

From Eden to Eternity: Creations of Paradise in the Later Middle Ages

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It is surprising how frequently books appear on the subject of Adam, Eve and the Garden of Eden. The already extensive bibliography in this volume could easily be doubled or trebled (1), but it has to be said that this is a fascinating, original and impressive contribution to what we might term protoplastic studies. Its subject, however, is hypothetical; that is, it examines (late) medieval views of how things might have been in paradise without the fall, and what they might be like in the celestial paradise. Alastair Minnis moves easily through a series of questions posed by the narrative of Adam and Eve, a tale which invites speculation at every turn, and which scholastic discussion has developed in all kinds of (contrasting) ways, looking too at how the Bible and other writings were used to substantiate the conjectures. The period upon which the work centres is (roughly) from the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard to the death of 'that ... theoretician of human misery' (p. 235) Calvin in 1564. Aquinas looms large throughout, and so does Wyclif, but a large number of lesser-known theological writers also make an appearance, as well as a range of literary texts (mainly in English), strongly supported by iconography (with a selection of colour plates).

The series of questions discussed relate first to the unfallen body, and how things would have been in Eden had man not fallen. What, for example, about sex? Was carnal love (intended to be) part of the pleasures of paradise? As ever, opinions differ, and Minnis cites an 'ardent fantasy' by Sir David Lyndsay as a contrast with those who thought that paradisaal sex would have been without pleasure. Other questions are to do with power – Adam's dominion over Eve, or over the beasts (indeed, what were the animals actually for?). It is assumed that the first couple were vegetarian, but so, presumably, though not all writers and artists agreed, were the animals, or death would have been present too (intriguingly, Mark Twain has Eve ponder that very point in his spoof Eden diaries, which Minnis quotes at one point as a chapter-head). That the animals start to rend each other after the fall is sometimes graphically depicted (2), but Minnis's illustrations include Bosch's depiction of this happening *before* the fall. One wonders, too, where the skins in Genesis 3: 21 came from? The problem of death signals 'the crucial, vast, fundamental, and intractable problem' that will be developed later in the work, namely of the restoration of the body in (perfected?) form.

The first major section is concerned with the body, touching on all kinds of specific details (rather than the more general legends such as the creation of Adam from eight elements, here noted p. 233), but Minnis

points to the medieval discussion of questions that we might not think were ever asked. What about defecation and urination in paradise, to say nothing of other bodily fluids? There were some simple answers (Bonaventure thought that excretory functions would have been less filthy). Of course, part of the point of questions like these is, as Minnis points out (p. 35f.) to establish a difference from the animals, and a wider discussion of the senses shows different views associated with Augustine and his followers, with Aquinas, or with Bonaventure. One significant factor in the consideration of what might or could have been, however, is voiced already in this early part, and that is the assumption of divine foreknowledge of the temporary nature of Eden, something which has to condition much of the discussion.

Accordingly, God provided the wherewithal for carnality, knowing that it would not be used there. Sex without sin (and the nature of sexual pleasure) is a complex topic, and it was linked, fascinatingly, with medieval medical theories as we move to speculations about how the commandment in Genesis 1: 28 to be fruitful and multiply might have been fulfilled.⁽³⁾ The discussion ranges over views of external influences upon conception (linked with the eccentric biology of Jacob's sheep-breeding), and then to the question of potential child development in Eden. Adam's actual capacity for sinning in his original state is looked at, and one might here add the view expressed in the Peterhouse manuscript of the so-called *Salernitan Questions*, according to which Adam had been created *temperatum in omnibus qualitatibus*, with perfect humours, but after Eve's discussion with the serpent he 'cepit super huius uerba cogitare et sollicitus esse, et ita nimia cogitatione et sollicitudines plus naturali temperantia incaluit'.⁽⁴⁾ Is the *sollicitudo* which put him off-balance perhaps 'executive stress'? The final part of this first section looks at the creation of the soul, at the formation of Eve, and at the habitation of Eden as such, which is sometimes located cartographically (in spite of views on its concealment after the fall). The place as a *locus amoenus* is familiar enough, and artists and writers usually present it as perpetual spring or summer; more interesting are the debates on what happened to it in its redundancy after the Fall (p. 78). What might have been taken into consideration for several reasons is the extended tradition (which also covers the period of this study) of the *Vita Adae et Evae* in Latin and in vernacular languages, in which Adam and Eve actually try by means of penance to get back to what they had enjoyed in Eden. Asking whether they had at least tried to get back is another legitimate question, even if not discussed by the schoolmen, and although they of course fail when the devil tricks Eve again, Seth manages a final look into Eden (he is not actually allowed in), and brings back for the dying Adam a promise of the Redemption, some sweet herbs, and seeds that will grow into the Cross. Adam's son, then, is presumably the last person actually to have *seen* Eden. Christian apocrypha also include a strong apocalyptic tradition, with regular and specific visions of the heavenly paradise in texts afforded as much authority as the canonical Apocalypse. The brief look here at the *Visio Tnugdali* might have been amplified.

The second section of the study looks at power, Adam's proposed and eventually truncated role as master over the land, the beasts and indeed perhaps over Eve, confusingly described in Genesis as his *adiutor*.⁽⁵⁾ This might take us beyond the Fall and back; it has been pointed out that one of the marks of sainthood is control over the beasts (St Jerome, St Francis), perhaps as an echo of paradise. However, the animals themselves pose problems; Peter Comestor, Peter Lombard and Robert Grosseteste all worried about the concept of perfect worms or lice, although Grosseteste, rather tellingly, more or less gave up on the lice. As far as perfectability of fauna in the General Resurrection is concerned, Minnis notes the thoughts of two more recent writers, Martin Luther and C. S. Lewis. The former considered that insects would be restored in an improved and fragrant form; the latter, although positive on the immortality of beloved pets, was dismissive of newts, who do not have consciousness or soul. The small aside is interesting in demonstrating that this kind of debate is not exclusively medieval, although one might expect some confusion from Lewis, who has rational and non-rational beasts in Narnia and whose Christian enclave in *That Hideous Strength* contains a veritable menagerie.

More subtle, however, are medieval distinctions between power, ruling, and owning, and the familiar question of who was then the gentleman is also invoked here. Adam's job in paradise, though, was that of a gardener, and this concept could be put very simply. An Irish chronicle describes how God set Adam 'in the Paradise of Pleasure, that he might till it i.e. that he might plough and reap, without sweat and without weariness'⁽⁶⁾, but gardening as such (as an unconscious attempt to recreate Eden?) was much developed.

Again it is worth noting that in the *Vita Adae* the hungry protoplasts are provided with seeds and instructed in agriculture after their failed attempt to redeem themselves by penance and fasting (the latter practice discussed here, p. 235f.) On the gender issue, we are shown here how the condemnation and commendation of Eve varied considerably, although Christine de Pisan's *felix culpa* defence is indeed (p. 138f.) special pleading. Things are perhaps deliberately made clearer in the *Vita Adae* tradition, in which Eve again fails to recognise the devil (disguised as an angel) while Adam sees through the disguise at once.

The final part is concerned with views on what might be to come, rather than what might have happened in Eden. Consideration of the heavenly paradise also raises questions, some of a technical nature, such as how the body is to be restored if that body has in life been eaten, say, by a cannibal, a proposition which exercised Augustine and Aquinas (also on behalf of the cannibal). Another trump card, that of 'Creator's omnipotence' in setting things right has to be invoked (p. 149). The linking of the restored and glorified soul with the medieval use of crystal reliquaries is of interest, and light plays a very important part in the image of heaven, with reference to Isaiah 30: 26. This section of the study develops more links with literature, with Dante, of course, but also with the *Prick of Conscience* (sometimes still maligned and here rightly given credit), and with the Middle English *Pearl* (with Boccaccio's *Olympia*) for its relevance to visions of the resurrected body. The detailed discussion of *Pearl* also provides a justification for what might at other points look like a history of medieval whimsy: the human need to revitalise the loved dead. The Pearl-maiden, in heaven as a grown woman, raises additional points which might have been developed here; Malory, for example, does distinguish between types of virginity when he refers to Sir Perceval's sister as a 'clene virgyne in wylle and in worke', and the German Hartmann von Aue created in his work *Der arme Heinrich* a memorable young woman (rather than the infant Pearl-maiden) who actually *wants* to gain a heavenly crown by willingly sacrificing herself to cure her lord's leprosy. Hartmann's maiden, incidentally, says of life in the heavenly paradise that no-one ages and the old become young, there is no frost or cold, and – since she is a farmer's daughter – horses and cattle do not die. That the Pearl-maiden's crown does not mean that she is usurping the Virgin is a misprision used in various places, not only in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* (in a passage referred to here in a different context, p. 278n), but in other medieval works. In the 14th-century English *Trentalle Sancti Gregorii*, Pope Gregory sees his once sinful mother crowned after her redemption and assumes her to be 'qwene of heven,/ Modyr of Jhesu, mayde Marye' until she disabuses him.⁽⁷⁾

The study is completed with a coda which is important, given that it moves us away from simple speculation to matters which are of importance to human thought (p. 220), the balance of *curiositas* and *utilitas*. The scientific (medical, astronomical) and aesthetic areas of thought inform the methodology of speculations which might provide the prospect (as in *Pearl*, p. 238) of joy after grief and a perfection which would surpass the might-have-beens of Eden.

It will be clear that this study makes a significant contribution to studies of Adam and Eve, who serve yet again as a starting-point for discussion of the philosophy of being in medieval theology, art and literature. The copious notes develop specific points, and the primary and secondary bibliographies are, as indicated, extensive. The complex material is entertainingly presented and the illustrations well-chosen, and the speculations on Genesis fit, in fact, into a long tradition of enhancement according to the *sensus litteralis* in which there is, of course, rarely any consensus. The Irish *Leabhar Breac*, for example, notes that some writers say that there were a thousand years between Lucifer's creation and transgression, but then adds that 'other writers say that it is thirteen hours and a half ...'. The related Irish *Saltair na Rann* tells us that Adam was in paradise for a thousand years and six hours, but also that he and Eve were destined to live without illness in Eden and then to be taken to Heaven at the age of 30. On the other hand, the ages of Adam and Eve are sometimes set in medieval texts at 30 and 12 respectively.⁽⁸⁾

Finally, however, since the brightness of heaven indicated by Isaiah 30: 26 is mentioned more than once, it is impossible to resist noting that this was cited in 1972 in a wonderfully solemn scientific assessment of the relative heat of heaven and hell, comparing the radiation levels of seven suns with the maximum temperature for liquid brimstone (Apocalypse 21: 8), and finding the former to be at least 200 degrees greater.⁽⁹⁾ Bodies will need to be very much perfected in the General Resurrection, therefore, since our modern schoolmen

have shown us (with careful reference to the Bible) that heaven will be hotter than hell.

Notes

1. To the additional secondary studies mentioned in this review, we might add just two different but useful works: Hans Martin von Erffa, *Ikonologie der Genesis* (Stuttgart, 1989–95); and *A Walk in the Garden. Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden*, ed. Paul Morris and Deborah Sawyer (Sheffield, 1992).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. As in the 17th-century illustrations to Andreini's *L'Adamo*: John Prest, *The Garden of Eden. The Botanic Garden and the Re-Creation of Paradise* (New Haven, CT, London, 1981), pl. 15.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. M. Evans, '*Paradise Lost*' and the *Genesis Tradition* (Oxford, 1968), p. 72f. discusses Philo and sexual allegory, and notes p. 77 that John Scotus Eriugena sees the division into sexes as a result of the fall. Diane Kelsey McColley, *A Gust for Paradise* (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 1993) considers p. 92 the problem of sex before the Fall, which might have resulted ultimately in progeny with and without original sin. See also Felix Asensio, 'Tradición sobre un pecado sexual en el paraíso?', *Gregorianum* 30 (1949), 490–520 and 31 (1950), 35–62, 162–79, 362–90 and Jeremy Cohen, '*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It*' (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1989).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Brian Lawn, *The Prose Salernitan Questions* (London, 1979), pp. 1 and 220.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. On which see David J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help* (Sheffield, 1990, repr. 1994).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Lebor Gabála Érenn, ed. trans. R. A. S. Macalister (Dublin, 1938–56), I, 58f.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See my 'Two Heavenly Crowns: Hartmann's *Der arme Heinrich* and the Middle English *Pearl*', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 53 (2000), 145–66, with details of Malory, Hartmann, and the *Trentalle*.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. B. MacCarthy, *The Codex Palatino-Vaticanus No. 830* (Dublin, 1892), pp. 37–90, see pp. 46f. David Greene, Fergus Kelly, and Brian Murdoch, *The Irish Adam and Eve Story from Saltair na Rann* (Dublin, 1976), I, p. 29 and II, p. 70f.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. *A Random Walk in Science*, ed. R. L. Weber (London and Bristol, 1973), p. 106 (from *Applied Optics*).[Back to \(9\)](#)

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