies wore out from all the work. Having more children became a priority and raising them became feasible. Populations grew and the need for more food increased. Sex and fertility gained importance.

What occurred to change humans from hunter-gathers into farmers? Human knowledge increased. As hunter-gatherers, humans needed far less learned knowledge than farmers. Farmers needed technology.

Consider the possibility that the Garden of Eden story is **an allegory of the transition of humanity from hunter-gathers into farmers**. Humans biologically evolved as hunter-gatherers. We have millions of years of hunter-gatherer existence in our genes. It is thought that agriculture developed about 12,000 years ago. During these 12,000 years, our cultural evolution raced far ahead of our genetic evolution. Could it be that humans have an innate yearning for a return to a simpler lifestyle, a lifestyle more akin to the hunter-gatherer? If so, the Garden of Eden story could have been written as recognition of this yearning.

The conflict between the hunter-gatherer and the farmer is recounted in another story in Genesis 4:2, *"... Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground."* In Genesis 4:3-5, *"And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell."* Genesis 4:8 says, *"Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him."*

In the story of the journey of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, the people return to a hunter-gatherer way of life for forty years. Exodus 16:11-15 says, *“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God. And it came to pass, that **at even the quails came up, and covered the camp**: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host. And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground. And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, **this is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.**”* From Exodus 16:35, *“And the children of Israel did eat manna forty years, until they came to a land inhabited; they did eat manna, until they came unto the borders of the land of Canaan.”*

In the New Testament books of the Christian Bible, the lifestyle conflict is prominently displayed in the teachings of Jesus. In the story of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:25-31, Jesus says, *“Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?”*

Sex was a major issue in the story of the Garden of Eden. In Genesis there are two different stories of the creation of humans. The first story, in Genesis 1, is a concise story of all creation. Genesis 1:27 says, *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”* In

this telling, mankind is created as a sexual being, like all the other beasts of the earth. The second telling of human creation is related in Genesis 2. In this telling, the human male is created first; then the female is created from a rib of the male **to serve as a helpmate** to the male. Sex has become a major theme in human life. Humans are placed into the Garden of Eden. In this garden, Genesis 2:9 tells us, *“And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the **tree of life** also in the midst of the garden, and the **tree of knowledge of good and evil.**”* In both story versions, the point is made that humans were not ashamed of their sexual differences. Before the transgression, Genesis 2:25 states, *“And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.”* Following the eating of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Genesis 3:7 says, *“And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.”*

We should ask ourselves, **why was the issue of sex** salient to the story of the transition of humans from hunter-gatherers to farmers? Sexual activity is the natural and necessary manner in which mammals, including humans, procreate. In the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, procreation is a lesser priority for survival. Humans spend many years in development before maturity. For a family to have more than a couple of children to raise is a great burden to daily living and could be a threat to survival. Sexual activity within the family and tribe would be a reluctant necessity. However, in the farming society having more children is a great priority. Food production depends upon human labor, and a large population supplies this labor. Permanent housing and crop storage enable the agricultural lifestyle. Sexual activity becomes a desire rather than a burden. In our genetically inherited yearning for return to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, **sex is evil.**

End

Note: Biblical texts are from the King James Version.