

Adam and Eve in its Mesopotamian Context
by Luke Lea

Abstract

Based on a range of internal and circumstantial evidence we conjecture that the biblical story of Adam and Eve was initially a conquest myth of popular origin, and dates from the period during which military conquest became established as the defining institution in Mesopotamian society.

To Prof. Jack Goody
St. Johns College, Cambridge
January 7, 2007

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, my conjecture was 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 the word in its original sense) of the invention of agriculture, which made servitude a practicable 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 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) happened somewhere in northern Mesopotamia in the late 5th or early 4th Millennium BC, at the interface of the Ubaid and Halaf material cultures.

Now of course strong claims require strong evidence. With respect to this second, narrow 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 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 between serpents and the horticultural practices of northern Mesopotamia in the early 4th Millennium B.C.E.. Based on Speiser's excavations at Tepe Gawra, we know not only that serpents were a 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 was, perhaps, the only period in Mesopotamian history or pre-history in which such an association existed. For later, during the 3rd and 2nd Millenniums, 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 Jones)

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 its being a conquest myth, or having anything to do with the origins of agricultural servitude, class and sexual inequalities, or the rise of authoritarian political states) 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 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 thirty centuries of oral transmission before written down, let alone preserve arcane details of a long-ago culture. I would not credit the possibility myself were there not a strikingly similar case on record in connection with the ancient vedic traditions of India, as was documented by one of your former Cambridge colleagues, the late Glyn Daniels. (See *The First Civilizations in the Apollo* paperback edition, p 96)

Would you consider it improper for me to question, if only provisionally and for the purposes of this discussion, a common schoolbook assumption about the way the Urban Revolution first got underway in southern Mesopotamia, namely, that it was an essentially voluntary development? Granted, cuneiform references to urban "assemblies" (ukin) suggest the existence consultative bodies at some 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 groups of neighboring 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 picture the effect the first conquest events would have had upon the thinking of the various horticultural communities that were settled about in the region, many at relatively short distances from each other, once they had a chance to absorb what was happening and 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 perpetual bondage by first seizing those food stocks, and then forcing their submission through a combination of restricted rations, repeated 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 entire the Neolithic world order and replacing it with a new one based on warring states in a relentless competition for empire, 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 their eventually becoming a taboo subject for frank and open discussion, 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 were around at the time, making them an ideal subject for treatment in the oral traditions of those unhappy folk who found themselves trapped on the bottom of the new social order -- provided, of course, that any such treatment remained 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 amongst diverse populations, long after its original significance may have been lost?

I will not attempt to elucidate two or three other elements in the story. My letter is already long, and besides there are others far better qualified than I am to do this, and to render a professional judgment as to whether they support or are inconsistent with the hypothesis under review. But nevertheless, I am willing to go out on a limb and risk one concrete, falsifiable prediction, which, if verified, would lend 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 together with "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 have been 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, let me say I realize there may be, and probably are, errors of fact and defects in the logic of my argument of which I am completely unconscious, the sorts of things amateurs are guilty of. You can imagine how presumptuous I feel, therefore, in approaching such an eminently accomplished authority as yourself, Prof. Goody. But as you are one of only two or three 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
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