

## Two Conjectures Concerning the Adam and Eve Myth in its Mesopotamian Context

by Luke Lea Smith

### ABSTRACT

Using internal evidence we conjecture that the Adam and Eve story, when considered in the light of its Mesopotamian background, was originally a *conquest myth* belonging to the oral traditions of a subject people: that in covert language it tells a story of the invention of agriculture which made the enslavement of human beings a feasible possibility, thereby ushering in new forms of society based on military conquest and involuntary servitude as normative human institutions. More narrowly, if less plausibly, and again using internal evidence, we conjecture that the tale itself is a verbal artifact of the period during which the first large-scale military conquests occurred in northern Mesopotamia. In support of this narrower conjecture we hazard an empirically verifiable prediction, namely, that if and when burial sites belonging to the Ubaidian upper-classes are discovered, battle axes made of copper (as opposed to bronze or stone) will be found among the grave goods at the interface of the Halafian and Ubaidian cultural complexes. But even should this prediction be born out, we make no claim that the evidence, arguments, and interpretations presented in support of these two conjectures are conclusive. At most they establish a degree of plausibility which is useful for the light it sheds on the historical process.

Comments: 3 pp. For reasons explained these conjectures are contained in a letter to a noted anthropologist, Jack Goody, a specialist in the roles played by myths in the oral traditions of pre-literate societies.

Dear Prof. Goody:

I am an amateur scholar who has recently retired from my profession, and consequently find myself with time on my hands and in need of some expert advice from a professional anthropologist. It concerns a conjecture I first made when I was right out of college, while researching the historical origins of the Adam and Eve myth. My quandary is how to go about presenting that conjecture today, in a manner that would make it suitable for consideration by an academic audience?

Broadly speaking, my conjecture was this: that the Adam and Eve story is best understood as a *conquest myth* of Mesopotamian origin; that it should be read as an allegory (using that word in its original sense\*) of the invention of agriculture, which made servitude a practicable political and economic institution, thereby opening society to relationships of domination and submission, along with the idea that obedience to authority is an absolute moral imperative which must under no circumstances be questioned.

More narrowly, and less plausibly, I conjectured that the story is an artifact of the period in Mesopotamian history in which the first conquest events actually occurred: events which, as you know, V. Gordon Childe once hypothesized (on the basis of what, to me, still seems like an inspired reading of the stratigraphic evidence) occurred somewhere in northern Mesopotamia in the late 5th or early 4th millennium B.C. at the interface of the *Ubaid* and *Halaf* material cultures.\*

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\* **Allegory.** From Greek *allos* meaning "other" and *agora* meaning gathering place (especially the marketplace). In times past it was common to do one's chatting at the marketplace. Some of the topics discussed were clandestine in nature and when people spoke about them, for fear of being punished, they would speak indirectly. That is to say, they would speak about one thing in such a way as to intimate the actual information to the listener. Thus, the persons discussing clandestine matters were said to be speaking of "other things" in the marketplace. Eventually the words joined and became associated with the act of speaking about one thing while meaning another.

\* See *What Happened in History*, pp., 75, 81, 91

Now, of course, strong claims require strong evidence. Limiting myself to the second, narrower form of the conjecture, therefore, let me begin by pointing to a couple of clues in the text, both of which no doubt you are already familiar with, but which because they are internal to the body of the text as we have it, support an early provenance. The first is an apparent reference to matrilineal residence ("*Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh.*") which, taken literally, describes a custom that was quite common in early horticultural societies throughout the world, but which almost completely disappeared at the end of the Neolithic period (this sentence needs up-to-date documentation which I lack).

The second anachronism in the text (if that is the right word for it) concerns a symbolic association that once existed between serpents and the horticultural practices of northern Mesopotamia in the early 4th millennium. Based on the plates in E. A. Speiser's *Excavations at Tepe Gawra, Vol. 1*, we learn not just that serpents were a common fertility symbol associated with horticultural fecundity during this period -- a period also distinguished, if I am not mistaken, by goddess worship and a relatively high status for females -- but that this may have been the *only* period in Mesopotamian history or prehistory in which such an association existed. For later, during the 3rd and 2nd millennia, serpents became associated with the idea of immortality and eternal life (cf. *Gilgamesh*) and later still, during the 1st millennium, with the idea of physical health, from which our modern caduceus symbolizing the medical profession is derived. (See *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament* by Karen Randolph Joines.)

Thus if one accepts the broadly Mesopotamian origins of the Adam and Eve myth (which to my knowledge is not controversial) along with the decidedly unoriginal hypothesis that the story is at least in part and in some sense "about" the invention of agriculture by the female half of our species (as distinct from the question of its being a conquest myth, or having anything to do with the origins of agricultural servitude, class and sexual inequalities, the rise of authoritarian political states, etc.) then the fact that it was a serpent and not some other creature that tempted Eve to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (which she did, and found that it was "good for food") is significant. For then we would have two completely separate and independent pieces of evidence, neither of which by itself is enough to establish the plausibility of an early provenance, perhaps; but which, taken together, form a striking coincidence that is difficult to explain on any other hypothesis.

Of course it is not easy to credit the idea that a myth, any myth, could survive intact thirty centuries of oral transmission before being written down, let alone preserve arcane details of a long-ago culture. I would not credit the possibility myself were there not a remarkably similar case on record in connection with the ancient Vedic traditions of Indian civilization, as was documented by one of your former Cambridge colleagues, Prof. Glyn Daniel, in his book, *The First Civilizations* (see the Apollo paperback edition, p 96).

Might I ask whether you would consider it improper of me to question, if only provisionally and for the purposes of this discussion, a standard textbook assumption about the way the Urban Revolution first got underway in southern Mesopotamia, namely, that it was an essentially voluntary development? Now granted, a number of cuneiform references to urban "assemblies" (*ukin*) suggest the existence consultative bodies of some sort at an early date. But even so, when one takes into account the larger sequence of events in Mesopotamia as a whole, it is possible to view the rise of the Sumerian city-states as an involuntary response, the product of defensive alliances entered into by neighboring groups of villages as part of what they (rightly) understood to be a necessary reaction to events in the north.

To see this one need only contemplate the nature of conquest as a human institution, and then imagine the effect the first conquest events would have had on the thinking of the various horticultural societies that were scattered across Mesopotamia, many at relatively short distances from each other, once they had a chance to absorb what was happening and to reflect on its likely consequences for them. The discovery that it was possible for ruthless bands of men to extend the concept of animal domestication to other human beings; that as an alternative to killing ones enemies and plundering their food stocks, it was possible to reduce them to a state of bondage by first seizing those food stocks, and then forcing their submission through a combination of restricted access to food, physical beatings, and unremitting toil -- this discovery, or cultural innovation, or whatever one chooses to call it, was without question a turning point in human affairs, destabilizing and ultimately destroying the Neolithic world and replacing it with a new one based on warring states in a relentless competition for power, whose reverberations are still felt.

The point I am trying to make is that the initial conquests in Mesopotamia, wherever and whenever they occurred, and despite taboos on speaking about them freely which must have inevitably ensued, were by their nature public events that took place in the full light of day. As such they were bound to have made

an impress on the human imagination, including any gifted observers who may have been around in that period, making them an ideal subject for treatment in the oral traditions of those various unhappy folk who found themselves trapped on the bottom of the new social order -- provided, of course, that any such treatment was artfully discreet in its mode of presentation.

When we add to this consideration the peculiar charm of the Adam and Eve story, which I think everyone will agree is a masterpiece of the mythopoetic imagination, then is it so difficult to believe that this particular myth could have survived upwards of a hundred generations of sacred story telling, and amongst diverse populations, long after its original significance may have been lost?

I will not try to elucidate two or three other elements in the story. This letter is already long, and besides there are others far better qualified than I am to do this, and to render professional judgments as to whether or not they support the hypothesis under review. Nevertheless I am willing to go out on a limb and risk one concrete, falsifiable prediction, which, if confirmed, would add a third modicum of empirical support.

You will recall that at the end of the story, after Adam is driven from the garden to eat bread in the sweat of his face, Cherubim are posted "and a flaming sword [Hebrew *cherib*] which turned every way, to keep the way to the tree of life." The Hebrew word *cherib*, however, does not signify a "sword" but rather something more general, a "destroying weapon," which would certainly encompass a battle axe, for example, as well as a sword. Now I was graciously informed by Prof. Robert McC. Adams in a letter some years back that battle axes made of copper -- an orange metal which, when polished, reflects brightly in the sun -- do in fact begin to turn up in Mesopotamia during the period under discussion. So my prediction is this: if and when the graves of Ubaidian adult males are discovered at the *Ubaid-Halaf* cultural boundary (which, I understand, has yet to happen), some of them will be found to contain copper axe heads along with other insignia of nobility.

In closing, Prof. Goody, let me say I realize that there may be, and probably are, factual errors, questionable assumptions, and defects in the logic of my argument of which I am completely unconscious, the sorts of things amateurs are prone to. You can imagine how presumptuous I feel, therefore, in approaching such a preeminently accomplished professional as yourself for direction. But as you are the only one I've been able to identify with what looks like the requisite scholarly background and interests, I approach you all the same. Should you know of other, perhaps younger colleagues who would also be suitable, and you feel you haven't the time or the inclination to deal with this matter, I would be grateful if you could supply me with their names. In any event I shall remain

Respectfully yours,

Luke Lea Smith  
Reed College, class of 1964

*Postscript.* As a courtesy I am sending copies of this letter to Professors Joan Oates and Robert McC. Adams. I was in contact with Prof. Oates this past summer, albeit indirectly through her secretary, regarding the current state of archeology in northern Iraq. Prof. Adams, on the other hand, generously helped me on two separate occasions, one mentioned above, the other some thirty years prior, in the mid 70's, when I called on him at the University of Chicago and he kindly consented to read through and criticize a long brief I had written in support of these two conjectures, which at that point were not disentangled. I should also acknowledge my debt to a junior faculty member at Chicago at the time, whose name, I regret to say, I never learned, for bringing to my attention the Joines monograph on serpent symbolism in Mesopotamia.