The Apple in Paradise

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In the Christian mythology, the first human beings placed into Paradise by God committed sin by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree and were punished with hardships in life. Nowadays, the forbidden tree is thought to be an apple tree. It is not known how or when the apple became associated with this Christian belief. This paper compiles the available evidence on the subject.

The origin of Paradise

The English word “paradise” is a transliteration of the old Persian word pairidaeza, referring to a walled garden. Cyrus the Younger (424–401 BC), a Persian king, called his walled-in garden pairidaeza, which is a simple combination of pairi (around) and daeza (wall). Pairidaeza comes to us through Xenophon, the Greek writer and historian, who heard it in 401 BC in Persia, where he fought with Greek mercenaries. Xenophon used the Greek word “paradeisoi” for garden (Lord, 1970). This became the Latin paradisus, and first appeared in Middle English as paradis in 1175 (Oxford Dict., 1933).
The idea of Paradise as a garden is much older than the word itself. Since the beginning of history, or perhaps prehistory, societies shared the common concept of Paradise as the ideal garden, a secure, everlasting place. The concept of Paradise remained even though societies that adhered to it have disappeared. A poem on one of the oldest Sumerian cuneiform tablets (ca 3500 BC) describes such a place. According to this verse: “Dilmun” was a land that was pure and clear and bright, whose inhabitants knew neither sickness, violence nor aging, but had no fresh water. Through the Sumerian gods’ intervention, Dilmun was transformed into a mythical garden with fruit trees, green fields, and meadows (Kramer, 1956), and became what today we would call Paradise.

The Paradise myth continued. In the 7th century BC, the Sumerian city state of Ereech (Waraka, Iraq) was ruled by Gilgameh. The myth of an immortal garden is repeated on Babylonian tablets bearing the “Epic” of Gilgameh (Barondes, 1962). According to this Epic: There was an immortal garden where stood a tree with a golden trunk. It was the Tree of Life, and, once discovered, could confer immortality, but discovery was not easy. Gilgameh sought immortality but his tree was “hidden,” guarded by monsters. He could never discover it and remained mortal (Cirlot, 1962).

The Epic was popular and widely known throughout the ancient world and influenced the folk tales of later civilizations (Moynihan, 1979). Two thousand years later, the holy tree in the Bible. In Paradise, there were the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Both were placed in the Garden of Eden.

Paradise as more than one location

Throughout the Bible, the earthly Paradise became identified with Heaven, remote and unobtainable, thus acquiring the transcendental image dominant in Christian tradition (Moynihan, 1979). The sacred vision of the Garden of Paradise varies from a single place of total happiness to several gardens of varying degrees of happiness. In the New Testament, Paul refers to a man caught up in the “third heaven” of Paradise (Corinthians II 12:2–4). The Paradise promised in the Koran consists of several terraces of gardens, each more splendid than the last (Koran) (there are about 120 references to gardens in the Koran).

The place of the tree in Paradise

In the archaic Mesopotamian civilizations, plants and trees were believed to contain a divine presence. The Epic of Gilgameh mentioned the “Tree” in the immortal garden. Other early Sumerian tablets often illustrate the exalted position of the Tree. On one such tablet, the mystical Huluppu tree was uprooted by the south wind and carried by the waters of the Euphrates until the Goddess of Love and Fertility seized the tree in her hand (Moynihan, 1979). The Koran (13:28) mentions the Tuba tree in Paradise. In the Upanishads of ancient India, the Cosmic tree is depicted as an inverted tree with its roots in Heaven (Moynihan, 1979). Mesopotamian settlers believed that the moon brought relief from the relentless sun, and depicted the moon as a tree atop the mountain of sky. In India, the Moon Tree was pictured as a peepul tree (Ficus religiosa). In Persia, the Moon Tree was drawn as a conifer—possibly a cypress—that came to symbolize immortality in Persian culture (Moynihan, 1979). The Sasanian Tree of Life (Sassanid dynasty ruled Persia from 226 AD until the Mohammedan conquest in 641 AD) was somewhat similar to a giant floral motif depicted on the Dome of Rock in Jerusalem (Grabar, 1959). Throughout history, the Tree is depicted as one of the most essential of traditional symbols. Often the symbolic tree is of no particular genus, although oak was a sacred tree to the Celts, ash to the Scandinavians, and the fig to the Indians (Cirlot, 1962). The tree also has been reduced to its essentials in ichnography. The cross often is depicted in the Christian ichnography as tree—“Tree of Life” (Cirlot, 1962).

The tree in the Bible

At the most primitive level, there are the “Tree of Life” and the “Tree of Death” (Knappe, 1952). Thus, we have to consider a two-tree symbolism. We can find such symbolism in the Bible. In Paradise, there were the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Both were placed in the Garden of Eden.

The Old Testament’s Book of Genesis contains two accounts of the creation of Adam. In the first version (Genesis 1:26–30), the creation took 6 days and mankind is...