

INTERVIEW

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The Garden of Eden: A Dull Place?

Brook Wilensky-Lanford talks about Eden and Iraq, how the search for Paradise has been a masculine adventure, and about the hazards of perfection.

By NATHAN SCHNEIDER

Paradise Lust: Searching for the Garden of Eden

Brook Wilensky-Lanford

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It's promised in the Bible—and in red letters, no less: “Seek, and ye shall find.” It's at least as much a principle of psychology as of theology, I'd wager. Look hard enough, and you'll find yourself finding *something*. So beware.

Brook Wilensky-Lanford's debut book, out this week from Grove Press, tells stories of some seriously quixotic seeking. *Paradise Lust: Searching for the Garden of Eden* introduces us to a series of men from the last couple of centuries who set out to find the place where we all came from, alluded to in the strange verses of Genesis. Many of them in fact did—or thought or felt they did. *Paradise Lust* is fair warning for anyone out to discover ultimate things, as well as the perfect companion for anyone who's more interested in who you meet along the way.

In anticipation of her book's release, I asked Wilensky-Lanford about what writing it has meant to her, and we compared notes on what her work on Eden and my own work on another religious search—for proof of the existence of God—might have in common.

Nathan Schneider: This book is an amazing reminder of how much energy has been expended looking for the true Eden. But its very novelty is also in how little, compared to the first creation narrative in Genesis, say, Eden has played a role in recent public debates about religion, science, and politics. It never got a Scopes Monkey Trial—though it was certainly discussed in Scopes. Are we overdue for a major public debate about Eden? Or is it too rarefied a concern, somehow?

Brook Wilensky-Lanford: *Christianity Today* recently tried to ignite a major debate about whether there was a “real Adam,” that is, one original pair of primate ancestors we are all somehow descended from. But you're right that Eden has never had its Scopes moment, where the public felt the need to choose sides on the location of Eden for political reasons. I'm not sure that debate is forthcoming, and that's okay with me. Writing the book I was really obsessed with the wide variety of proposed locations

for Eden, each of which comes with its own idiosyncratic theology and politics, some more rarefied than others.

I'd love for Eden to be a respite from the black-and-white interpretations that dog more commonly quoted Bible stories in the public realm. Let's treat it as a free interpretation zone, a preserve for diverse species of Biblical interpretation. Let the mass politicization skip right on to Noah's Ark, which has been pulled into service for both environmentalist and anti-climate-change causes. Maybe that's the next book...

Nobody even raised the issue when the U.S. invaded Iraq! Or did they?

Actually, there were lots of mentions of the Garden of Eden during the early years of the Iraq War. It would come up as a mournful, ironic side-note in otherwise brutally depressing reporting. "This place, which is according to legend, the Garden of Eden, now looks like hell," and the like. Which I always felt to be kind of unfair.

Yes, the Garden of Eden story in the Bible is thought by most legitimate scholars to originate in much earlier Mesopotamian legend, which means that the Garden of Eden would be somewhere in Iraq. But—and I admit to a certain literalism here—that early version doesn't necessarily share the same theology or have the same implications of a beautiful, perfect place where something went wrong. So in a way we were imposing our mythology on the place, along with our energy needs and politics.

Wait—Eden wasn't always a beautiful, perfect place?

Not exactly. Some say the (possibly Sumerian) word "Edin" means simply "a flat plain." The Mesopotamian ancestors of the Bible stories have this polytheistic, pragmatic quality which I for one really enjoy. The legendary Sumerian "happy hunting grounds" called Dilmun is a nice place, sure, but also noted to be useful as a convenient location for trading. In their flood story which precedes Noah's Ark, the gods (note the plural) decide to flood the world because the humans are making too much noise and keeping them awake at night. This idea of perfection and paradise that we associate with Eden really came along later, as the story evolved into the Biblical canon.

Okay. Back to Iraq.

Well, even in the Judao-Christian Eden, the combination of it and a war zone is not really so surprising, although still sad. There's nothing saying Eden stayed perfect after the Fall. Genesis says God placed a couple of angels with flaming swords outside the gates to protect the Tree of Life, and presumably bar our return, and many assume that the Garden was destroyed in Noah's Flood, never to be seen again. There's a small town near the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates today where they have a Tree of Knowledge, now dead, standing in a little cement park. And that's pretty much how I picture the aftermath of Eden. On my optimistic days I remember the group trying to re-populate the marshes that Saddam drained; it's actually called the Eden Again project.

The end has been much more popular than the beginning lately—Harold Camping’s May 21st of this year, and the Mayans in 2012, etc., etc. But ask any good creationist, and he’ll tell you that the beginning has everything to do with the end. The great young-Earther Henry Morris wrote a book near the end of his life, for instance, on *Creation and the Second Coming*, and even the Turkish creationist Harun Yahya promised me when I met him that Jesus would return in ten years and evolutionism would be done with—well, that’s seven years, now. So what has Eden to do with the end? What note will you tuck in it when you mail a review copy to Harold Camping?

Is that seven years exactly? I’ll have to mark my calendar.

I wouldn’t bother.

So, yes, Eden is also about The End. I would probably call Harold Camping’s attention to the chapter of *Paradise Lust* about the Creation Museum in Kentucky, where the Fall of Man and Noah’s Flood both serve as reminders of God’s unforgiving wrath against sinners, foreshadowing the end to come. Of course, Eden has also been identified with heaven, another perfect place at the end of life. The Mormons have a tradition that “Zion,” their vision of a future utopia, “will be where Eden was.” Theologians have characterized Christ as the “Second Adam” or “Last Adam,” whose sacrifice specifically redeems the First Parents’ original sin, closing the loop of that story.

You note that most of the searchers you write about, maybe “not surprisingly,” are men. Why is that not surprising? Not surprisingly, too, I’ve found something similar in my work on the search for proofs of the existence of God, which has turned itself by virtue of the fact into a study of masculinity, at least implicitly. I’ve had to think a lot myself about what thinking about proofs has to do with being male. How about you, though? What does all this thinking about Eden-searchers have to do with being a woman?

The “not surprisingly” is just my little bitter feminist joke. It actually was sort of surprising, or certainly disappointing to me as a woman writer working on this book, not to find any full-fledged Eden-seeking women. I kept running into historical women on the edge of the search, who were always sort of “tsk-tsking” dreamier male Eden-seekers. The feminist Victoria Woodhull gave an entire lecture in 1871 refuting the idea; she said that any “schoolboy over the age of 12” who would read Genesis 2 and think it describes a literal place “ought to be reprimanded for his stupidity.” Others were more diplomatic. Gertrude Bell, who lived in Iraq for much of her adult life, only mentioned Eden once in her diaries: her friend William Willcocks had come to town, to discuss “Eden and other reasonable things.” She called him “dear old thing.”

I feel like this kind of biblical musing was a creative canvas for men, but it brought out a certain practical streak in women. Then of course there’s the stereotypical demonization of Eve—if Eden is the origin of women’s villainy and/or victimization, why would we want to go back there?

Are you impressed by these guys? Do you think they're trying to be impressive? Who do you think they were trying to impress?

I'm sure they were trying to impress their audience, sometimes a very specific one. There's a German Assyriologist who delivered a rousing defense of Eden in Iraq directly to Kaiser Wilhelm from the stage of Berlin's biggest concert hall, in hopes of getting royal funding for more archaeological digs. William Warren wanted to dazzle his readers into supporting North Polar exploration with his 500-page book explaining why the Garden of Eden had once been there. Doubtful, I know.

But I feel less impressed than entertained, bemused, and sometimes amazed by the scale of the reasoning that these characters put into these claims—and a little protective too. They had no idea their theories would be made to stand up generations later and testify.

Among proofs for God's existence, too, one often runs into an interpretive problem: proof enough for one person isn't proof enough for another. Some proofs are better than others, to be sure, and then for some, it's just a matter of personal feel. What makes a case for an Eden location compelling? What kinds of evidence and reasoning have actually managed to convince people? What, if only momentarily, has convinced you?

The basic proof of Eden goes like this: If the Garden of Eden story in the Bible was based on a much older Mesopotamian legend, and if that legend referred at all to a real place, then that place was probably in Mesopotamia. Beyond that, we'll never have much more evidence.

But that level of explanation doesn't say anything about the actual origin of man, or why our original place was perfect, or why we left, or how we can get back. That's why the Eden theories keep coming. They may sound scientific—they usually do—but they're really about the “feel,” as you say. The most successful Eden in terms of number of people convinced would have to be Joseph Smith's Eden, in Independence, Missouri, and he was convincing because his followers considered him a prophet.

Nothing's supposedly weaker in philosophy than an argument from authority, yet nothing seems to work on people better...

For sure. Smith was reported to have invincible charisma, but not being privy to it, I had to recreate his Eden claim with as much context as possible. I want you to be able to follow each seeker's logic for as long as possible, before that veneer of philosophy breaks down into straight-up belief.

For me, each theory became a miniature creative work, convincing in the sort of literary way where you're rooting for the narrator of a great novel. I do have a soft spot for the “why not?” school of Eden rhetoric, in which a location is deemed possible because it's no more *unlikely* than the alternative. One of my favorite seekers, Tse Tsan Tai, tried to prove Eden was in Mongolia by virtue of the fact that Iraq was just too ugly. “Would God choose to put paradise in such a corner of the world?” A preacher lobbying for Ohio said that Eden didn't have to be in Asia just because people thought it was; the Bible doesn't say “Asia,” it just says “East.” He's right about that. I'd be curious to know if the proofs of God

you've been looking at have this whimsical quality.

Of course—but, again, we the readers of later generations usually have to put it there. I don't think Aristotle (or his editors) meant to be funny when he went off on a numerological tangent about how many prime movers there might be (47 or 49 or 55 or somesuch), but I happen to think it is. I also think Spinoza's way of inverting Descartes' proof for God into one for "God or Nature" was pretty dastardly. But, at the time, most people found this more dangerous than amusing.

Sounds like we're both walking the line between investing these quirky theologies with the humor that they seem to call for, and the sympathy and seriousness that endears them to us in the first place. So long as we upset everyone equally, we should be fine.

Something has recently been irking me about the Eden narrative in the Bible that I want to run by you; Adam and Eve don't actually seem all that upset about the Fall. I mean, the first thing we hear from them after the Expulsion is Eve thanking God after giving birth—in post-Edenic pain, no less—to a child. Do you think that even a perfect Eden would really have been so great as people seem to think? Augustine certainly described sex there in a way that seems like it would be singularly uninteresting. Would you even want to live in paradise, given the chance?

No way! I feel like Adam and Eve were just being polite—they knew God was pissed at them, so they played contrite, no Job-like wailing for them. I bet they were secretly thrilled to get to wear clothes and till the land. There's a school of thought that says paradise wasn't paradise until it was lost. While you're in perfection, it's actually really dull. Fun fact: my hometown, Bar Harbor, Maine, was actually once named "Eden." Now, after living elsewhere for 15 years, I know it's a stupendously beautiful place that I was lucky to grow up in. But as a kid I could not *wait* to get out.

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