

Desert of Genesis: The Scenes Before and After Creation

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Beginnings, roots and origins have always attracted human's mind. The more we go back the more baffling they are. Accordingly, 'Genesis', 'Big Bang Theory', 'The Theory of Evolution' and a belief in the creation story of 'Adam and Eve' are actually our buried origins. This paper, quoting from some religious texts like the Bible, the Quran and the likes, discusses how the scenes before Creation and after it were similar to a desert and nothingness. Such a desert can also be a symbol of Adam's Fall on earth and his creation out of dust. In the deserts, it is said then, we are closer to God and some hidden signs of a paradise. Consequently a memory of a loss and the Garden of Eden evokes every traveller who enters this harsh yet rich landscape.

Key words: Beginning, Genesis, Eden, Desert, Dust, Fall.

Beginnings and origins are always arresting. Using such an idea, great literary figures of the world brought about brilliant masterpieces. Acting as zinger and quick remark, the opening line(s) of any great work of literature often matters more than the others. Such remarks do evoke a sense of astonishment and an urge to follow the subsequent lines and pages in a literary work. Note for instance these catchy lines of some notable masterpieces in English literature from American Book Review¹:

- a) "Where now? Who now? When now?" (*The Unnameable*)
- b) "It was the day my grandmother exploded" (*The Crow Road*)
- c) "A screaming comes across the sky" (*Gravity's Rainbow*)
- d) "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (*A Tale of Two Cities*)
- e) "This is the saddest story I have ever

- f) heard" (*The Good Soldier*)
- g) "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new" (*Murphy*)
- h) "Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu" (*Waiting*)
- i) "Call me Ishmael" (*Moby-Dick*)
- j) "The sky above the port was the colour of television, turned to a dead channel" (*Neuromancer*)
- k) "They shoot the white girl first" (*Paradise*)
- l) "I write this sitting in the kitchen sink" (*Capture the Castle*)

Nevertheless, beginnings are not merely for literary works. Roots and origins have always attracted human's mind. The more we go back the more baffling they are. Take the famous and startling chicken and egg quandary. Then there are the wondering and ever-present questions regarding creation of the world and our own origin: "When and how it all began?", "Who set in motion the beginning of the heavens and the earth?", "Where did I come from?" and "Where will I have to go to after death?" Since long back, myths, science and religion have attempted to answer such questions. As a result imagination and stories have opened their way strongly in the realm of answering

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such quests. For anticipating the coming future we do need the past. Areti Dragas discusses and encapsulates such concepts nicely as follows:

Of course, origins are harder to determine the further back you go. Questions like, 'where do we come from?', 'where did our story begin?' and 'how do we understand what has happened to us?' inevitably feature in our origin quest. Whether we quote 'Big Bang Theory', 'The Theory of Evolution' or argue a belief in a creation story like 'Adam and Eve', we cannot 'absolutely' know our origins. In the end it may simply come down to a belief in or acceptance of a cultural tradition. However, it is also true that in order to move forwards into the future, we have always tried in some way or other to interpret and understand our past. Marx and Freud, as the great figures of modernity, also sought formulations for future constructs. Invariably, then, we have done this through stories and, as I seek to bring to light in this thesis, the storyteller is the key to both past, present and future, the storyteller as the "original" narrator of stories both true and imaginary.

Genesis is in fact our buried origin. It is just like *Enuma Elish* (Babylonian creation mythos) and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (the oldest written story on Earth from Ancient Samaria), another very old Near Eastern story of creation that every human being is ardent to know about². Accordingly, the ancient Near Eastern accounts and stories are the first documents and heritage we have about Genesis, which have developed through time: this can be called "Documentary Hypothesis" (Cook 6): Such "memorable stories," according to Cook, thence lead to "ancestral stories that identify the roots and early branches of the Jewish family tree. This same tree grows in Christian settings as the matriarchs and patriarchs of Genesis appear over and again in New Testament writings". In relation to such parallels most of our religious books, for example, contend that the world was created in six days.

The World before Adam

The desert pre-exists man geologically, but it also pre-exists man semiotically³. The earth we are living on at present is composed of jungles, poles, seas, mountains, and of course miles of sandy vistas. To be more specific, "today approximately one-third of the Earth's land surface is desert, arid land with meager rainfall that

supports only sparse vegetation and a limited population of people and animals"⁴. However, the original pattern or idea of such deserts perhaps goes back to the first creation of the world. Such constantly recurring symbols of desert are also prevailed throughout different chapters of our religious and holy books such as the Bible, the Torah and the Qur'an⁵. The holy Bible, for example, starts like this: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1-2).

These inherited ideas indicate archetypes of desert in Genesis. It is said that in the desert where rarely a person goes, you will be much closer to God and you will find a new identity that is your original identity (Savage 30, 53, 65). There the signs of Eden exist but hidden from the mortal eyes. The desert is in fact part of a much bigger picture in the Bible. The Bible begins with a description of chaos and disorder. Not desert but watery chaos. The churning nothingness of Genesis 1:1 (Vander Laan, Sorenson and Sorenson 31) (6). '*The void and the earth without form,*' in the above verses of Genesis indicates a place which is confusion, void, empty, in vain, vanity, nothing, (thing of) nought, a desolation, a worthless thing, dimness, wilderness, a waste and a desert. So, the pre-creation scene has been much like a wilderness or desert landscape or the idea of such a site which comes instantly to our mind. At the beginning of section VII of "Choruses from the Rock" Eliot puts the same lines of the Genesis as follows:

In the beginning God created the world. Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness was upon the face of the deep.

Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep. And the Spirit moved upon the face of the water. In the restless wind-whipped sand, or the hills where the wind will not let the snow rest. Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep.

It is Jeremiah who later connects that formless and empty waste of creation with the coming desert, reminding of an apocalyptic vision of chaos which may happen again in future in response to human sin (Vander Laan, Sorenson and Sorenson 33). Take the following lines from the Bible:

I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled. I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the presence of the LORD, and by his fierce anger. For thus hath the LORD said, the whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end (Jeremiah 4:23-27).

God thinks over that emptiness and void (before Genesis), and decides to arrange things out of that chaos: He creates first the light – consequently Day and Night appear – and then divides waters from waters to make a firmament and so Heaven appears. He gathers then the waters together unto one place (Sea) to let the dry land emerge. And God called the dry land Earth (Genesis 1:3-10). On the sixth day, He ended his work with earth and heavens. Imposing beautiful order, “everything God created was in perfect harmony (Hebrew: *Shalom*)” and the present view pleased Him (Vander Laan, Sorenson and Sorenson 31; Genesis 1:31). He then started another creation: And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had formed. (Genesis 2:7-8)

As the verses implies, from the dry desert dust, the Creator forms the first man and breathes life into him, and then places him in a beautiful oasis-like garden, abundant with fruits. On the other hand, according to the Bible Man’s essence is made out of the dust or soil of the ground. Dr. Henry Morris, known as the ‘father of modern creation science,’ defends the same fact in his comprehensive study of the KJV: Human being’s body is composed of “the ‘elements of the earth,’ the same materials (carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, etc.) from which both plants and the bodies of the animals had been formed (Genesis 1:12,24). This unity of physical composition is a fact of modern science long anticipated by Scripture”. The holy Qur’an states that Allah “has created man from water” (Qur’an 25:54); but it also says and speaks of stages that he was created “ out of dust, then out of sperm, then out of a leech-like clot, then out of a

morsel of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed” (Qur’an 22:5 ; see also Qur’an 16:4, 18:37, 40:67) (7). Similarly in ‘Alrahman’ sura (chapter) it is highlighted that “He created man from sounding clay like unto pottery” (Qur’an 55:14).

“*For dust you are, and to dust you shall return*” is also another recurring sentence in the Bible and the Qur’an indicating the original matter of human beings (Genesis 3:19; Qur’an 7:25, 30:20, 30:25). It can be a determined answer for the two main questions about our existence: “Where did we come from?” and “Where will we go to after death?” Nevertheless, what such religious claims try to underline is the fact that the physical body of Man is only made of valueless dust or mud – hence it is not eternal – and his spirit is heavenly, precious and beyond the material. In view of that, “in Genesis 2 man is dusty, but in Revelation 21 he is precious stone” and according to Genesis 1:26 God even made him in His own image and likeness (Lee 891-3). Eliot accentuates the same idea of man’s valueless materiality when it lacks the spirit of God in his “Choruses from the Rock”:

And when there were men, in their various ways, they struggled in torment towards GOD Blindly and vainly, for man is a vain thing, and man without GOD is a seed upon the wind: driven this way and that, and finding no place of lodgement and germination. (VII, ln. 4-9) In addition to the void of the pre-creation scene there is another post-creation desert as well. The latter is in fact a symbol of Adam’s Fall. Therefore, one of the early explanations for the desert waste is that it was a consequence of God’s curse: Adam’s fall brought with it the decay of the earth (Genesis 3:17). The earth itself, though today embodies deserts, jungles, seas, mountains and so on, has been the first desert created by God full of suffering and toil in contrast to Eden which was an eternal garden full of comfort, blessing, perfect happiness and endowment. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge and came to know that they are naked, God substituted the earth in place of Eden: *shalom* was gone and chaos was back. Before sin came in this world, Adam and Eve never realized any sin nor assault or violence. They never realized what do curse, disorder, hunger, thirst, desert, hard work, sweat, sorrow, tear and death mean. Alienated from God and His presence, they lost His fellowship:

Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee, and thou shalt eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:17-19)

Hence the scene before creation, as an agitating nothingness, churning waste and watery chaos reappeared in a new form, and the harmony declined. Such a depiction also suggests, by some means, that both the sea and the desert – often turbulent and waste – are old archetypal patterns. Charles M. Doughty likewise stresses such a curse on the earth and the sea in his *Adam Cast Forth* (1908) as follows:

ADAMA: O Adam, when blew GOD that bitter breath On Earth's Plain; blew he likewise on sea-deep? ADAM: I wiss not, Like to cragged desolate waste, we lately passed, is sea-steep's haggard face⁸.

Nevertheless, the Lord is compassionate and often forgives; everything He does is with purpose. In fact, the earth is a desert He sent man to be tested on, as a place of trial wherein he can work, violate and learn, and consequently to be awarded or punished in the next world. Such an idea is stressed in the following verse: "Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken" (Genesis 3:23).

On the other hand, "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33) and he continuously restores *shalom* to his creation. The deserts are necessary for us: "In the desert of our lives we become actually aware of our longing for God and his *shalom*" (Vander Laan, Sorenson and Sorenson 32). Despite all negative notions, however, the desert paradoxically can itself be a paradise, a lost garden, or Eden. In fact it is an "oasis of light and contemplative beauty" (Twigger 99). Accordingly, quoting from Genesis and book of Revelation (21:1-2), page 43 of Jasper's *The Sacred Desert* states:

The early ascetics went into the desert while seeking a lost paradise. What they bequeathed to the mystical tradition in the West was a haunting by two biblical images that impelled and grounded their search. The first was that of

the lost Eden (Genesis 3:23). The second was that of the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21, for they literally sought a new earth and the old had passed away.

Then, I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I [John] saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, [prepared as a bride adorned for her husband].

Therefore, "in the Bible, these often hellish wanderings exist between a lost garden and an envisioned city, folded between the pages of the sacred text: from the Eden of Genesis 1-2 to the Heavenly City described in Revelation 21". Accordingly, a mystic or a desert traveller "is drawn to venture into a new land that is at the same time a memory of one that has been lost" (Jasper 16 and 50) (9).

Notes and References

1. In this regard, you may note "100 Best First Lines from Novels" by American Book Review.
2. For some details see Richard J. Clifford's *Creation Accounts* (1994), pp. 33, 84-5, 140,148. You may also consult: Hess and Tsumura, *I Studied Inscriptions* (1994).
3. Richard J. Lane: *Jean Baudrillard* (2009), p. 116.
4. You can refer to "What is a Desert?" in *U.S. Geological Survey* (USGS) website.
5. Throughout this study the authorized text of King James Version (Cambridge edition) of the Bible and Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'an are used.
6. You may see *Walking with God in the Desert*, page 31. One can also refer to the same discussions in the DVD version of the book filmed on historical locations in the Middle East, presenting faith lessons and making the Bible come alive.
7. Such verses are regarded as miracles of the holy Qur'an, for such a book, in 1400 years ago, has manifested such scientific facts in Embryology that some renowned scientists have discovered just recently. See Naik: *Qur'an and Modern Science* (2009), pp. 42-53.
8. W.H. Auden starts the first chapter of his *The Enchafèd Flood*, namely "The See and

- the Desert” with the same quote. See p. 1.
9. In this regard, note also the representation of such themes in the two works by John Milton, namely *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. As we know the first is the story of Man’s fall from paradise to earth (desert) and the second the story of regaining the lost paradise out of the same desert that he fell in.

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