

THE MIST, THE CANOPY, AND THE RIVERS OF EDEN

R. LAIRD HARRIS, PH.D.*

The second chapter of Genesis has been much studied by conservatives and liberals alike. The latter have found in it much mythology and have claimed various contradictions with the so-called "other creation story" in Genesis 1. The conservatives, for their part, have perhaps not been as reserved as they should have been in the interpretation of this section. Various conclusions on cosmology have been drawn from these verses that seem unfounded to the writer. He would rather claim that the first chapter deals with the great work of cosmic and terrestrial creation and that chapter 2 deals exclusively with the settlement of our first parents in Eden.

Basic to this contention is the translation of 2:5: there went up a "mist from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground." A common interpretation is that this mist was world wide and that there was no rain until the flood. Following the flood a rainbow appeared for the first time. This view is associated with a canopy theory that sometimes involves the idea that prodigious amounts of water were held above the canopy until it was released at the time of the flood.

A liberal view is given by E. A. Speiser in his Anchor Bible commentary on Genesis. He holds that this verse reflects ancient mythology. The word "mist" is translated "flow" and it refers to the idea that waters beneath the earth welled up and irrigated the land. Some have even suggested that Eden is pictured as a holy hill from which four rivers flowed in all directions.

Both of these views are deficient and a straightforward interpretation of the verse seems to make excellent sense when the meanings of the words are determined. To begin with, the translation "mist" is a guess. The word is used elsewhere only in Job 36:27 where it could possibly mean "mist" but could also mean "water course." No Hebrew etymology is known for the word. "Mist" was conjectured by the King James translators apparently because the word concerned water and the verb used was "go up." Water does not go up except in the form of a mist! The Greek translation is "spring" or "fountain."

Speiser, however, has a better explanation of this Hebrew word 'ed. He, like others before him whose work he cites, had traced the Hebrew word to the Akkadian word *edu* "flood, waves, swell."¹ His contribution was the claim that the word, borrowed from the Sumerian A.D.E.A., refers to the rise of subterranean waters, which fitted his interpretation of the Genesis passage. In a Sumero-Akkadian vocabulary he

*Professor of Old Testament and Dean of the Faculty, Covenant Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.

1. "Ed in the Story of Creation" BASOR, No. 140, Dec. 1955, pp. 9-11.

found parallel terms to be Akkadian *melu* "flow" and *butuqtum* "break through" (of the subterranean waters). It would seem, however, that Speiser presses the mythological connections too far. There is nothing in the context cited by Speiser to prove that the reference of *melu* is always to the rising of subterranean waters. In Bezold's *Babylonisch-Assyrisches Glossar*, *melu* is defined so as to include the overflowing of rivers. Speiser specifically cites the use of the Akkadian term *edu* to refer to irrigation. Also, the context of the Genesis passage says nothing about subterranean waters unless the verb "go up" is taken to imply such a picture. According to the *Assyrian Dictionary* of the University of Chicago, the word *edu* is used of an inundation that overflowed the city of Babylon on the lower Euphrates.² Such floods, both beneficial and destructive, were common in the lower Euphrates valley.

The whole context is quite adequately cared for without any resort to mythology by the translation "inundation" thus: "No plant of the field was yet in the land and no herb of the field had as yet sprung up, but an inundation went up from the country and it watered all the face of the ground."³ Verse 10 is very similar to verse 6 and serves to explain it: "A river went out of Eden to water the garden." The word for "river" is the usual Hebrew word and the verb "to water" is identical with the verb "watered" in vs. 6. It should be concluded that the watered "garden" of verse 10 is parallel to the watered "ground" of verse 6. Verse 6 does not refer to the whole globe at all. The whole passage refers only to Eden and it informs us that it was not a rain country; it was rather a territory watered by river overflow and irrigation.

This limitation of vss. 5 and 6 to Eden answers a problem raised by Kline⁴ when he supposes a contradiction between Genesis 1 and 2 in the order of creation of plants and man. Following many others he concludes that there were no plants in the world before God formed Eden whereas chapter 1 says that plants were created on the third day. Kline, on the basis of his interpretation argues for a framework theory of the days of Genesis 1. When one holds that Genesis 2:5, 6 refers only to plants in the Garden of Eden which God was preparing for mankind, Kline's argument is seen to be unjustified.

The translation here suggested also makes unnecessary the translation suggested by Derek Kidner.⁵ He agrees with Speiser that *edu* refers to the upswelling of waters from within the earth. But instead of referring this to the realm of mythology Kidner takes it to speak of the repeated outpouring of waters from within the earth as a result of the cooling of

2. (1958) Vol. IV, pp. 35-36.

3. For this translation of vs. 5, Cf. E. F. Kevan in *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson, London: IVCF, 1953, *in loc.*

4. Meredith G. Kline, "Because It Had Not Rained" *Westminster Theol. Journ.* XX, 1957-8, p. 146 ff.

5. Derek Kidner, "Gen. 2:5, 6: Wet or Dry?" *Tyndale Bulletin*, London, 1966, pp. 109-114.

the globe. This took place before the presence of vegetation and before any human cultivation of the ground. This view unnecessarily complicates the situation and does not observe that the difference between the global situation and the Edenic culture is *the* contrast (not contradiction) between chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis.

The naming of the rivers of Eden in the following verses locates the general area of the garden for us. Speiser neatly shows that the four rivers that parted from the river of Eden were not rivers flowing away from Eden but toward it. The expression "four heads" by good parallels refers to the four sources of the rivers. These four rivers united to form the river which by inundation watered the garden. Two of the rivers have long been identified—the Euphrates and the Hiddekel. Hiddekel is the ancient form of the name "Tigris" which has come to us in this form through the Persian and Greek. A third river, Gihon, "compasseth" or "winds through" (Speiser) the land of Cush. Since the AV was translated it has been found that the Hebrew word *kush* refers to two areas. It may mean Ethiopia south of Egypt or it may mean the country east of Mesopotamia where the Kassite people were. Clearly the Nile river of Ethiopia and Egypt is not in view in Gen. 2. The Cush intended is the Kassite territory and the Gihon is therefore one of the several rivers coming from the Zagros Mountains east of Mesopotamia. The fourth river, the Pison, winds through the land of Havilah. Havilah is rather clearly some portion of Arabia. It is associated with Ophir and Sheba in the Table of Nations (Gen. 10:7, 28, 29) and is located east of Egypt and between Egypt and Assyria in Gen. 25:18 and I Sam. 15:7. This land is now all desert, but the climatic conditions were doubtless somewhat different in Edenic times. The geography has changed through the centuries through the receding of the Persian Gulf and probably also through the effects of the flood and other major climatic and geological processes. None the less, there are valleys in North Arabia which may well have formerly channeled water into the lower Euphrates River. We can not, of course, set the limits of Eden, but its approximate location can be inferred. It was in the general region of southern Mesopotamia. It may even have been under the present Persian Gulf.

In any case, the description of Genesis 2 is non-mythological straight geography and should not be used as a basis of unusual theories of cosmology. Whether there was a canopy of some kind is perhaps not sure. Quite possibly more water was once in the atmosphere as cloud cover and the earth was warmer. There is no need to rule out rain before the flood. The rainbow may well have been an old phenomenon invested with new significance for Noah and his descendants. As to the flood itself, the problems it raises are not before us in the present passage. The writer, for one, does believe in a flood of universal extent, but does not hold that a mist-canopy theory could explain the whole phenomenon.