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The Vegetable Garden of Eden

by Ariel Suhamy

The question of original sin no longer concerns us as much as that of diet. But what if it were the same?

Reviewed: Guillaume Alonge & Olivier Christin, *Adam et Eve, le paradis, la viande et les légumes*. Toulouse, Anacharsis, 2023, 191 pp., €19.

The story of Adam and Eve is contained within just a few verses in the Bible. And yet, it has inspired a wide range of contrasting commentaries: the interpretation differs significantly depending on whether one considers (like Saint Augustine) this story to be an authentic account of origins, or (like Origen and Philo of Alexandria) an allegory whose moral significance concerns us in the present; it differs even more greatly depending on whether one focuses on one particular verse over another. Where exactly was, and is, sin? If we focus on the verse on nudity and shame, we draw from it (again like Saint Augustine) the idea that sin is linked to sexuality. If we emphasize the woman's role as temptress, we open the door to misogynistic readings; if we focus on the Serpent, it is the Devil who takes the lead (raising some awkward questions: how could he have gone against the Almighty's wishes, and how could this reptile even speak?); if we turn our attention to the main offence—the tree itself—then it is the *libido sciendi* that is incriminated... Unless we happen to notice that it is not just any knowledge, but specifically knowledge of *good and evil*.

However, theologians of every stripe have largely retained the opposite view, and moral law reasserts Adam's sin every day in judging things and beings. One might sometimes wonder whether the emphasis placed on the circumstances of the story is not intended to distract from this core problematic point: for if Adam and Eve were ignorant of good and evil, how could God at the same time have forbidden them

anything, thus effectively teaching that there is such a thing as good and evil? And, in allegorical terms, the implicit invitation to live "beyond good and evil" takes on curiously Nietzschean overtones.[1]

This begs the question: was life in the Garden of Eden good and happy? And can we envisage a return, or is paradise irretrievably lost, at least in this life, until the return of the "new Adam" who would be Christ? Can we at least take as our model for living what little we are told about it? But what must we defend ourselves against in order to return as far as possible to primitive purity? Lasciviousness? The pride that drives us to measure ourselves against God? "Good" and "evil"?

Guillaume Alonge and Olivier Christin are historians, of theological controversies and religious wars respectively. Here, they have focused on the interpretation of another verse (1.29), which concerns the strictly vegetarian, even vegan, diet required of the residents of paradise: "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food." Seed-bearing plants and fruit would have formed the primitive diet.

The book sets out to correct a widely held prejudice among vegan activists that modern vegetarianism is the result of "abandoning religious illusions and prescriptions" (p. 180). In fact, this prejudice is not so widespread, since even today, particularly among American creationists, there are still many followers of the "Genesis 1.29 diet", which is said to prevent or cure all illnesses much more effectively than medicine. However, the authors claim that Adam and Eve's diet is not only "a major milestone in the history of vegetarianism" (p. 11), but also a model for understanding the scientific revolution of the classical age.

The debate began at the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and continued for two centuries, until the theological discourse on prohibitions, based on dietetics and comparative anatomy, finally yielded to science. The tone of the polemic gradually shifted from the virulence of controversy and anathema to the gentleness and urbanity of scholarly exchanges under the aegis of the learned and curious public. The authors indicate that this welcome epistemic shift originated in the polysemy of myth, rather than in a radical break with the naïve faith of another age, and for a long time the two discourses overlapped and drew on each other. This period of

[1] See also Spinoza's interpretation of the Genesis account in *Ethics*, part IV, proposition 68, scholium; and *Theologico-Political Treatise*, chap. IV.

cohabitation between the theological and the scholarly is the subject of this study, which is as erudite as it is informative.

The sausages of discord

When, in 1522, Ulrich Zwingli broke with the rites and sacraments deemed to have no biblical foundation since St. Paul (and St. Peter) had abolished the ritual obligations of Judaism, and initiated the famous "sausage affair" in opposition to Lenten fasting by offering two meager sausages to his co-religionists, the Roman Counter-Reformation went back to the sacred text to seek a justification for fasting, reaching back as far as the Flood and even earlier: they found it in the diet imposed by God on the original couple—a diet entirely devoid of sausages. A whole body of theological literature asserts that the meat diet only began after sin, when God gave a new diet to Noah and his descendants. This new cuisine was a reflection of humans' physical and moral decline: unable to return to the original state of innocence by their own efforts, they had to strive at least periodically to do so.

If Adam lived 930 years, as the sacred text teaches us, was it not thanks to his meat-free diet? In order to justify its traditions, the Roman Church has been forced to seek support not only from the field of exegesis, but also from scientists, anatomists and physicians—who in turn, whether out of conviction or prudence, have based their research on biblical references.

From an exegetical standpoint, this interpretation is open to debate, since there are also verses in Genesis concerning animals, which Adam is invited to "dominate." But what does this verb mean? Is he explicitly authorized to kill and eat them, or must he protect them, even against their own carnivorous instincts? Yet, why is Abel a shepherd if he does not eat animals? Does he do it for their milk? At least he makes sacrifices to God. But are they bloody sacrifices? If God permitted a meat diet after the Flood, was it to shorten human life? And finally, what about carnivorous animals, whose teeth and digestive systems are clearly designed to feed on living things? Were they already carnivores in the Garden of Eden, or did they only become so after the Ark episode?

Whether they reflect sincere questioning or hidden irony, all these debates have ultimately served to introduce doubt and to surreptitiously undermine the authority-

based argument. For example, in 1713, Nicolas Andry wondered whether during Lent it was possible to eat, in addition to fish, seabirds "which have the nature of fish"; and in 1714, physician and exegete Jean Astruc pondered whether, if there were no fish in the Garden of Eden, would we be allowed to eat them during Lent?

From men of nature to the nature of men

Drawing on a wealth of expertise, the authors retrace the various stages of a fierce, interdisciplinary debate that mobilized not only clerics and theologians, but also doctors and philosophers from all over the world. Leaving aside concern for the soul, the controversy soon shifted to the human body, the stomach and digestion; the authors even cite a *Traité de la police* [Treatise on the Police] which, in a chapter on butchers' shops and their opening days or hours, began with a reference to the story of Adam and his meat-free diet: "the control of morals, the protection of public health, the regulation of competition and the upholding of order could therefore lead those responsible for them to take a fairly close interest in the debates on Book 1 of Genesis" (p. 112).

While the Bible remained the standard reference, experimental sciences were called upon to rescue exegesis, which was hampered by the obscure nature of the text. Philippe Hecquet, a doctor at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, physician to the Prince de Condé and close to Port-Royal, published *Médecine théologique* [Theological Medicine], *Traité des dispenses du Carême* [Treatise on Lenten Dispensations] and, also in 1709, *De la digestion des aliments* [On the Digestion of Food], all aimed at grounding Lent in "the nature of man," based on "history, analysis and observation." According to food historian Ken Albala, Hecquet was the first "to defend vegetarianism with scientific backing". The question of right and wrong became that of good and bad.

In addition to observations on the Brahmin diet, the crux of the argument centered on the stomach, defined as a muscle that crushes or grinds food. Although there was no shortage of refutations, they then shifted to the field of natural science, the formalities of which differed significantly from those of theological debate. Here, the authors echo Antoine Lilti's analysis of the emergence of a scholarly public in the 18th century, "no longer the ordered political body of jurists and theologians, but the spectators and readers collectively" (quoted on p. 142).

These controversies, which pitted "medical priests" against one other, were not about upholding the "true science" of nature against the false science of supernature, but rather about grounding in science the issue of the correct diet, in line with both the needs of society and the concerns of religion (p. 144). Two different worlds thus coexisted:

> exegetes and preachers—whose status was protected by the Church and who fulfilled a kind of professional duty by attacking Protestants, libertines and socialites guilty of moral laxity—crossed paths with physicians, naturalists and philosophers, for whom the arbitration of peers and the public was a necessary condition for acquiring scientific prestige. It was as if two dissimilar disputes converged, offering their protagonists a decisive opportunity not only to clarify their concepts of truth and fact-finding, but also to establish the boundaries of their respective areas of expertise (pp. 160-161).

In this double-edged dispute, reported by the press, the aim henceforth was not to discredit the adversary or condemn him to eternal perdition, but to establish the conditions for a legitimate debate in which courtesy and civility prevailed, as Jean Astruc so eloquently put it in his quarrel with Hecquet: "If we cannot convince him of the truth of the opinion we have embraced, we hope at least to make him approve of the manner in which we hold it" (cited on p. 165).

The book thus sets out to show that religion played a more important role in shaping this ethic of controversy than is generally recognized, far removed from the Voltairean image of an open conflict between reason and superstition. Without doubting the intentions of the authors cited, one sometimes wonders—and the authors acknowledge as much, by raising the possibility of a reckoning—whether this increasingly formal deference to the sacred story might not include a measure of caution, or even sarcasm (humor, moreover, is not the least of the book's charms, particularly in its chapter headings). Ironically, it was by taking the biblical account literally that the controversy shifted to dietary and ultimately scientific concerns. In fact, as Nietzsche observed, the same applies here as in other fields: by making truth a sacred value, Christianity ultimately turned against itself.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, October 4, 2023. Translated by Susannah Dale with the support of Cairn.info, and published in booksandideas.net, January 9, 2025