Paradise Found

This volume grew out of a conference held in 2008 at the Center for the Study of Christianity at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Its purpose is to examine “the luxuriant transformations of paradise in early Judaism and Christianity, from the Hellenistic times to the end of late antiquity” (p. 2).

An engaging essay by Guy G. Stroumsa, “The Paradise Chronotope” [sic], introduces the volume. In Bakhtinian linguistic theory, as interpreted by Tzvetan Todorov, a “chronotope” is the set of distinctive features of time and space within each literary genre. According to Stroumsa, the paradise myth is a chronotope, and early Jewish and Christian approaches to it were fundamentally dissimilar. For Jews, even though paradise stood at the beginning of a long story that ended with eschatological messianism and a return to Eden, national-historical events, such as the Exodus and Sinai, received the most attention. Christians, in contrast, were a “nation from among the nations” and the Verus Israel (p. 8). This, argues Stroumsa, led to a downplaying of the historical traditions of old Israel, a process reinforced by the critical place of the story of Adam’s sin in the new Heilsgeschichte (salvation history).

The thirteen main papers of the volume are divided into two parts. Those in part 1 are grouped under the title “Paradises of Second Temple Judaism and Christian Origins.” Joachim Schaper, in “The Messiah in the Garden: John 19:38-41, (Royal) Gardens, and Messianic Concepts,” argues that references in the Gospel of John to a garden (kēpos) should be understood in light of walled royal gardens in Persian and Hebrew sources. In her essay “Philo’s Scholarly Inquiries into the Story of Paradise,” Maren R. Niehoff demonstrates how Philo employs the stringent scholarship and “questions and answers” method of the Homeric scholars and Demetrius the Chronographer to underpin his allegorical readings of the paradise story in Genesis. Richard Bauckham, in “Paradise in the Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo” contends that paradise was most probably understood to be located either in the heavens (compare Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4) or preserved there (2 Baruch and 4 Ezra), and thus, contra Eibert Tigchelaar, that early Judaism had a tradition of a heavenly paradise. Martin Goodman in his essay “Paradise, Gardens and the Afterlife in the First Century CE” reviews the origin of the rabbinic belief that paradise was the abode of the righteous dead in light of the fact that Josephus fails to mention it but Luke 23:42 does. For Goodman, this suggests that the notion was still in its infancy in the first century CE, and only later became widespread in Jewish writings. Grant Macaskill examines the aforementioned Pauline and Lukan passages along with Revelation 2:7 and 22:1-5 in his survey, “Paradise in the New Testament.” He argues that the Adam Christology central to Paul’s theology best accounts for the prominence of the paradise theme in later Christian literature. Simon Gathercole’s paper, “Quis et Unde? Heavenly Obstacles in Cos. Thom. 50 and Related Literature,” surveys ten early Christian writings that con-
tain methods for circumventing guardian figures blocking heavenly ascent. He concludes that the technique described in the Gospel of Thomas is more in line with approaches that center on the knowledge of the identity and origin of the departing soul, rather than those of the guardian figure.

The essays in part 2 are unified under the title “Contemporizing Paradise in Late Antiquity.” In a terrific contribution, “Tertullian’s Law of Paradise (Adversus Judentaeos 2): Reflections on a Shared Motif in Jewish and Christian Literature,” Sabrina Inowlocki explains how Tertullian creatively redeployed Jewish traditions to support his Christian claims. Yonatan Moss surveys late antique Jewish and Christian sources in “The Language of Paradise: Hebrew or Syriac? Linguistic Speculations and Linguistic Realities in Late Antiquity,” while Menahem Kister in a very learned paper does much the same in “The Tree of Life and the Turning Sword: Jewish Biblical Interpretation, Symbols, and Theological Patterns and Their Christian Counterparts.” In “Erotic Eden: A Rabbinic Nostalgia for Paradise,” Galit Hasan-Rokem contrasts the expectation for utopia with a nostalgia for paradise that is motivated by sexually oriented rabbinic readings of the Genesis narrative. In her essay, “Paradise for Pagans? Augustine on Virgil, Cicero, and Plato,” Gillian Clark discusses how the Bishop of Hippo’s view of paradise was simultaneously in dialogue and in tension with classical concepts of the golden age. The next paper, “Heaven as Political Theme in Augustine’s City of God,” was composed by Émile Perreau-Saussine before he passed away in 2010 at an early age (the volume is dedicated to his memory). It reflects on the place of the themes of paradise and the eschatological city in Augustine’s political philosophy and his spiritualized understanding of history and its end. The final paper in this section is an excellent piece, “Locating Paradise” by Markus Bockmuehl. Using Philo and Origen as test cases, it investigates the persistence of the conviction among later Jewish and Christian writers that paradise was a terrestrial phenomenon and thus had a specific geographic location.


Collections of this kind stand or fall on the ability of their essays to cover their subject meaningfully and intelligently. This volume succeeds. It provides a fine complement to the recent swell of studies on the paradise myth in history and tradition. It also adds richness and nuance to our understanding of the spatial dimension of eschatological speculation in early Jewish and Christian writings.

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