



Messages in Myths: Eden A Poetic Rendition Of Reality

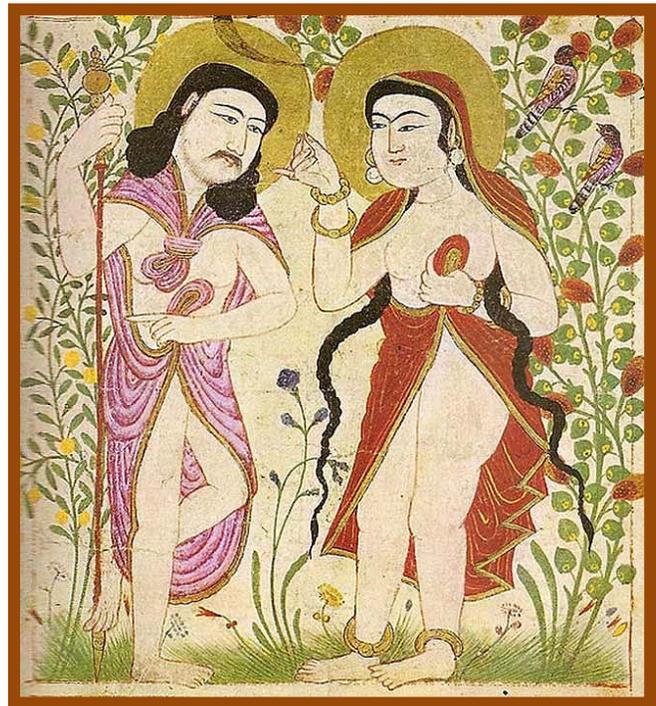
Jim Willis

There are few people in the world today who have not at least heard of the tale of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the mysterious Garden of Eden. Their story is told in the first chapters of the book of Genesis, and is a foundational myth of at least three great world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Countless lessons of morality, ethics, and religious teachings have been drawn from it, and it continues to be a great source of spiritual wisdom. Some read it as history – an explanation of why the world is the way it is. It explains the human condition of separation from nature, separation from God, and separation from each other. Others view it as a metaphor, a myth with a message.

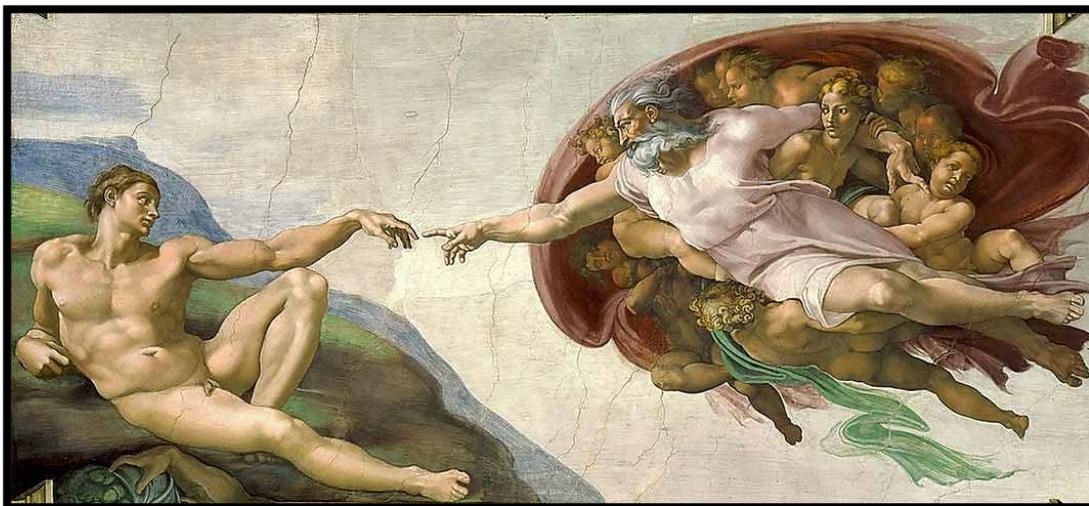
Painting from Manafi al-Hayawan (The Useful Animals), depicting Adam and Eve, from Maragh in Mongolian Iran. (1294) (Public Domain)

Eden A Poetic Rendition of Reality

What if both interpretations are, in a very real sense, true? Could it be that it is a poetic rendition of something that really happened? Can one find in the Eden stories a transition of humankind from Paleolithic to Neolithic — from a hunter/gatherer culture to that of modern civilization? Memories of a mythical paradise are universal. The old days always seem to have been better than the present. The Eden



story carries on this tradition. It harks back to the beginning when humans were one with nature. But in one sense, buried in the text might be an actual dimly remembered past of an epoch that goes back at least 200,000 years, maybe even longer, to the emergence of anatomically modern humans. In the Eden story, these first humans are given names – Adam and Eve.



Creation of Adam by Michaelangelo (1511) Sistine Chapel Rome (Public Domain)

The biblical text does not explain the way things were back then with words and phrases that would make a biologist happy. It just says: "God created it." The ancients did not understand the mechanics of spontaneous generation and evolution. On the other hand, modern man does not have it all figured out either. So, saying "God created it" is no stranger than studying theories involving Panspermia or the Many World's theory. Simply put, what the texts tell us is that for an unknown time we felt that we were one with the animals. We were one with nature. And, at least in memory, those times were good. In the words of Genesis, "*And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life, and man became a living soul ... And God saw that it was good.*"



Hands at the Cuevas de las Manos upon Río Pinturas, near the town of Perito Moreno in Santa Cruz Province, Argentina (Mariano/CC BY-SA 3.0)

In those remote, ancient, and memory-shrouded times, our human ancestors achieved something that no other animal did. It goes without saying that they developed the capacity to think and reason, but many other animal species can do that, to varying degrees. Humans also developed the ability to work together in community, but other species do that as well.

An Alternative Reality

What makes us unique is the ability to think symbolically — meaning "this" stands for "that" — and to become aware of a great mystery which is beyond ourselves. At least 40,000 years ago, early spiritual teachers, gifted Shamans, crawled back into the great painted caves of western Europe, possibly under the influence of mind-expanding and consciousness-raising hallucinogens, and began to imagine a world far bigger than any other animal species could ever picture. They reproduced that image on the cave walls. When they came out, they explained their new-found wisdom in stories, such as those about Eden. Was it simply a made-up reality? Was it only in their heads? Perhaps. But maybe not. As Dumbledore observed to Harry Potter, it may have been in their heads, but that does not mean it was not real. The world they envisioned was simply outside their sensory perception. It took a mind-expanding experience to first catch a glimpse of these forgotten landscapes. But anyone who has ever had an out-of-body or near-death experience, or who might have undergone a hallucinogenic spiritual journey, will insist that reality beyond the senses often feels more real than reality itself.



*Saint Paul the Apostle, identified from his attribute, the sword which he holds in his left hand
(Wellcome Images/ CC BY-SA 4.0)*

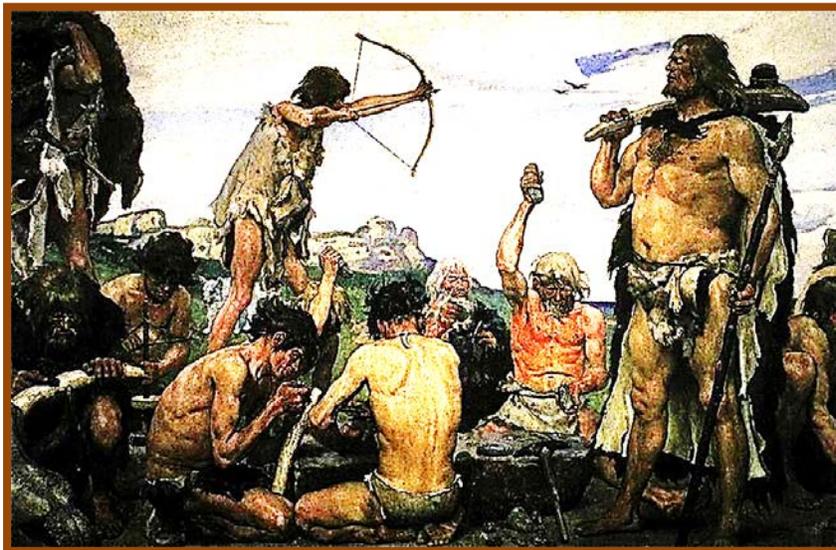
The Apostle Paul, in *II Corinthians 12*, described his own out-of-body experience. But he was forced to admit in *I Corinthians 13* that in this life we can only "see (as if) through a window, dimly." The "window" he referred to consists of our five senses, through which we experience the world.

We are just beginning, in our day, to face the fact that our senses filter out much of what is real. We have learned that ultra violet light or supersonic sound waves are real. We just cannot perceive them in the particular material perception realm we inhabit in these bodies. The difference between us and the ancients is that they seem to have discovered all this by instinct and intuition. With us it took microscopes and particle accelerators. We publish our findings in scientific, peer-reviewed journals. They told stories. Those stories conveyed to their listeners that the time when humans lived in the Eden of the natural world was a good time. In that sense, stories about Eden are no different than stories about Paradise, or Atlantis, or Mu and Lemuria. They may have had a basis in fact, or maybe not. But they represent a good way of life, now lost forever. It was a foundational time, a time of exploration and achievement.

All Humans Were Not Created Equal

It was not for everybody. All humans were not created equal. There were probably Stone Age peoples and advanced intellectual societies both inhabiting the planet. The advanced, technical cultures seem to have developed the first civilization, perhaps as far back as before the last Ice Age. It was a time of exploration. Humankind had awakened to the greater world around them. They had become aware. So, they set out to "*fill the earth and subdue it,*" as the command of *Genesis 1:28* so eloquently puts it.

Fill the Earth and Subdue it. Stone Age painting (Gugatchitchinadze/ CC BY-SA 4.0)



Did those early civilizations send out the equivalent of diplomats or emissaries to seek out new worlds and establish a beachhead on foreign soil? Did they try to communicate with Stone Age people in distant places? Did explorers go searching for natural resources that could help the motherland? At the very least, were ambassadors of good will sent out to expand human horizons? We will never know for sure, of course. But that is what we have done for thousands of years. Why would they not have done the same thing? Just because they lived a long time ago does not mean they were any different than us.

The Serpent Comet Cometh

But something happened 12,800 years ago that might very well have been interpreted as a divine judgment. Humans are not immune to the whims of the cosmos any more than were the dinosaurs who lived on earth 65 million years ago. Evidence is piling up that a segmented comet blew up in the earth's atmosphere, almost crushing the human experiment we now call civilization. The weather had been moderating quite nicely since the close of the previous Ice Age, and perhaps this hypothetical lost civilization was beginning to explore the world. Suddenly, however, the earth returned to bitterly cold conditions. The Younger Dryas Ice Age reappeared and wreaked vengeance upon the earth for more than a thousand years. Wherever the fledgling civilization called home, be it Eden, Atlantis, or something very much like it, the people discovered a bitter truth: They could not go home again. They were cast out of Eden and had to make their way into the world.



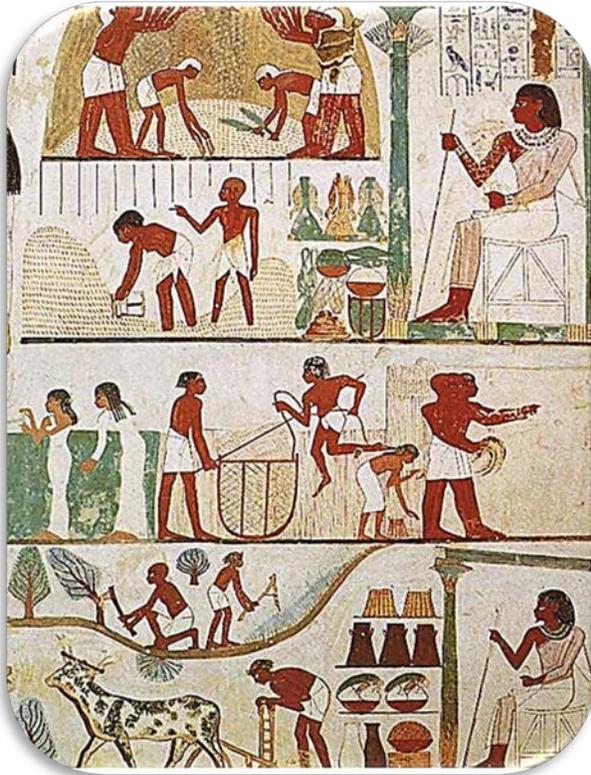
The Book of Miracles in an illustrated manuscript from Augsburg (1550) (Public Domain)

The people must have asked why. In their view, the attack by what some cultures referred to as a 'serpent' from above (after all, a comet would have had a long, serpent-like tail) seemed like retribution for their sins. In short, they blamed themselves. They had tasted forbidden fruit. What had they done wrong? They decided it was probably tied up with hubris. *Genesis* 3:5 says that they had wanted to "be like God." They soon tried to build a tower that would reach into the heavens. Their reach had exceeded their grasp. They had played with toys that proved much too dangerous.

How could they warn future generations about their mistake? What could they say to a future civilization that might, for instance, destroy the atmosphere with technology powered by burning fossil fuels, or release unthinkable energy by splitting the atom, or populate themselves out of existence? Well, they could tell stories. They were myths, yes, but they were myths based on something that really happened.

Fill The Earth And Subdue It

Meanwhile, after the destruction of their homeland, now forever closed to them and protected by what *Genesis* 3:24 describes as "cherubim with flaming swords," perhaps an illusion to the fires that burned for years after the comet strike, they might very well have set out to recreate the world. Where should the efforts begin? They had to establish some criteria.



Agricultural scenes of threshing, a grain store, harvesting with sickles, digging, tree-cutting and ploughing from Ancient Egypt. Tomb of Nakht, 15th century BC. (Public Domain)

First of all, they would have wanted to go to places that were warm. The Younger Dryas Ice Age still ruled the world, but to plant crops and become "tillers of the soil" like Cain, they would have needed a suitable climate. Around the equator the sun still shown. Waters lapped warm beaches. The Band of Pyramids found in equatorial regions around the globe probably did not happen by accident. Early civilizations in Egypt, Sumer, Indonesia, Turkey, Lebanon, Easter Island, Peru, and Mexico speak volumes about ancient

beachheads of civilization. The founders of those places had been expelled from Eden, but they were still willing to "fill the earth and subdue it."

If the homeland period of this lost civilization that once lived in Eden marked a great beginning, the epoch following the Younger Dryas Ice Age might be called its Golden Age. The comet would have forced them to "go forth and multiply." This they seem to have done. It was a period of expansion that marked a world-wide, growth-based economy based on trade. They probably decided to go to places where they had already sent their emissaries before the comet struck. It only made sense. They had already scouted the territory and perhaps even learned the language.



Cain and Abel by Andrey N. Mironov (2015) (Andrey Mironov/ CC BY-SA 4.0)

Maybe that even answers a question raised by those who first read the Bible for themselves. Who did Cain marry? He had murdered his brother, Abel. According to the *Genesis* account there were only three people left on earth. Perhaps he went native. How else did he find enough people to build a city? They were already there and willing to go to work. Why was Cain an agriculturalist? Because he taught the locals how to grow crops instead of hunt and gather their food. He had to. There are a lot of mouths to feed once you build a city and get people to settle in one place.



Cain and Abel make offerings by Phillip Medhurst (Phillip Medhurst/CC BY-SA 3.0)

Abel Versus Cain Factions

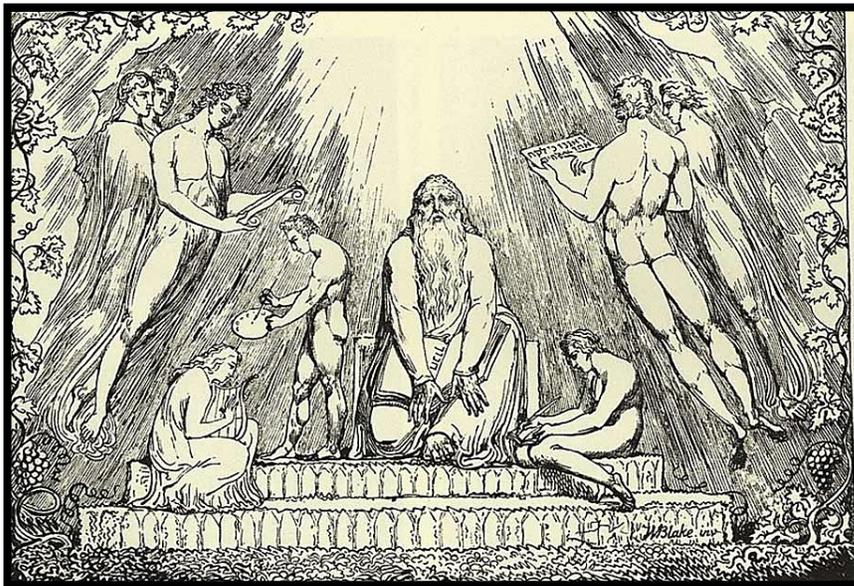
This is pure speculation, of course, but it is based on stories about Eden that have been told for thousands of years. Performing a thought experiment in the tradition of Albert Einstein, one can ask: Did the murder of Abel by his brother Cain symbolize a basic disagreement between the two about how to proceed with their missionary work? Did the "Abel" faction represent those who thought it

best to simply encourage the natives in what they were already doing? Perhaps this group believed in a "hands-off" policy — a Star Trek-type "look but don't touch prime directive" to let the locals develop in their own way. If that is the case, the "Cain" faction would represent those who wanted to jump-start local evolution by teaching the native inhabitants new things and guide their evolutionary path. This sense of involvement might also explain why Cain married one of the local women. He became actively involved with the indigenous population.

The two groups could not both have their way. According to the *Genesis* story, the Cain faction "killed off" the Abel faction, perhaps by simply outlasting and out-producing them. That eventually led to the great explosion of knowledge that occurred shortly after this time, during the period now known as the Neolithic Revolution. Perhaps this even explains a few mysterious passages in Genesis 6: "*When men began to multiply on the earth ...* (Of course they multiplied. Farming insured a stable food supply. The laws of biology tell us that when there is an ample food supply a species expands) *and daughters were born to them, the sons of God ...* (the Cain faction) *saw that the daughters of men ...* (the indigenous local population) *were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose ...* (as has been the case throughout our history wherever missionaries were sent). *The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown ...*" (Apparently, we are dealing with real men here, who could reproduce. The union of the races seemed to produce healthy offspring.)

Myths from all over the world emphasize this mixing of the races. The gods, people such as Cain and what may be called his 'emissary colleagues', seem to have created quite an impression. But it is always thus. It cannot be denied that the joining of races, in ways both beneficial and worrisome, furthered civilization. Look what happened according to *Genesis 4:16-26*:

- City Building: *"Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Cain made love to his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch".*
- Population Expansion: *"To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael was the father of Methushael, and Methushael was the father of Lamech ... men began to multiply upon the earth".*
- Bigamy Among the Missionaries: *"Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah".*
- Animal Husbandry: *"Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock".*
- The Arts: *"His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play stringed instruments and pipes".*
- Industry: *"Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. Tubal-Cain's sister was Naamah".*
- Grit in the Civilization Machine: *"Lamech said to his wives, "Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."*
- Religion: *"At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD".*



*Enoch by William Blake
Lithograph (1807) (Public
Domain)*

Global Warming And Deluge

All this seems to have taken place during or shortly after the Younger Dryas, a period that lasted for more than 1,200 years. That is a long time. The Eden *Bible* story, by its very nature, seems to present the events as a quick occurrence, but the time spans presented are really vast. The end came with a bang. For reasons no one fully understands, the Younger Dryas ended as abruptly as it began. The geologic record indicates that global warming arrived, seemingly overnight. The melting of the ice caps drastically raised ocean levels, broke apart ice dams that held in place inland seas bigger than the size of the state of Texas in the US, resulting in huge inundations all around the globe. The time of Noah's Flood had arrived. It did not cover the whole earth, but flooding was so wide-spread it must have felt like it. The myths are in complete agreement. Wherever one lived on earth 11,600 years ago, one had to head for high ground. When the deluge ended, and the earth slowly began its step-by-step path to what we now call normal, Eden was a forgotten experience, remembered only in myth.

The archaeological site of Göbekli Tepe: main excavation area with four monumental circular buildings and adjacent rectangular buildings. German Archaeological Institute, (Image: E. Küçük / CC BY-SA 2.0).



Göbekli Tepe: A Time Capsule

But there is archaeological evidence that the world began a new phase, outside the boundaries of Eden. It was precisely at this time that the first temple complex, Göbekli Tepe, was built. Evidence of the first agricultural experiments has been uncovered. Strange symbols involving sky charts, animal effigies, and religion are found there. Great, brooding, multi-ton, megalithic figures are carved out of solid rock, their hands pictured as clasped over their bellies, just like the giant figures found at Peru, Indonesia, Mexico, and the Moai statues of Easter Island. And then, soon after Göbekli Tepe was finished, it was buried until our time. Why?

The answer is again speculative, of course. But when we want to remember a particular era, we bury a time capsule that will be dug up at a future date to testify to our presence and to remind future people what we were like. Is Göbekli Tepe a time capsule that points back to a mythological Eden? But if it is, we are the recipients of the message it contains. We need only to apply ourselves to its meaning. This megalithic site now seems to mark the point of time which traditional archaeology believes our civilization began. It quickly spread downstream to Sumer and across the Fertile Crescent to Egypt, and then, after a few thousand years, flourished in Mexico and Peru.



Göbekli Tepe Totem Pole. Urfa museum (Dosseman / CC BY-SA 4.0)

They Believed In Something

If we read these texts in this way, given the obvious and, in some cases, glaring, discrepancies of the archaeological record, is the Eden story really different, or any less accurate, then the story we are taught in school? And it comes with an added bonus we do not find in textbooks. It is a story steeped in religion. It combines history with spirituality, and insists both are important when it comes to understanding who we are and where we came from. It tells stories of warm, flesh-and-blood people who lived

understandable and familiar lives. The stories are much more memorable than a simple, sterile recitation of historical facts. They stay with us for our whole life.

What do these early texts convey? What did the writers believe? The stories indicate that they believed in a metaphysical force they called God. They believed in Something that was greater than themselves. They believed that Something was guiding them and developing their journey through time, molding their destiny, from memories of Eden to the present day. And they conveyed those beliefs in myths and stories that lived on long after they were gone. Indeed, they live still.

*This article is adapted from *Censoring God: The History of the Lost Books*, by Jim Willis, published by Visible Ink Press, Detroit, MI: 2021.*

Top Image: Depiction of the original sin by Jan Brueghel de Oude and Peter Paul Rubens (1615) (Public Domain)

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