PARADISING

Reclaiming Ancient Ideas to Ask: Can Paradise Become an Ethical Imperative?

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The term "paradising" may initially seem to be a strange one. It is based on a conversation I had with Constantin Groehn in 2020. However, the neologism itself is derived from Marianne Spieweg, sustainability manager at German Diakonia. Initially, the term was part of a small experiment that took place during an online conference. We wanted to know whether a term like paradising would have any impact in the context of sustainability debates among the churches, given that other terms such as "*Schöpfungsbewahrung*"[1] are older and more established. Consequently, we sprinkled the term generously into the conference debates. There was considerable interest in this so-called paradising concept and where to find it, leading us to flesh out the term in a joint theoretical paper. The question guiding our deliberations was: Can a concept like paradising trigger a debate about theological ideas of creation, and not least the constantly evolving, morally charged understandings of creation and the imperative of preservation often found among them? Is it finally time, now that the Anthropocene is upon us, to come up with new ideas and theological topoi and to put them into a different language that resonates more widely in society?

These were the initial considerations. They have now evolved further. Here I introduce current approaches as well as new reflections of mine on the term and concept of paradising. What follows is a theological, socio-phenomenological approach to the concept of paradise and its Old Testament background. This approach is presented in order to start a debate about societal conceptions of paradise and to offer a church-based contribution to it.

The word paradise comes historically from the Greek παράδεισος which is found in the Septuagint. The German dictionary Grimm's lists as its first definition: "der garten in Eden der mosaischen schöpfungsgeschichte, der anmutige wohnsitz des ersten menschenpaares vor

[1] A literal translation would be: "creation preservation". Originally, the expression came from the Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which used the term "integrity of creation".

dem sündenfalle, das irdische paradies: mhd."[2] In fact, the word paradise derives from the Greek translation (παράδεισον ἐν Εδεμ) of the Hebrew גַּן-בְּעֵדֶן. This is reason enough to start the biblical analysis in Genesis chapters 2–3.

In an Old Testament commentary from 2021 Jan Christian Gertz writes the following sentence: "Die Paradieserzählung des weisheitlichen Erzählers, der zweiten Hauptstimme in der biblischen Urgeschichte, gehört zu den bekanntesten und wirkmächtigsten Texten der Weltliteratur."[3] The Old Testament text in Genesis 2:4b–4:1 is a text with a very varied history in terms of its impact. Based on inner-biblical interpretations of the text, a doctrine of hereditary sin founded in the woman's deed has traditionally been sought here.[4] From a standpoint of exegetical research, however, this view would have to be classified as being long since obsolete. Furthermore, it has been argued theologically time and again that the Eden narrative–clearly mythological and etiological in character–merely describes an original state which neither can be restored nor serves as an ethical orientation. Despite these pointers toward a different notion of creation, in 1983–1991 the World Council of Churches formulated a triad of desirable goals with an imperative connotation: "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" (JPIC for short). In the German translation the last part of this triad was translated as "preservation of creation" (*Schöpfungsbewahrung*)[5] and as such it exerted a considerable impact in the context of the sustainability debates of the 1980s, continuing even up until today's debates around the ecological crisis. This adaptation (which is not so much a translation as an interpretation) is based in turn on an interpretation of the second account of creation in Genesis 2:4b–4:1.

I want to pursue two lines of thought suggested by this interpretation, which turn out to be two interrelated hermeneutical assumptions: First, how is creation to be understood and what distinguishes the concept of "creation" from the concept of "nature" or "world"? Second, is it possible to understand paradise as an ethical imperative? In addition to these theological considerations, the following questions must also be addressed: How can a biblical text from 2500 years ago be contextualized in the light of the challenges thrown up by the Anthropocene, which reveal a fundamentally different conception of the world and understanding of global structure than the ones which existed at that time?

I begin with the second question and therefore with the term "preservation". The idea of *Schöpfungsbewahrung*, as the German translation has it, is based on a single verse in the entire narrative, namely Gen 2:15. There it says: "And Yahweh God, took the human and put him into the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it (infinitive of שׁמר)." In this verse, the human being is placed in the garden of Eden for a second time. The first time is described in Gen 2:8. This verse belongs to an earlier stage of the text, which originally narrated the story of Eden as the creation of human beings, animals and the command to multiply, as it is plau-

[2] GRIMMSCHES Wörterbuch, A rough translation would be: "the garden of Eden from the creation story in Genesis, the delightful abode of the first human couple prior to the Fall, paradise on earth." Cf. woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB#0, Paradies (last access 31.03.2023).
[3] GERTZ, Urgeschichte, 83. A literal translation would be: "The Paradise narrative of the Wisdom Narrator, the second main voice in biblical prehistory, is one of the best-known and most powerful texts in the world's literature."
[4] Cf. SCHÜLE, Urgeschichte, 150–77. KÖHLER, Weisheit, 71–82.
[5] Vgl. SCHERLE, Creation, 245.

sibly reconstructed by Kratz and Spieckermann.[6] The verse in Gen 2:15, on the other hand, belongs to a later textual addition concerning the trees in the garden and the story of the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge, the banishment, and the judgement narratives. The word שׁמר ('preserve') is therefore to be understood in the context of the references to the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. This also explains why, in the later additions to the banishment and judgement narrative in Gen 3:23 and, related to these, the text added at the beginning of Gen 2:5, only the word cultivating (עבד) refers to the soil. The cherubim take over the task of preservation (שׁמר) relating to the tree of life in Gen 3:24. There is no remaining imperative of preservation at the end of the story: the Eden narrative cannot be read to support *Schöpfungsbewahrung*.

Does the expression "garden of Eden" refer to the whole of creation? Here, the answer is also based on the assumption of a multi-stage evolution of the text, as proposed by Kratz and Spieckermann.[7] As mentioned above, Gen. 2:15 and the repetition of the statement that God put the human in the Garden of Eden belong to a later stage of the narrative. While in Gen. 2:8 it is a garden in Eden in the east (גַּן־בְּעֵדֶן מִקֶּדֶם / παράδεισον ἐν Εδεμ), Gen. 2:15 speaks of the Garden of Eden (בְּגַן־עֵדֶן / ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ), that is, it gives a proper name for the garden.

In the context of Ancient Near Eastern mindsets, which form the background of the story, the concept of the garden, or paradise, refers to an actual cultivated and demarcated royal garden. However, in the later added narrative about the trees and the banishment, the garden is to be conceived of in much more concrete and limited terms than in the context of the presumed oldest version of text, which I call basic layer. The subsequently added story of the banishment and judgement refers not so much to the overall constituted structure of the *Mitwelt* (the nature with which humanity shares the Earth) than to a specific space in which a human-God relationship occurs, one characterized by direct communication. Moreover, this later narrative also relates strongly to the denial of an access to immortality, rendered metaphorically in the concept of the tree of life. The focus of the basic story of creation without banishment and judgement was on Eden as the place where humankind, vegetation, and the existence of certain animals began. Following Kratz and Spieckermann, this could be called the basic layer of Gen 2:4b–4:1, which can be found in Gen 2:5a.7a.8.18–24; 3:20–21; 4:1.[8]

The text is to be understood in both mythological and metaphorical terms. Eden is a specific location where an offence against a divine command took place, but first and foremost Eden is the place of the whole creation: it is where things appear that had not existed on Earth before (Gen 2,5 אֶרֶץ): vegetation, fields, trees and animals, and people. Eden is thus the place where the world was created, and this includes an understanding of the world as a limited space for humans in the sense of being bound to and by the limits of the Earth. It is in Eden that the vegetation and animal life that still surround us today are created. The term creation is not found in this text, because the Old Testament does not contain any such noun.[9] The concept of *Schöpfungsbewahrung* does not get to the heart of the text's matter. It is true that it is about our living conditions and the human environment, but theologically speaking the

[6] Cf. KRATZ and SPIECKERMANN, Schöpfung, 258–83.
[7] Cf. ibid.
[8] Cf. ibid.
[9] Cf. SCHMID, Schöpfung, 71–74.

idea of creation would be greatly foreshortened if it referred to that alone.[10] Similarly, the concept of creation is unsuitable as a synonym of a demythologized, mechanized conception of nature.[11]

While it is certainly true that the word creation refers to the conditions for life, it simultaneously includes an inherent idea of Earth as the space and place where God's relationship to humankind is continually being (re-)constituted. The creation concept refers to an ongoing relationship between the Creator and the creature. In this context, the concept of creation acquires normative significance.

The next step is to consider the ethical dimensions immanent in the text. Before doing that, however, it is worth contextualizing it in relation to our current worldview. Contemporary understandings of the world or, more precisely, system-wide interactions on Earth, differ fundamentally from the biblical worldview in one specific aspect in particular: The cyclical, regenerative life conditions constituted by God were once considered as unchangeable basic constants for human life on Earth. The scientific proclamation of the Anthropocene, however, tells us that human beings are the first and only species that has become a major geophysical force on the planet. Human activities impact upon the entire Earth system and its components and change them fundamentally. According to our current scientific understanding of the world, the Anthropocene is manifested in the model of planetary boundaries. The planetary boundaries framework, developed under the directorship of Johan Rockström, was first published in 2009:

> The planetary boundaries demarcate the safe operating space for humanity. Water is one of the nine regulators of the status of the Earth system and is the sixth boundary that scientists have found to be transgressed. Other transgressed boundaries are: climate change, biosphere integrity, biogeochemical cycles, land system change and, in 2022, novel entities including plastic and other human-made chemicals.[12]

Although this scientific analysis does not imply any specific ethical instruction for dealing with the crisis-ridden Anthropocene, nevertheless it does indicate the magnitude of the task facing humans who seek to respond appropriately. The proclamation of the Anthropocene essentially challenges theology and theological discourse to re-contextualize themselves. Can biblically based theology, whose texts are rooted in a profoundly different worldview, accomplish such a task?

I argue that, yes, there are some connecting strands if we consider the ethical dimension immanent in the paradise story: the story of the Garden of Eden is not one of preservation and neither is it one of sin; rather, it is a story of freedom. The Old Testament scholar Eckart Otto understands the story in Gen 2–3 as a "treatise on the freedom of God and of humanity".[13] He says:

[10] Cf. SCHMID, Schöpfung, 10–13.
[11] Cf. SCHMID, Schöpfung, 10–13.
[12] POTSDAM INSTITUTE FOR CLIMATE IMPACT RESEARCH, Planetary boundaries update: freshwater boundary exceeds safe limits, https://www.pik-potsdam.de/en/news/latest-news/planetary-boundaries-update-freshwater-boundary-exceeds-safe-limits (last access 26.03.2023).
[13] OTTO, Urmenschen, 688. The original text is as follows: „Traktat über die Freiheit Gottes und des Menschen".

> God gives humans the right to decide freely. They can obey the commandment not to eat from the tree of knowledge or they can transgress it, knowing full well what the consequences are. This assumes that when freedom is granted to humanity, God in his omnipotence steps aside. Freedom, however, is only given where humans may fail to handle it appropriately–and they do fail.[14]

The modern concept of freedom is a key concept in Western societies.[15] Considering recent political debates, I tend to agree with Martin Laube in understanding freedom as "a key category for describing modern Western societies, one that generates identities".[16] Following this assumption, all ethical and value-based ideas circulating in our society are also to be understood in the context of a conception of freedom.[17] Laube states that the responsibility of theology in the modern age is to create an awareness of the dialectic between freedom and dependence.[18] According to him, the two issues are not mutually exclusive but are in fact interdependent. The role accorded to ethics here is to express this interrelatedness through the very way we live our lives.[19] Viewed in this way, the paradise story comes to be recontextualized in several ways. God is the creator of the conditions of life to which humans remain bound in a relation of dependence, and which at the same time constitute the conditions for human freedom.[20] The freedom of human beings is inextricably bound up with their constitution qua creatures of God. Thus, human freedom is finite and limited to its application to human life only. The Old Testament scholar Uwe Becker expresses it appropriately when he says:

> The sin itself consists in nothing other than in transgressing the divine prohibition to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We might also say: it consists in failing to heed the divinity of God and thus simultaneously in disregarding the limits of humanness set by God. Surely this is actually where humans transgress: in failing to acknowledge their humanness and instead reaching beyond themselves and transgressing the boundaries of their freedom.[21]

Another current ethical context immediately arises in this connection. The freedom experienced by humans leads to the ethical obligation to act in accordance with the acquired knowledge of good and evil. Thus, mortal existence becomes not just a condition for human beings but also our mission.[22]

When the first individual grasps their freedom and fails by violating God's prohibition, that is the moment when a realistic dimension of freedom is constituted in human life. Yet at the

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[14] OTTO, Urmenschen, 688. The original text is as follows: „Gott räumt dem Menschen die Freiheit der Entscheidung ein, dem Verbot, vom Baum der Erkenntnis zu essen, zu folgen oder es, wohl wissend um die Folgen zu übertreten. Das setzt voraus, daß Gott sich in seiner Allmacht zurücknimmt, wenn dem Menschen Freiheit zugemessen wird. Freiheit aber ist nur dort gegeben, wo der Mensch auch an der Freiheit scheitern kann – und er scheitert."

[15] Cf. LAUBE, Freiheit, 119.

[16] ibid. The original expression is „identitätsstiftende Schlüsselkategorie zur Bezeichnung westlich-moderner Gesellschaften."

[17] Cf. ibid.

[18] Cf. ibid., 119–23.

[19] Cf. ibid., 123–24.

[20] Cf. EVERS, Schöpfung bewahren, 430.

[21] BECKER, Freiheit, 33. The original text is as follows: „Die Sünde selbst liegt in nichts anderem als in der Übertretung des göttlichen Verbots, vom Baum der Erkenntnis von Gut und Böse zu essen, man könnte auch sagen: Sie liegt in der Nicht-Beachtung des Gottseins Gottes und damit zugleich in der Missachtung der Begrenzung des Menschen durch Gott. Denn darin liegt die eigentliche Verfehlung des Menschen: Dass er sein Menschsein nicht anerkennt und über sich hinausgreift, also die Grenzen seiner Freiheit überschreitet."

[22] Cf. EVERS, Schöpfung bewahren, 430.

same time, the story has another dimension, namely, that of justice. The human being grasps freedom, fails, and bears the consequences in the sense of a "reduction of life in paradise".[23] In the context of world constitution and the constitution of a relationship between God and human, as offered to us in the story of Eden, there is yet another highly relevant ethical point of connection. The space in which a human relationship with God can take place, i. e. the world with all its conditions for life, is created implicitly not just for the first human being, but for the whole of humankind. In the process of keeping open the conditions for life and of freedom for the human being who is to come, paradise actually becomes an imperative for ethical action here and now. In the context of his theory regarding sustainability, lawyer Felix Ekardt offers an extension of the concept of freedom and the concept of justice to include an intertemporal and global perspective. He writes:

> Far-reaching economic freedom, an unhindered free play of forces, economic growth, progress based on prosperity and technology and a certain appreciation of work [...] as well as the welfare of one's own people and industry–this panorama of principles is called classical liberalism in the history of philosophy–as well as anthropocentrism, which sometimes forgets that human freedom could not exist without certain physical conditions.[24]

These physical conditions of freedom include clean air, access to water and food, a stable global climate, and also the absence of military conflict.[25] Ekardt's definition of intertemporal freedom and intertemporal justice gives the concept of freedom an expanded ethical dimension, to which he adds a factor that is also inherent in the Eden narrative. He calls it the junctim of responsibility for the consequences of any action.[26] What was constituted in the Old Testament in the idea of a connection between deeds and consequences once again becomes a commandment, and is broadened to include consideration of the future. Ekardt calls for both the positive and the negative consequences of an individual exercise of freedom to be traced to the person who chooses this action. Politics has the task of implementing this systemically. A person who chooses to travel by air, for example, must be made "liable"[27] for the negative consequences of this means of travel, such as the resulting carbon emissions.

At present, things are different. The political and systemic structure is designed in such a way that the negative consequences of people's actions in the global North (such as the consequences of carbon emissions in the form of climate change) are passed on to the global South. This restricts the freedom of people living there now as well as of future generations. The notion of broadening of the concept of freedom by adding a global and intertemporal perspective was also the basic approach for the climate complaint and the decision of the German Federal Constitutional Court in 2021, which judged the climate protection activities of the

[23] OTTO, Urmenschen, 688, says: „Reduktion des paradiesischen Lebens."
[24] EKARDT, Nachhaltigkeit, 157–58. The original text is as follows: „Weitreichende wirtschaftliche Freiheit , ein ungehindertes freies Spiel der Kräfte, Wirtschaftswachstum, wohlstands- und technikbezogener Fortschritt und eine bestimmte Wertschätzung von Arbeit […] sowie Wohlergehen des eigenen Volkes und der eigenen Industrie, dieses Prinzipienpanorama nennt man in der Philosophiegeschichte den klassischen Liberalismus–ebenso wie die Anthropozentristik, die zuweilen vergisst, dass die menschliche Freiheit ohne bestimmte physische Voraussetzungen nicht existieren könnte."
[25] Cf. EKARDT, Nachhaltigkeit, 180.
[26] Cf. ibid., Nachhaltigkeit, 260–83.
[27] Ibid., Nachhaltigkeit, 274. The German word used here is „einstandspflichtig".

German government to be insufficient.[28] At its core, this was about protecting the freedom and fundamental rights of people currently living in the global South and those who will live on Earth in the future. This idea is nothing less than revolutionary.

However, the Anthropocene issue poses a challenge to theology and society in more than merely legal ways. This challenge might be described as cultural change. It includes a comprehensive transformation of the very way of life of the global North along with the need to revise and adapt all patterns of thinking on which the configuration of this way of life is based. Given the range and depth of our knowledge about human interventions in Earth system processes, our definitions of freedom and justice also need to be renegotiated at societal level. This negotiation process is as multifaceted as society is diverse. Berlin-based sociologist Andreas Reckwitz argues that modern societies have something like an awareness of contingency.[29] The basic idea is that economic, social and political structures can be shaped and even completely changed: "doing contingency" always means at the same time "undoing order."[30] While we may be inspired by this idea, we are also overwhelmed when it comes to putting it into practice–and we are unwilling to give up our privileges. Viennese sociologist Ingolfur Blühdorn ascribes to the modern society of the global North a culture of "sustainable non-sustainability."[31] By this he means that the stability of a certain prosperity and a social normality is society's actual defence project. A study by the international nonprofit organization "More in Common" confirms this analysis. It reveals that while 80% of Germans believe that climate protection is an important political issue and that there is hope for a collective societal shift, climate protection should not displace other "desired improvements in society."[32] The improvement of one's own life regardless of issues of justice and freedom for all people predominates in both society and politics. Even in Germany, the majority is ruled by an elite minority. Michael Hartmann clearly illustrates this in his book "Die Abgehobenen" ("The Out-of-Touch"). Social background, along with values and ideas about normality, influences the political decisions that politicians make. "Government by the upper class promotes government for the benefit of the upper class."[33] Furthermore, it is precisely a group of powerful entrepreneurs, lobbyists, and politicians, who are usually accustomed to a luxurious lifestyle, who would have to decide whether or not to relinquish this lifestyle in view of the crises of the Anthropocene and the above-mentioned definition of justice. Such lifestyles also contain certain images of paradise, which are reflected in society. In our culture, the idea of paradise has acquired a certain exclusivity. Whether it is one's own sauna paradise or a yacht moored before a white sandy beach, such ideas and images are often the consumerist

[28] Cf www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/DE/2021/03/rs20210324_1bvr265618.html (last access 31.03.2023).
[29] Cf. RECKWITZ and ROSA, Spätmoderne, 73–74.
[30] Ibid., Spätmoderne, 74.
[31] BLÜHDORN et al., Nachhaltige Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit. Warum die ökologische Transformation der Gesellschaft nicht stattfindet, Bielefeld 2019.
[32] GAGNÉ and KRAUSE, More in Common, 24, the original text is as follows: „Klimaschutz sollte andere prioritäre Themen nicht verdrängen oder womöglich auf deren Kosten vorangetrieben werden, wenn er auf breite Unterstützung in der Bevölkerung gründen soll. Er sollte in der konkreten Ausgestaltung stets mit anderen gesellschaftlichen Verbesserungswünschen zusammenpassen, um mehrheitsfähig zu sein."
[33] HARTMANN, Abgehobenen, 150, who cites Nicholas Carnes Study of White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making 2013, 136.

adaptation of the ancient story of paradise. It turns paradise for all into paradise for the very few. Such conceptions of normality are one reason for the continuation of our lifestyle and why we still live in a high-emission society, despite numerous educational sustainability events. Social conceptions of paradise are a broad entry point for a differentiated ethical debate. The aim of Paradising is to start such a debate, not least about the political actions that need to be taken.

The Paradising concept paper is often hailed merely as a positive, motivating image of hope for targeted sustainability efforts. This view falls short of what is intended. The concept, as explained here, offers much more than just a pleasant image. The idea of Paradising entails profound ethically based approaches that can be contextualized for a broad social discourse in the face of the Anthropocene.

Additional Information:

The article mostly contains current thoughts of Dr. Sarah Köhler regarding the Paradising project. It also includes ideas and reflections from the Paradising concept paper developed in collaboration with Dr. Constantin Gröhn, Pastor for Diakonia & Education of Hamburg-East, and published in 2021.

The concept paper by Dr. Sarah Köhler and Dr. Constantin Gröhn as well as references to Paradising-Project can be found at https://umkehr-zum-leben.de/asa/paradising.

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