

## Book Review

**Devdutt Pattanaik, *Eden: An Indian Exploration of Jewish, Christian and Islamic Lore***

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Devdutt Pattanaik is a writer, author, lecturer, and illustrator who focuses on the relevance of mythology in modern times. He has authored over 50 books, is a leadership trainer, and works as a TV anchor on numerous programs.

According to Pattanaik, the world of religions can be divided into two: the Abrahamic faiths and others—or monotheism and polytheism. In this book Pattanaik explores the former category, consisting of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths. The book has a dozen chapters. Pattanaik also brings into focus the commonalities between religions; however, he does not explain the distinctiveness or uniqueness of each religious tradition.

For a person who is not aware of the Bible's contents, the book's first nine chapters give a helpful introductory overview. Pattanaik summarizes Eden, the Fall, Abraham's migration from Mesopotamia, the Egyptian slavery, the Exodus, settlement in the Promised Land, the Exile in Babylon, and the Gospels. The book also has a chapter on Islam. Later developments of Christianity and Islam have their own separate chapters as well.

The author gives engaging narratives derived from the Bible, Jewish writings and oral traditions, and Christian writings and oral traditions. Human beings love stories, and the narratives of various religions have shaped the worldview of millions throughout history. Accordingly, Pattanaik's style of writing would appeal to young readers. The illustrations are also interesting and helpful, having been done by the author himself.

The Introduction is about the monotheistic traditions. The author connects the immigration that happened in ancient India: "The immigrants eventually became landowners (Kshatriyas), landless labourers (Shudra) or craftsmen and traders (Vaishya). None became Brahmins, though many Abrahamic communities of India claim to have descended from Brahmins" (xv). Furthermore, "Exposure to Abrahamic mythology via trade routes explains why the concept of a future messiah also manifests as Maitreya, the future teacher in Buddhist lore, and Kalki, Vishnu's future avatar in Hindu lore" (xv). Fast-forwarding to modern times, Pattanaik explains how the worldviews of the West and East were diametrically opposite, despite ancient interaction through immigration: "The rise of the British Empire about 300 years ago introduced Indians to ideas of liberty, equality and justice. This was at odds with Hindu ideas of karmic bondage, caste and wheel of rebirths, and made the educated class defensive of Hindu customs and beliefs" (xv).

The author clearly has a postmodernist worldview: "It is now clear that myth is somebody's truth, distinct from everyone's truth, i.e., measurable truth (fact) and nobody's truth (fiction). Some myths like rebirth and God are traditional, inherited over generations. Others like the nation and human rights are contemporary and ideological" (xvii). This pluralistic understanding leads to the mistaken conclusion that myths or history do not matter. Postmodernism seems to overlook the fact that values are merely subjective and not objective. The author reinforces that notion of

religion's subjective usefulness by noting, "Science, secularism and postmodern thinking have overpowered religion in many areas but have not been able to provide the comfort religion does to the meek and the suffering" (xiv).

Also according to Pattanaik, God can never be historical; belief in God remains a matter of faith. The following comments may rattle believers of the Abrahamic faiths: "Religions are based on faith. Science is based on doubt. Religions often claim that they are perfect and cannot improve. Science keeps improving over time, with better measuring and analytical tools, and more evidence" (xvii).

Commenting about truth: "Indian religions like Buddhism seek to end suffering. Chinese philosophies focus on order and harmony. In other words, the quest for 'the' truth is not a universal one" (xvii). The search for finding God or the meaning and purpose of life are not included. Indeed, Pattanaik fails to see how the religious search that begins with man as the centre, and not God, is a central flaw in non-Abrahamic religions.

The author claims that "For centuries Christians hated the Jewish people and saw them as Christ-killers" (xx). He also claims that "Islamophobia, the structural and systemic hatred of Muslims, began with Crusades" (xxi). Pattanaik further asserts that, prior to the Crusades, there was no anti-Semitism in India: "In India, while there was no anti-Semitism, there was little curiosity about the Jewish tales. Synagogues were often confused with the Parsi fire temples and mosques" (xxi).

Pattanaik notes how Christian missionaries have translated their Bible into almost all languages. "Abrahamic lore clearly values the textual over the oral. So, it constantly refers to 'People of the Book'" (xxv). Related is how literacy began about 5000 years ago in Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization.

The book explains the Hindu idea that God contains the world, and the world contains God. In the Abrahamic worldview, "All things were created from God's word. But Adam was created from God's hand" (12). In Islamic lore: Adam was the first of 124,000 prophets. "In Jewish lore, Eve gave the fruit to all animals and birds. Only the phoenix refused to eat it and so was blessed with eternal life" (17). According to Hindu lore: the first man is Manu and so all humans are called Manavas, the children of Manu.

Regarding the Tower of Babel, "God saw it and realized that people need to look at each other more than they look at the sky" (31). Ziggurat was an excuse to unite the kingdom around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in a single tongue. The confusion of languages brought 72 languages into the world, though the number is not mentioned in the Bible.

"The gods, the people of these cities believed, created humans out of clay just as humans created idols out of clay" (33). Terah was an idol maker and idol worshipper—but as he carried idols on a cart, they fell to the ground and could not fix themselves. Terah's son Abram wondered who God is by wondering, "A star cannot be a god, because it disappears; so does sun." Hence, God spoke with him. Abram a city dweller became a nomad with no land to his name, inspired by his faith. Some think Abraham comes from Brahma and Sara comes from Saraswathi.

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed due to homosexuality. The author writes that Shiva also destroyed three magical flying cities (Tripura) with a single arrow. Pattanaik also notes, "Ismael would taunt Isaac that he was a lesser man as his covenant was involuntary, forced upon him when

he was just a baby” (45). Also, “Abraham helped Ishmael rebuild Kabah, the first mosque built by Adam, which was now in ruins” (47). According to Pattanaik’s narrative, Abraham placed a black stone there, originally transparent when it came from Eden, but now black due to the sins of man.

Jacob was born circumcised, while Esau was born in filth. The idea of brothers fighting for inheritance is found in Hindu mythology, for example in such epics as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Abraham died and the funeral meal was being prepared by Jacob. Esau sold his birth right for the meal without regards for the sacred ritual. Jacob’s ladder had seven rungs according to legends, which mirrors the tantric concept. In Buddhism, heaven is the abode of 330 million gods and a ladder connects paradise to the earth.

Again by Pattanaik’s reporting, Potiphar’s wife name was Zulekha. Joseph’s garment on his back was torn, not his front hence, so Potiphar knew Joseph was innocent. Actually, however, Potiphar’s wife’s name is not mentioned in the Bible.

“All Pharaohs spent their lives preparing to enter the afterlife, a world without flood, without the desert, without hunger, without fear” (78). Pharaoh’s wife Asiya did not have a child, so she adopted Moses. Because he was circumcised, she knew he was a Hebrew child. The Bible, however, mentions the one who adopted Moses as Pharaoh’s daughter.

Pattanaik goes on by describing how the Israelites were liberated from Egypt but wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. “People assumed it was because of the short route had garrisons of Egyptians soldiers who could arrest them if the pharaoh changed his mind” (87). A mindset change needs a generation, hence the extended period of the children of Israel in the wilderness.

The author makes many other striking claims. “Monotheistic religions demand submission to the word and so its counter, dissent, and rebellion, remains a consistent theme in Abrahamic lore. The obedient sheep is venerated, not the disobedient goat” (96).

“It is similar to the concept of arajakta (mayhem) that follows when a land has no raja (king)” (121). The nation of Israel also needed a king. Saul was the first king. David defeated Goliath, which has become a universal story of a fight between unequals. David was made an outlaw by the envious King Saul, then he became of leader of outlaws. Later, David emerges as a powerful king.

The Babylonian exile, building of second temple, and teachings of the prophets are also covered well.

The life, ministry, miracles, and teaching of the Lord Jesus are presented in a comprehensive and concise manner. “A parable is instructive. Unlike the myth, it does not create a world view but assumes a world view” (185).

The author writes, “The triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem mirrors the triumphant entry of Krishna into Mathura” (187). The trial, death, resurrection of Lord Jesus Christ is explained.

The author is a great storyteller. He has conducted comprehensive research on all three religions and presented that research in an engaging style of writing. Should not Christian writers present the Bible in such an exciting way for all readers? Pattanaik has indicated that the book is exploration, which he has done well. This is a good book worth reading. However, the prerogative of knowing the truth and conducting further research rests on the readers.