
Paradises Lost

PROFESSOR BOYLE: I'm Nancy Boyle and again today Dr. Lou Bolchazy is with me to discuss Paradise Lost.

Dr. Bolchazy, I assume we're talking about the Garden of Eden, which according to Genesis is a paradise full of bliss and immortality. However, judging from our past conversations, I'm sure that the concept of an original paradise is not unique to the Bible.

DR. BOLCHAZY: That is true, Nancy; the concept or myth of an original paradise seems to be universal. It is certainly common in the ancient Near East and in the ancient Mediterranean world—the two areas that shaped our Western theology and culture.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Will you give us some parallel myths of paradise?

DR. BOLCHAZY: The best known are the Greek Golden Age and the Sumerian Dilmum.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: That's D-I-L-M-U-M, right? Go on, please.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Dilmum is a land that is pure, clean, and bright—a land of the living, which knows neither sickness nor death. Let me quote from an ancient Sumerian text:

The croak of raven was not heard,
the bird of death did not utter the cry of death,
the lion did not devour,
the wolf did not rend the lamb,
the dove did not mourn,
there was no widow, no sickness, no old age, no lamentation

PROFESSOR BOYLE: In the Gilgamesh epic, doesn't the hero visit Dilmum in his quest for the herb of immortality?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, which he finds but later loses to a serpent.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: The serpent is thus responsible for the hero's mortality.

DR. BOLCHAZY: True. In the Gilgamesh epic there is another story which parallels the myth of original bliss, innocence, and immortality; you recall that Enkidu was created by the mother goddess Aruru. Enkidu lived an innocent and contented life with the animals in the wild. Then one day, a temple prostitute was sent to lure him away from his state of natural bliss and innocence. So Enkidu went with the temple prostitute, who was a representative of the goddess Aruru, and stayed in her embrace for six days and seven nights.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: What happened to Enkidu?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Well, Enkidu gained new knowledge and became civilized.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: I'm sure he paid a price for this new knowledge and civilization, though.

DR. BOLCHAZY: He lost his friendship with the animals. He was no longer welcomed by them. And, he would eventually die.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Loss of innocence and immortality! The tree of knowledge of good and evil with a woman instrumental in bringing wisdom to man! Was the Greek Golden Age similar to the Garden of Eden?

DR. BOLCHAZY: In some sense. Let me quote from Hesiod, who wrote a poem called *The Works and Days* around the eighth century B.C. I'll use Professor Wender's translation:

The gods, who live on Mount Olympus, first
Fashioned a golden race of mortal men;
These lived in the reign of Kronos, king of heaven,
And like the gods they lived with happy hearts
Untouched by work or sorrow. Vile old age
Never appeared, but always lively-limbed,
Far from all ills, they feasted happily.
Death came to them as sleep, and all good things
Were theirs; ungrudgingly, the fertile land
Gave up her fruits unasked. Happy to be
At peace, they lived with every want supplied,
Rich in their flocks, dear to the blessed gods.

Further on we are told two interesting things: first, men and gods lived on intimate, familial terms. Secondly, after a long life individuals would leave

this earth and go to dwell with the gods and in subsequent generations they would act as messengers of the gods and protectors of men.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Like angels in Hebrew tradition! Are there other paradises in Greek mythology?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Homer in his great epic, the *Odyssey*, mentions several: for example, the Elysian Fields characterized by perfect natural bliss; the island of the Phaeacians who mingle with the gods and whose technology is so advanced that their ships travel almost as fast as the speed of light; now of course you have the island of Calypso where Odysseus can become immortal if he only marries the nymph Calypso; the island of the Cyclopes also is described in paradisiacal terms: People there are close to the gods, and the land provides everything for them without any sweat of the brow.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Now that we've discussed several myths of paradise lost, I'd like to compare them with the Hebrew concept of paradise.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Some of the chief characteristics in the biblical Eden are: There is no death.

It is implied that the tree of life will give immortality to Adam and Eve.

DR. BOLCHAZY: In the Mesopotamian paradise, Dilmum, there is no death. Utnapishtim will live forever. Apparently there is available to Utnapishtim the herb of immortality.

In the Greek Golden Age, mankind did not suffer and did not die, but rather was transported to the abode of the gods.

Enkidu in his innocence living a carefree life among the animals is not faced with the prospects of death until he becomes civilized and knowledgeable.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Adam and Eve walk with God.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Just as in the Greek Golden Age mankind associated on familial and friendly terms with the gods.

The Zoroastrian myth places the original human beings in heaven with the good spirit Ahura Mazda. The Phaeacians and the Cyclopes in Homer also associate freely with their gods.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: In the Bible, there is the curious connection between gaining wisdom and losing immortality.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes. The interesting point is that Adam is introduced to the tree of knowledge through a woman, Eve, his wife. If you recall, Enkidu in the epic *Gilgamesh* also learns wisdom and becomes civilized through a woman. Once Enkidu gets wisdom, he becomes mortal.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So the concept of paradise lost—whether it's called Eden, the Golden Age, or Dilmum—

DR. BOLCHAZY: . . . or the Garden of Hesperides, or Avalon . . .

PROFESSOR BOYLE: . . . it's a universal concept, and differs only in details from culture to culture. In essence all these accounts tell the same thing: mankind at one time was immortal, happy, and on friendly terms with the divine.

DR. BOLCHAZY: That's the way I see it.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Why was the concept of original paradise invented?

DR. BOLCHAZY: I can think of several reasons. First of all, it is a normal and persistent human tendency to think that the past was somehow better.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: The "good-old-days" syndrome?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So, in addition to the good-old-days syndrome, there's another one: "The grass is greener on the other side of the fence."

DR. BOLCHAZY: This syndrome possibly explains why the early Greeks and the Mesopotamians believed that paradises existed in their time somewhere far away. The Homeric Greeks, we know, conceived of many such paradises—the island of the Phaeacians, the island of Calypso, the land of the lotus eaters, and the land of the Cyclopes. In all these utopias, life was easy, there was no sweat of the brow, and there was no death, no estrangement from the divine.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: It seems to me that the myth of an original paradise also affirms that God is good and that he created everything good, at least at the beginning.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Very well put. To put it differently, the human condition of suffering, sickness, and death does not go along with the concept of God's goodness and omnipotence. So in their original paradise, the mythmakers did not blame God. On the contrary, they affirmed that at least originally, mankind was created in a blissful and immortal state. The story of paradise is usually an introduction to another story, namely the fall from original perfection. This is true in the case of the Biblical account, the Greek Golden Age, and the Mesopotamian story of Adapa. The fall, of course, explains the reason for the current human condition on earth. The story of paradise contrasts man's hated condition with the desired condition.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: It seems to me that in these accounts of paradise, there is an attempt on the part of the mythmakers to define the ideal life—abundance of material resources; absence of sorrow, sickness, war and death; a need for a relationship with the infinite.

DR. BOLCHAZY: And, of course, immortality. I agree with you, Nancy, that the concept of paradise represents an early attempt to define the ideal life.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: You've mentioned that Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian counterpart of Noah who survived the great flood, succeeded in regaining the paradise lost. My question is: how can a paradise lost be regained?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Every religion has an answer to that question, and we already know these answers.

So, instead let me mention the answers that Hesiod and Homer give.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: All right.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Homer shows an interesting attitude toward all those Utopias. Odysseus, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, has an opportunity to live in a number of utopias. He rejects them all, one by one.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Why? After all, on the island of Calypso, Odysseus had a beautiful, never aging nymph for a girlfriend. He had a ready kingdom at his disposal. He was promised immortality.

DR. BOLCHAZY: True. But after seven years on the island of Calypso, Odysseus is crying because he wants to go home to his aging wife Penelope and to his young son Telemachus. And so Odysseus is willing to give up his kingdom, his Calypso, and the prospects of immortality. For what? For the insecurity and the dangers of the open sea.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Why would Homer have him do that?

DR. BOLCHAZY: I believe Homer is raising an important question—what is happiness? Does happiness for a man like Odysseus consist in immortality and in an abundance of material goods? It seems that Homer is saying that such a utopian condition is a hellish Eden, because it is a sterile existence. That human nature demands something else—struggle, which brings a sense of accomplishment; danger to life, which brings stimulation; the daily great unknown, which satisfies curiosity for new knowledge; challenges in which one can stretch his mind and brawn and realize his potential; the imperfections of the world among which one can stand high instead of the divine perfection which would dwarf him.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So Homer rejects utopias; he rejects the mythological definition of happiness. For Homer happiness is the pursuit of happiness, and not the possession of material things.

DR. BOLCHAZY: So it seems.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: How about Hesiod?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Hesiod too seems to reject the mytho-religious definition of happiness. His recipe for regaining paradise lost is: hard work to get rich and justice and piety to win the favor of the gods.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: The Protestant ethic!

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, in a certain sense. His poem, *Works and Days*, is considered the first gospel of labor. He does not look for pie in the sky, but rather for a paradise on earth, which he can obtain through hard work and an ethical life.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Dr. Bolchazy, one last question. If we take the mythical aspect out of the concept of paradise lost, what do we have left? In other words, what is the meaning of the demythologized myth of paradise lost?

DR. BOLCHAZY: We yearn and strive for a different life—life of peace and bliss— for ever and ever. Secondly, we affirm that God, the Creator, is good and that he made people better than they are now.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Thank you Dr. Bolchazy.

DR. BOLCHAZY: My pleasure, Professor Boyle.

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