

THE LOCALIZATION OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN

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The site of the Garden of Eden has always been a tantalizing problem for interpreters of the early chapters of Genesis. Well-known localities are interspersed in the text with obscure or ambiguous place-names, thwarting any serious attempt to mark the boundaries of the ancient paradise. No locality has yet been proposed that fits snugly into all of the geographical data.

The quest is of minor significance, of course, for exegetes that take the language of Genesis, chapters two and three, conceptually, or as religious fantasy, without any historical basis whatsoever. John McKenzie refers to Eden as a "Never-never land, whose geography is altogether unreal."¹ More recently the Catholic scholar, H. Renckens, has concluded:

The world of paradise, as it is described in Genesis, if it is to be taken literally and then analyzed in the light of modern secular and scientific knowledge, poses an insoluble problem. And it is a false problem, for this world neither has ever existed, nor could have existed.²

Both of these authors, however, would readily agree that the ancients *believed* in the existence of an objective and historical Garden of God. Certainly the Hebrews understood the language of the Torah about Eden to be literal.

A different form of attack on the concept of a localized paradise comes from evangelicals who teach that Edenic perfections were universal in nature prior to Adam's sin. This results in an *ipso facto* denial of major elements of the text and also blurs the distinctive image of the garden.

H. C. Leopold, for example, in his *Exposition on Genesis* asserts that "A paradise-like state prevailed at creation over all the earth."³ The co-authors of *The Genesis Flood*, Whitcomb and Morris, assure their readers that "Christians have been entirely justified in thinking of the whole earth before the Fall in terms of Edenic conditions."⁴ In reply to a suggestion by Bernard Ramm that the environment outside the garden

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1. John L. McKenzie, "The Literary Characteristics of Genesis," *Theological Studies*, XV (Dec., 1954), p. 555.

2. Henricus Renckens, *Israel's Concept of the Beginning*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), p. 164.

3. H. C. Leopold, *Exposition of Genesis*, (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1942), p. 98.

4. Whitcomb and Morris, *The Genesis Flood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), p. 468.

was natural from the beginning, as we see the cosmos today, Whitcomb and Morris declare: "The principle objection to this approach is that it lacks a single shred of Scriptural support in its favor, and runs counter to an immense avalanche of revelation."⁵

This "avalanche" of evidence appears to consist of only two passages beyond the opening chapters of Genesis: Genesis 5:29 and Romans 8:19-23. Perhaps the viewpoint of Dr. Ramm may not be so summarily dismissed after all.

The first concern of this paper will be to show that the language of the text on the Garden of Eden requires a localized, rather than a universal paradise. Second, it will be noted that literary parallels from Summerian, Akkadian, and Ugaritic documents also speak of a particular locale of utopian quality. Finally, it will be demonstrated that the references to the cursing of the ground prove neither a cosmic judgment upon the plant and animal kingdoms, nor the creation of new and menacing forms of vegetation to plague man's work.

The Biblical Account

The *toledoth* of the heavens and the earth in Genesis 2:4 introduces a supplemental history of man's creation and initial environment. Chapter one dealt with the origin of the world in its cosmic totality. Now the attention is focused upon that particular area prepared for man.

The scene opens not with the garden, but with the world outside, termed the *adamah*. This is pictured as an uncultivated, parched region without rainfall, but watered by ground-swells or floods from the earth. (For the discussion of Hebrew *ed*, "mist," see articles by Albright and Speiser.)⁶ Since there was neither a gardener to care for the soil, nor proper irrigation, the *adamah* did not produce the "plants of the field." This implies only the absence of field-crops, not the state of the earth before the third day's work when all forms of vegetation were created. Von Rad sees the *adamah* as a "Desert in contrast with the Sown."⁷ Adam was formed not only of the *adamah* but upon the *adamah*, before he was placed in the garden.

Eden is given as the region or country within which God planted the garden. Such a territory is listed with other place-names in Genesis 4:16, II Kings 19:12, and Isaiah 37:12; a land called *Beth-Eden* occurs in Amos 1:5. The *East* could mean any number of areas, stretching all the way from Trans-Jordan to the far side of Mesopotamia. There is general agreement on the derivation of Eden from the Akkadian *edinu*

5. *Ibid.*, p. 467.

6. W. F. Albright, *JBL*, 58 (1939), p. 102ff., and E. A. Speiser, *BASOR*, 140 (1955), p. 9 ff.

7. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 71.

with the connotation of "plain," "steppe," "wilderness." The homonymous *eden* of Hebrew for "delight," or "voluptuousness," is a tempting, but less likely etymology. The term was rare in Akkadian records, but very common to the earlier Summerians, which speaks in favor of its antiquity. With the meaning of "plain," it shows up in several of the Ugaritic tablets, but an identical word, *'dn*, can refer to a "season" or a "host."⁸

Gan is another term that argues for the localization of paradise. Coming from a verbal stem meaning "to protect," "to defend," it always describes an enclosed or fenced area. In place of the Hebrew *gan* the Septuagintal translators found it convenient to employ the Persian *pardes*. Already this term had established itself as a loan-word in the corpus of the sacred writings with the significance of "park," or "orchard," or "royal garden" (Song of Solomon 4:13; Ecc. 2:5; Neh. 2:18).

Eden's most specific, and most perplexing landmarks were its rivers. A system of four tributaries merged into one mighty stream at the entrance to Eden. At once this suggests an area with abundance of water and fertility. If this single current is considered to be the source of the four branch streams, it should be located high up in the ranges of Kurdistan, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers rise within a short distance from each other. Two other rivers, such as the Phasis and the Oxus can be selected to identify the Pishon and Gihon of the text. Emil Kraeling, however, has reproduced an old-world map which locates Eden in this general area of the Ararat mountains, but with the four rivers all moving in a southerly direction.⁹ The Pishon and Gihon flow around the lands of *Cush* and *Havilah* to the east of the Tigris and Euphrates.

A locale for paradise near the city of Babylon is barely possible, if the two unidentified currents can be imagined as transversal canals joining the narrows of the Tigris and Euphrates.

In the *MacMillan Bible Atlas*, published in this current year, authors Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah suggest that since the lands of Cush and Havilah are related in the Bible to Egypt and Ethiopia (Genesis 10:6, 7), the Pishon and Gihon may indicate the White and Blue arms of the Nile.¹⁰

Renckens contends that the answer will come from the old conception that the physical world was divided into four great centers of civilization, each with its own river-valley. Starting from east and moving westward, the Indus would identify the Pishon, and the Ganges-Nile the Gihon. (Even the Greeks were accustomed to linking these two great rivers, as the Greek *Gichon* for the Nile indicates.) For Renckens, "The best way of conveying an impression of exceptional fertility and fruitful-

8. *Legend of Krt*, line 87 (*Ugaritic Literature*, Cyrus Gordon, p. 69).

9. Emil G. Kraeling, *Bible Atlas* (New York: Rand McNally and Company, 1946), p. 42.

10. Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah, *Bible Atlas* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), p. 21.

ness was to locate the garden in the unattainable and mysterious region where these four great world rivers had their common origin."¹¹

A very strong case can be made for the Mesopotamian delta area, using both the geographical data and the inscriptions of archaeology. Speiser has interpreted the plural of *ro's* as the upper courses of the rivers, thus the four branches flow *into* Eden, not out of it, as was assumed by the Kurdistan theory. He states: "All four streams once converged, or were believed to have done so, near the head of the Persian Gulf, to create a rich garden land to which local religion and literature alike look back as the land of the blessed."¹² Cush is mistakenly understood as Ethiopia in this context; rather it represents the land of the Kassites, *kussu* in the Nuzi tablets. No other locale combines favorably so many features of the Edenic topography.

Many distinctive qualities of the garden emphasize its superiority to the rest of nature outside: the abundance of water, the edible plants and fruit-trees, the non-violent behavior of the animals, the absence of thorns and thistles, the stewardship apart from toilsome labor. Perhaps the serpent's unusual powers of communication and appearance give an inkling of the special features of all the creatures of the garden. Blessed harmony existed between God and his world. Man and woman lived together in perfect tranquility and without fear or shame. A hidden Tree of Life marked man's potential reward, and the other tree of the knowledge of good and evil challenged his moral freedom. The sanctity of paradise was evidenced by the guardian cherubim at its entrance.

The Literary Parallels

Archaeological records verify the wide-spread belief of the peoples of the Biblical world in a place of utopian bliss. Such legends have limited value for the exegetes of the Old Testament, but, for the point at issue, the localization of paradise, their concurrence is meaningful.

The Summerians enjoyed retelling the tale of Enki, the fresh-water God, who lived in a "land of the living with neither sickness nor death. In *Dilmun* the raven utters no cry; the lion kills not; the wolf snatches not the lamb."¹³ It was to this same wonderful land that Ziusudra was transported in the Summerian version of the flood story. He there obtained "breath eternal like a god, in the place where the sun rises, in the land of *Dilmun*."¹⁴

Much later, the Babylonians related similar tales of the fabulous city-state of *Eridu*, also located near the mouth of the two rivers. Adapa

11. Renckens, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

12. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1964), p. 20.

13. James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 38.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

managed to arrive in heaven, somehow connected in locale with *Eridu*, but was cast out for his refusal to eat of the bread of life. The text reads: "Take him away and return him to his earth. He shall not have eternal life!"¹⁵

The deified hero of the Babylonian flood recounted to Gilgamesh of his adventures upon disembarking on Mount Nisir of the Ararat range, and then of being taken far away to the "mouth of the rivers" (the delta region?), where he and his wife received immortality.

Yima was the first human being in Persian mythology. He dwelt in a land of joy with the deity Ahuramazda where the evils of old age and death did not exist. But the man lost his state of perfection and was driven out for speaking an untruth.¹⁶

For the Canaanites and Syrians the concept of paradise centered upon the belief in a sacred mountain. Baal made his sanctuary on Mount Casius, north of the country of Ugarit. Here the pantheon of Canaanite deities and heroes lived in glorious pomp and splendor. "In the midst of the heights of Zaphon the house of Baal shall comprise a thousand acres," reads the text of one of the *Baal* and *'Anat* Cycles.¹⁷ This alternate title for the holy mountain, Zaphon, is the normal Hebrew term for "north." In Psalm 48:2 Mount Zion is said to be "in the far north," but Dahood now translates: "Mount Zion is in the heart of Zaphon."¹⁸

Descriptions of the happenings on Zaphon more closely parallel those of the Greek Olympus, than of the Biblical paradise. However, Ezekiel must have detected some similarity as he taunts the king of Tyre for his arrogance. "You were on the holy mountain of God, you were in *Eden*, the garden of God, . . . so I cast you out as a profane thing from the mountain of God" (Ezekiel 28:13-16). Reading the full context of this prophecy, it is impossible to miss the allusion to the Genesis account of Adam's sin in the garden of Eden.

In their details, these samplings from Near Eastern mythology bear little resemblance to the Biblical account of man's first estate. However, they all show the hostility of nature outside the confines of the sacred area, and the distinctive character of life within, where neither pain nor death is tolerated.

The Cursing of the Ground

Often a number of disasters are assigned to the curse when actually they occurred before and independently of it! Man's consignment to

15. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

16. Paul Heinisch, *History of the Old Testament*, trans. by W. Heidt (St. Paul: North Central, 1952), p. 16.

17. Cyrus Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

18. M. Dahood, *The Psalms*, vol. I, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966), p. 288.

death, the shame of being naked, the attempt to hide from God, the disrupture of harmony through accusations, the fact of sin and disobedience itself; all of these results of the Fall came prior to the cursing of the ground. Thereupon, man was expelled from the garden and all of its tranquility and driven back to the *adamah*, "from whence he was taken."

In the new environment every aspect of man's life suffered drastic change. His joyful work turned to hard labor. Child-bearing became painful for the woman. The laws of survival in a world characterized by struggle, sickness, death, and decay were all agonizing to Adam after his first experience within the confines of paradise. Yet, nothing in the account suggests that the realm of nature was altered in a fundamental way so as to make death and violence the new fate of all animals. There is no indication that the Lord God added thorns to the rose-bushes, or pointed teeth to the carnivorous beasts. Least of all does it state that the land of paradise was itself cursed. It was first guarded by the cherubim, then its miraculous existence faded from history.

God's curse upon the ground is intended by some to mean the revoking of that original "goodness" of all things in the first chapter of Genesis. But, that which was good and proper for the plant and animal kingdoms was evidently *not* suitable for Adam and his wife, since God immediately transported the first pair into a specially prepared area, separate from the larger environment. Furthermore, neither moral goodness nor moral evil can be projected upon amoral phenomena. The goodness of the cosmos is that of God's precise handiwork and the remarkable balance He achieved and still conserves between all living things, as Bernard Ramm has pointed out.¹⁹

In Genesis 1:29, 30 God offered all forms of vegetation for the consumption of man and beast. Only by indirect reasoning can this text be made to say that no patterns of carnivorous behavior existed for any of the species, such as, for example, the multiple varieties of parasites. This order of affairs may actually belong to the utopian situation of the next chapter, as it most certainly does to the future era when "The lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 11:7).

The flood served as an additional curse upon the ground, for at its termination God promised Noah: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man" (Genesis 8:21). Was this the "relief" predicted by the father of Noah from the cursed ground with all its toil (Genesis 5:29)? At face value this would mean that the original curse was lifted yet the Lord God offers Noah a covenant that includes the right to eat meat!

In some way, all of man's actions affect his environment. When

19. Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), p. 335.
24. *Ibid.*, Compendium on chapter 20.

Isaiah talks of the curse upon the nation, even the stars of heaven "languish together" and the earth "mourns and withers" (Isaiah 24:4-6). Likewise Jeremiah finds the heavens "shocked" at the apostasy of the people of Jehovah (Jer. 2:12).

For the Apostle Paul a personified creation can "groan in travail" and "wait with eager longing" with the sons of God for the future glory. Romans 8:19-23, however, offers the natural world more than merely a poetic or figurative role in the coming age. The *ktisis* will all be changed and made to share in the universal paradise of that coming day of final redemption. This can not be affirmed of mankind, generally, as some interpret this word, but it does fit the over-all expectation of Scripture that "We wait for new heavens and a *new earth* in which righteousness dwells" (II Peter 3:13).

Summary

Exegetical considerations in the opening chapters of Genesis lead one to view the garden as a localization of paradisiac conditions, whereas the world outside was "natural" from the beginning. Various parallel accounts of paradise from the literature of Israel's neighbors concord with this non-universal concept of the land of bliss. An examination of the main passages dealing with the cursing of the ground fails to uncover evidence of any major deformation of the natural world at the time of Adam's disobedience. All of God's creations were "good" but not all were intended for that first paradise. Only in the coming age will Eden's perfections become universal.