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EDEN AND ERIKSON:  
PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN

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## **Abstract**

The interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden is often the source of contentious disagreement. Traditional and progressive religious traditions argue over how the biblical text should be read, while many people struggle to see the relevance to modern society of what may seem like nothing more than a fairy tale. This paper suggests that the tale of Eden be read as the story of a passage by Adam, Eve, and God through Erik Erikson's first three stages of development. During their time in the Garden, Adam and Eve secure a sense of basic trust in God and their world, a sense of autonomy in their own capabilities, and a sense of initiative for their familial and social roles. By the end of their time in Eden, Adam and Eve are prepared to face a world of responsibility and like children who have matured out of infancy, Adam and Eve are expelled from the paradise of early life.

## Introduction

The interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden is often the source of contentious disagreement. Religious traditionalists read the biblical text as a literal account of the historical origins of humanity, while progressive religious traditions urge that the Garden of Eden be taken as a product of the ancient culture in which it developed and caution against a literal interpretation. Many readers struggle with the continuing relevance in the modern world of what might seem like nothing more than a fairy tale. This paper suggests a psychosocial reading of the Garden of Eden story based on the work of Erik Erikson.

Reading the Garden of Eden story through the lens of psychosocial theory affords a connection to be made to child development as described by Erikson in *Childhood and Society*<sup>1</sup> (W.W. Norton, New York, 1964) and elaborated on in *Identity, Youth, Crisis* (W.W. Norton, New York, 1968). In those works Erikson explained that three stages of growth govern child development from birth to about the age of five or six<sup>2</sup>, Basic Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, and Initiative vs. Guilt. During each of these stages the child faces a crisis of growth, wherein he<sup>3</sup> struggles between a condition that will allow for continued development and a condition that results in stagnation or crisis. While the child is the protagonist in his struggles, he shares his adventures with his parents and his peers (Erikson, 1964). By comparing

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1 In *Childhood and Society*, Erikson (1964) alludes to Eden only twice. First, he discusses a young girl's feelings of guilt after showing her mother animosity and her father love, and the girl's subsequent attempts to rectify her relationship with her mother. Erikson likens the girl's feelings of guilt to those of Adam, who Erikson supposes felt guilty when, in order to atone for his transgression against God, blames Eve for his consumption of the forbidden fruit (Erikson, 1964, p. 51). Second, Erikson invokes Eden when describing infantile biting. He suggests that once an infant has grown teeth, he becomes unable to suckle the breast without having to worry about biting down and angering or causing his mother pain. Erikson notes that similarly, Adam and Eve "forfeited forever the right to pluck without effort [by biting] into the forbidden apple" (Erikson, 1964, p. 79).

2 In *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erikson (1968) indicates that the Initiative vs. Guilt stage begins as early as the "end of the third year (Erikson, 1968, p. 115)." He does not give an exact age for end of the stage, so I have estimated age five or six because by the end of this stage, the child has begun formal schooling in industrialized societies or "[has entered] the technology of his tribe (Erikson, 1968, p. 123)" in non-industrialized societies.

3 For simplicity and because it was Erikson's style, all uses of the third person singular will be male.

the events of Eden to Erikson's first three stages of human development, this paper will demonstrate that the biblical narrative can be read as a story of child development.

### **Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust**

According to Erikson, the first crisis of development is that between basic trust and basic mistrust (1964, p. 80). In the Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust stage, a newborn relies on his mother to forge enduring patterns of care through which the newborn experiences her as sensitive to his needs and faithful in responding to them. In addition to breast milk, the mother must provide physical care and convey a sense of being loved (Erikson, 1964). If she meets these needs, he will come to “rely on the sameness and continuity of [his] outer providers” (p. 248), and experience her as an “inner certainty” (p. 247). If he enjoys this internal security, he will develop a sense of basic trust in his mother and in the world. But if the infant does not feel genuinely loved or is not consistently cared for, he will experience confusion and abandonment and project the resulting internal insecurity onto family members, peers, and social institutions. The acquisition of either basic trust or basic mistrust constitutes the “source of both primal hope and primal doom throughout life” (p. 80).

At this point it is important to explain Erikson’s (1964) notion of mutual regulation. Mutual regulation occurs throughout child-rearing and refers to the process by which parent and child adapt to changes in the other’s condition. As Erikson writes, “babies control and bring up their families as much as they are controlled by them” (p. 69). A child will successfully navigate each crisis of growth if he and his parents(s) can mutually regulate themselves.

The first instance of mutual regulation occurs several months into life, when an infant bites in order to relieve the pain in his gums caused by growing teeth. In this situation, the mother must be aware of her infant's teeth on her breast and the infant must become aware of the power of his bite. If the mother feels nipped, she has to communicate her feelings to her infant without harming his sense that he is loved and will be protected from harm, while he must suckle without biting so as not to cause her pain or anger. There is a certain amount of unavoidable trauma involved in this negotiation and Erikson states that it is "here that good and evil enter the baby's world"<sup>4</sup> (p. 78).

In the Garden of Eden story, God is initially like a mother caring for a newborn, in that God is abundantly creative and provides for all of the Adam and Eve's needs. In Genesis 2:7 (The Torah: A Modern Commentary), God creates Adam<sup>5</sup>, places him in that fertile place called Eden, where God, "caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food," (Genesis 2:9), and generally ensures that Adam is emotionally and physically satisfied. God then undertakes an exhaustive effort to find Adam a helper, creating all the birds of the sky and the beasts of the land but, upon finding no fitting helper among them, creates woman (Genesis 2:18-2:22).

If the Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust criteria are applied to the Adam's and Eve's early relationship with God, the humans constitute the infant who "lives through and loves with his mouth" (Erikson, 1964, p. 72), and God constitutes the "mother who lives through and loves with her breasts" (p. 72). God provides care and Adam and Eve, like infants, receive that care passively. Man and woman in the Garden do not have to labor to provide food for

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<sup>4</sup> This "good and evil" are not religious or moralistic in nature. Rather "good" refers to the baby's continuing sense of unity with his mother if he does not bite, while "bad" refers to the baby's sense of separation from her when she withdraws the breast in pain or anger.

<sup>5</sup> The word "Adam", literally translated from the biblical Hebrew, means "human being" or "earthling" (Plaut, 1981, p. 29)

themselves; they live instead in a state of continual leisure, sustained solely by God. And since they are consistently provided with all the means for comfort and safety, Adam and Eve develop a sense of basic trust in God and in their world. This sense of basic trust causes them to believe that God will protect them from the consequences of autonomous action.

### **Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt**

Erikson's second stage of child development is Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (Erikson, 1964). In this stage, a toddler operates on whatever basic trust he acquired in the previous stage to deal with his new "violent wish to have a choice" (p. 252). If he feels a sense of basic trust, he will attempt to exercise autonomy. If he does not feel basic trust he will cling to his caregivers or will let go of them too quickly in order to mask his own insecurity. Clinging to caregivers will constrain his development while letting go too quickly will result in his inability to control his impulses. The toddler needs his caregivers to be firmly reassuring in their guidance of his autonomy so that his "basic faith in existence...the last treasure saved from the rages of the [biting] stage, will not be jeopardized" (p. 252).

Adam and Eve first exercise autonomy in the Garden of Eden when they eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:10). Until this point God, as divine Mother, has provided for all of the humans' physical needs and they have therefore developed a sense of basic trust. Adam and Eve are thus willing to risk eating the forbidden fruit in spite of God's warning that they would die (Genesis 2:17). Like a child who expects the support of parents who have been consistently nurturing, Adam and Eve depart from the complete dependency of infancy by tasting the wondrous knowledge of the forbidden fruit.

Erikson wrote that mutual regulation, during the Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt stage, faces its “severest test” (p. 82). Adam's and Eve’s role in passing this test is exercising autonomy by eating the forbidden fruit. God’s role is to firmly protect Adam and Eve against shame over their acts of autonomy. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit but God, seemingly surprised by this sudden demonstration of independence, admonishes the humans and they feel shame (Genesis 3:9-3:13). According to Erikson (1964), children determine what is behaviorally acceptable and what is not based on shame they feel over certain actions.

### **Initiative vs. Guilt**

Erikson’s third stage of child development is Initiative vs. Guilt. The events of this stage constitute one of the most fundamental transitions in the child’s life. Motor, cognitive, and emotional developments combine to allow for the execution of rudimentary self-care, increased participation in the operation of the family, the formation and sustenance of self-guided relationships, and the commitment to personal goals. School and other activities outside the home introduce opportunities to learn practical skills, acquire knowledge, and gain status in the wider community. Psychosexual forces awaken, which serve as the foundation male and female adult sexuality (Erikson, 1968). In all, the groundwork is laid for the child to begin solidify a sense of who he is and a “realistic sense of ambition and purpose (p. 115),” a sense of initiative, for who he might become in the future.

Yet for all the new powers and opportunities present development makes possible, a dear and lasting price is paid. Abruptly and without chance for recourse, the child is thrust into "that specifically human crisis during which [he] must turn from an exclusive, pre-genital



attachment to his parents to a slow process of becoming a parent, a carrier of tradition” (Erikson, 1964, p. 225). Erikson writes that “here the most fateful split and transformation in the emotional powerhouse occurs” (p.225) for at this point the “instinct fragments which before enhanced the growth of his infantile body and mind now become divided into an infantile set which perpetuates the exuberance of growth potentials, and a parental set which supports and increases self-observation, self- guidance, and self-punishment” (p. 225). In order to achieve mutual regulation amidst this chaotic psychosocial and psychosexual growth, the child must develop self-awareness and self-directedness, acquire a sense of “paternal responsibility” (p. 226), and learn to participate in the mechanics of his society. A sense of guilt arises when the child fails to align his abilities and aspirations with the society in which he lives.

Adam and Eve experience such a transition in the conclusion of chapter three. When Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, they “become like [God] knowing good and bad” (Genesis 3:22). They further “perceive that they [are] naked” (Genesis 3:7) and “cover themselves out of shame” (Genesis 3:10).” Upon discovering the humans’ consumption of the fruit, God decrees that Eve will have pain during childbearing, desire her husband, and defer to him (Genesis 3:16), while Adam must work and eat from the “cursed” ground all the days of his life (Genesis 3:17-18). And once God realizes that the humans might use their new knowledge to eat from the tree of life and live forever (Genesis 3:22), God banishes the humans from Eden to “till the soil from which [they] were taken” (Genesis 3:23).

During, the conclusion of chapter three, Adam and Eve experience the turmoil of the Initiative vs. Guilt stage. Here Adam and Eve become ready for the journey to adulthood. That the humans “covered their nakedness” (Genesis 3:7) to allay shame (Genesis 3:10) indicates both the capacity for self-care and sexual consciousness. And so like a child who has developed in such psychosocial and psychosexual ways, Adam and Eve must be given the opportunity to gain a sense of initiative for their future roles and responsibilities of the future, a task God promptly undertakes when God articulates the new social order (Genesis 3:16-3:18). But there is an even greater ramification for Adam’s and Eve’s new states of being. The Garden is a place of infinite care and safety, suitable as long as the humans remain needy, passive, and ignorant, like infants. The humans, though, are no longer like infants, they are now armed with the mental and physical abilities characteristic of children. Eden is thus no longer a fitting place for Adam and Eve to live. The only way for the humans to maintain mutual regulation, now that they are capable and self-aware, is to leave Eden! So, God acts like all parents do at the onset of childhood. God relinquishes the total care early life and pushes to Adam and Eve into the world of “production and procreation” (Erikson, 1964, p. 91).

### **Conclusion**

If the events of the Garden of Eden are understood in light of Erikson’s psychosocial theory, the account in Genesis can be read as a story of the earliest years of life. At first, a mother with seemingly divine power looks after a child’s every need, feeds him, and keeps him safe. Like Adam and Eve, the child lives through her love and nourishment, gaining basic trust in her (and thus in his own and in the world’s) ability and intention to provide protection and sustenance. Eventually, the child begins to seek

autonomy in his experience of the world and grasps for new knowledge and power over his life. But, he discovers that such prizes require sacrifice: no one can be both all-powerful and eternally cared-for, nor bear knowledge and also dwell in ignorant bliss. The long and tumultuous, but inevitable, developmental crisis of leaving early life and beginning the journey to adulthood thus sets in.

In view of the comparison between Genesis and the Eriksonian developmental stages, it is appropriate that Adam and Eve experience their exit from Eden, their passage out of early life, as a punishment. According the stage theory, it is necessary, and indeed unavoidable, for Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. The punitive nature of the exit therefore derives not from God's anger over a particular transgression, but from the fact that the humans have to painfully shed the bliss of early life in order to fulfill the responsibilities of work, school, and family. Adam and Eve, like every growing child, must face the finality of the fact that glory of adulthood comes at the expense of the paradise of early life, and that possessing the glorious power of infantile providers necessitates banishment forever from the garden of infancy.

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