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The Rivers of Paradise

Although the Paradise of the Bible was manifestly a place of mystery, its physical setting cannot be dismissed offhand as sheer imagination. To the writer of the account in Gen. 2:8 ff., in any case, and to his ultimate source or sources, the Garden of Eden was obviously a geographic reality. The fantasy in this instance is the unintentional contribution of interpreters, both ancient and modern.¹⁾ In their efforts to locate the site, countless prospectors have roamed over many regions of the earth. The garden and the rivers that circumscribe it have been sought in such places as Armenia and Transcaucasia, Ethiopia, India, and Mongolia. And as A. H. Sayce noted some sixty years ago, even Australia and the North Pole have had their credulous advocates.²⁾ In short, the storied delights of Eden have been made to cover a multitude of aberrations.

Various recent findings justify a fresh survey of the problem. The relation of the biblical Urgeschichte to its Mesopotamian analogues has been clarified on many counts. Our knowledge of the geographic history of Lower Mesopotamia has been substantially advanced in the past few years. And above all, our understanding of the cultural attainments of the ancient Near East in general has been greatly improved. All this has a bearing, in one way or another, on the site of the biblical Paradise.

It is well to bear in mind in this connection that "the important question about any statement contained in a source is not whether

it is true or false, but what it means."³⁾ To put it differently, the problem is basically one of methodology: does the issue lend itself to a conclusion consistent with all the known facts in the case? I believe that it does. The pertinent details, however, are at once too numerous and too diffuse to be duly developed at this time. The alternative is to concentrate on the salient points and list them schematically as so many links in a progressive chain of reasoning.⁴⁾

1. The biblical data on the subject either are a valid point of departure, or they are not. The narrative states explicitly that the garden was planted in the east (vs. 8), and that the four rivers involved had a common meeting place in a single body of water (10). Those who regard the two unidentified streams, the Pishon and the Gihon, as fictional need waste no time speculating about the site of Eden as a whole. But when the existence of the pair is conceded, it is fallacious to look for the Pishon in India, far from the meeting place of the Euphrates and the Tigris, and to locate the Gihon in Ethiopia, which was surely not east of either Mesopotamia or Palestine. One simply cannot have it both ways.

2. It does no good to argue, as has often been done, that the ancients had weird notions of geography. When the account before us received its present form, hardly later than the 10th century B.C., Israel had just witnessed, under David, its maximum geographic expansion. By that time, Western Asia, the Nile Valley, and the Aegean had long had many mutual ties. Centuries before, the commercial center of Ugarit benefited from contacts with all these regions. A millennium earlier, there were trade relations between Mesopotamia and the Indus valley; the same is true of Egypt and Mesopotamia at the very dawn of history. Even primit-

ive prehistoric centers like Jarmo managed to obtain obsidian from distant places. There is a vast difference between drawing a reasonably accurate map of a country and dumping the Nile in the Persian Gulf. The chances are that no ancient caravan ever strayed that far from its intended objective.

3. The source of most of our geographic troubles with the biblical Paradise is the mention of a land called Cush in Gen. 2:13.

Normally, the Bible understands by that term the region of the Upper Nile, cuneiform Kus/šū, Kas/ši, Eg. K'š. But there was also another, and wholly unrelated, Cush; the Nimrod fragment (Gen. 10:8-12) connects this homonym unmistakably with Mesopotamia, by assigning it to the father of the hero who is said to have founded a number of Babylonian and Assyrian capitals.⁵⁾

This particular Cush, then, is the eponym of the Kassites, Akk. Kaššû; its Nuzi form Kuššu-⁶⁾ and its Greek derivative Kossaioi actually contain the same vowel as the biblical name. Now the Kassite rule over Babylonia had ended by the 12th century. It was bound to be remembered locally for some time afterwards. But how many authors in first-millennium Palestine would be familiar with this footnote to distant history? The narrator of the Urge-schichte - or at least his sources - knew about it, to judge from the Nimrod account and our present passage; for only a Kassite context can accord with the phrase "in the east" of Gen. 2:8. The Samaritan version, too, would seem to reflect the same tradition, for it renders Gihon, the name of the river of Cush, by 'Asqop, evidently the Choaspes, modern Kerkha. With everyone else, however, it was the Ethiopian Cush, naturally enough, that immediately came to mind. Hence LXX translates the present instance as Ethiopia; and Josephus, Jubilees, the new Genesis Apocryphon⁷⁾, and various other ancient sources go on to identify the Gihon with

the Nile⁸⁾. Nor could modern scholarship be blamed at first for its ready acceptance of older opinion, especially before the discovery of the form Kuššu-, which was used by next-door neighbors at a time when the Kassites were still very much in power. Today, however, no such excuse can be advanced any longer for detouring both Nimrod and the Gihon all the way to Ethiopia.⁹⁾

4. The river names Pishon and Gihon could only add to the confusion. They were bound to be etymologized as something like "the Gamboler" and "the Gusher" respectively; the latter, moreover, is actually found as the name of a spring near Jerusalem (e.g., I Kings 1:33). Besides, each of these streams is described in the present passage as sōbēb its given land, the Heb. participle being interpreted to mean "encompassing, encircling". Now a stream with a playful name and the ability to encircle a whole country does not inspire confidence in its genuineness. It belongs in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. Small wonder, therefore, that rabbinic tradition had the four rivers represent honey, milk, balsam, and wine.¹⁰⁾ Yet this is not much more fanciful than the other attempts, old and recent, to identify the Pishon with the Ganges or the Indus.¹¹⁾ Furthermore, the names of the first two rivers of Eden may merely be secondary and Hebraized forms, just as the other two found their way into Greek in the guise of the Tigris¹²⁾ and the Euphrates. As for the accompanying sbb, the primary meaning of the verb is not so much "to circle", as "to turn". One of its established uses, therefore, is "to pursue an irregular path", hence "to wander". This is still clear from the passage in II Kings 3:9 wayyāsobbū derek šib'at yāmīm, which tells us that the three kings in question "wandered for seven days", and not that they went around in circles for a whole week. The same sense, incidentally, suggestive of a winding course, is conveyed by Aram. s^ehar, the equi-

valent of Heb. sbb. The Genesis Apocryphon shows this use repeatedly, once even with the very Gihon of our present text.¹³⁾ And "to turn, twist, meander" is precisely what any normal river will do.

5. With Cush and its river thus restored to their required eastern location, the theoretical limits of Eden begin to assume manageable proportions. By the same token there emerges this significant fact: the stated order of the last three out of a total of four Paradise rivers - i.e., the Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates - is east to west. This is exactly the opposite of what one would expect from an Israelite vantage point; for from that direction the first one would be the Euphrates, which for that very reason is not infrequently described simply as "the river" (Gen. 31:21; Exod. 23:21; Num. 22.5, etc.), or "the great river" (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 1.7; Josh. 1:4). And with three positions thus assured, there is the inherent probability that the remaining stream - the Pishon - would have to be sought still farther east, and presumably not too far from the Gihon. Accordingly, the same uniform sequence should apply also to the central river of Eden itself, which ought thus to be the most easterly of all. The original narrator, therefore, of the account before us has to be visualized as looking from the Persian Gulf inland.

It would seem to follow, then, that the "four heads" of which the text speaks (vs. 10) are meant to be viewed upstream rather than down, something that very few authorities appear to have realized.¹⁴⁾ Yet both Akkadian and Hebrew usage support such a view. Thus Akk. ina rēš Uqnê stands for "on the upper Kerkha".¹⁵⁾ And A. Ehrlich has pointed out that the Hebrew term for the lower course of a stream is qāšê (cf. Josh. 15:5, 18:19); hence rōš must

refer to the opposite end, the upper course or headstream.¹⁶⁾ Now S.N. Kramer has shown independently that to the poets and priests of Sumer it was the Persian Gulf that gave the Tigris and the Euphrates their annual overflow, rather than the invisible thaws in far off Armenia.¹⁷⁾ Strong tidal action in the region of the delta, which has left a salt wedge all the way to modern Qurna,¹⁸⁾ may well have helped to foster this ancient illusion.

6. The biblical text itself contains two semantic trailmarkers that point unambiguously to the land and lore of Sumer. One is the geographic term Eden, which hardly can be separated from Sum. edin "plain". The other is the 'ēd of Gen. 2:6, the term for the groundwater that first irrigated the land. Whether one derives the word, with W.F. Albright, from id "river", or from a. d. e. a (Akk. edû) "ground flow", as I have recently advocated,¹⁹⁾ its origin would be Sumerian in any case. Near the head of the Persian Gulf lay the celebrated Dilmun which, as Kramer has shown, was "the land of the living", a place that knew neither sickness nor death, a garden of the gods - or in a word, Paradise. The same general region also bore the name of pī nārâte "the mouth of the rivers" (sometimes reduced to "the mouth of the two rivers").²⁰⁾ Through it access could be gained to the abode of Ut(a)napishtim, whom the gods had placed there after the Flood, to share in the boon of immortality.²¹⁾ The area was thus plainly a favored spot of ancient legend and literature.

Another clue that deserves special mention in the present context is furnished by sacred architecture. Perhaps the most venerated type of Sumerian sanctuary was the reed shrine, the basic "Gotteshaus" of W. Andrae's pioneering study on the subject.²²⁾ Now the characteristic type of construction that the modern inhabitants of

the same region - the so-called Marsh Dwellers or Ma'dān - employ to this day is similarly based on a reed technique. The latest photographs of contemporary buildings²³⁾ cannot but call to mind immediately the selfsame motifs on archaic Sumerian seals and reliefs. It is worth noting in passing that the Marsh Dwellers are a society apart, so much so that their neighbors often question whether the Ma'dān should at all be regarded as Arabs. We thus have here an immemorial tradition that had a profound spiritual effect on the oldest inhabitants, and has remained very much alive down to the present.

7. There is no need, then, to stray far from the Persian Gulf in search of the Garden of Eden. The biblical text was not anticipating an aquatic Nephelococcygia. What the narrative calls for is an extensive body of sweet water, with ample areas of vegetation dotted through it, and with four sizable rivers fanning out from there upstream. All these conditions, moreover, should be applicable to the past, the 10th century B.C. at the latest. To be sure, hydrographic features in the soft alluvium of Lower Mesopotamia have been far from stable through the ages. Nevertheless, recent technical studies²⁴⁾ have made it probable that, contrary to all previous calculations, the area from modern Amara eastward must always have contained reedy marsh and shallow lagoon, in the past even more so than today. Much of it appears to have been a sweet-water spur of the Persian Gulf,²⁵⁾ a shallow lake into which numerous rivers descended, among them the as yet unmerged waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Significantly enough, aerial photographs still show traces of ancient cultivation under the present northwest reaches of the Persian Gulf.²⁶⁾

8. What is the bearing of these data on the identification of the

Pishon and the Gihon? The one definite result is that, at the time when the narrative before us originated, neither of these rivers could have had its estuary very far from the mouths of the Tigris and the Euphrates. This in itself is an appreciable gain, in view of the geographic anarchy that is implicit in so many of the attempted solutions of the question. If one wishes, however, to be even more specific, the choice is as yet by no means self-evident, even though the range has been vastly reduced. The most likely solution should be among one of the following:

a. Gihon-Diyala and Pishon-Kerkha. This presupposes, in line with recent hydrographic studies, that the mouth of the Diyala was at the time considerably farther east than it now is. There is no question that the Diyala winds through much of what was once Kassite territory, or one of the two widely separated regions which the Bible designates as Cush. In that case, the Pishon would have to be equated with the Kerkha, a river that comes down from the heart of the Iranian plateau. It so happens that Assyrian records mention Median gold;²⁷⁾ on the other hand, the Havilah of our passage was a non-distinctive geographic designation, being applied in the Table of Nations to more than one place (cf. Gen. 10:7, 29), so that an Iranian namesake is not out of the question. More suggestive, perhaps, is the mention of the šōham-stone as one of the products of the Pishon territory. If the Pishon was indeed the Kerkha, then its cuneiform name was Uqnû (the lapis lazuli river). Now the biblical term for lapis has yet to be pointed out. It can hardly have been sappīr, since sapphire is a different type of blue stone. On the other hand, it is worth noting that šōham was the only type of stone used in the decoration of the ephod (e.g., Exod. 25.7). Since lapis would be the corresponding decorative material in Mesopotamia, and since neither the

meaning nor the etymology of šōham²⁸⁾ has been determined, there is a good chance that the term referred to lapis.²⁹⁾ There is the further circumstance that šōham is almost invariably accompanied by the word for "stone", which is very rarely the case with other mineral-names in Hebrew; the same is true, of course, of lapis lazuli itself, and probably also of the Sumerian equivalent z a. g ì n.³⁰⁾ Now just as the Pishon is said to come from a country known for its šōham-stone, the Kerkha originates in a land from which lapis was imported in antiquity. What is more, the Assyrian name for the Kerkha was Uqnû "the Blue River", or the same term that was also used for lapis. None of this adds up to conclusive proof. But there is at least a fair possibility that the biblical reference to the Pishon in connection with the šōham-stone showed an awareness of the native name Uqnû. If these combinations stand up, we shall then have not only a positive equation of the Pishon with the Kerkha but also of the šōham-stone with lapis lazuli.

b. Gihon-Kerkha and Pishon-Karun. In favor of this assumption is the known propinquity of the Kerkha and Karun estuaries and the further fact that all four Paradise rivers would then have converged within the compass of the shallow lake area. Another favoring argument would be the Samaritan version's apparent identification of the Gihon with the Choaspes/Kerkha. On the other hand, however, the Kerkha would seem to be placed too far from Kassite territory, unless the biblical statement is taken to allude to the Iranian homeland of the Kassites. When it comes to the Pishon, there is little to choose between the Karun and the Kerkha for purposes of geographic comparison.

c. Gihon-Kerkha and Pishon-Wadi er-Rumma. The latter, or one

of the other now dry wadis that slope down from the south, would have to be identified with the Pishon if it is deemed necessary to locate the pertinent land of Havilah in Arabia. Gold is known to have been imported from Arabia as far back as the time of the Royal Tombs of Ur. Furthermore, geographers now estimate that the old shore of the Persian Gulf lay farther to the south,³¹⁾ indicating deeper penetration into that quarter in ancient times. It remains to be shown, however, that any of the present wadis was sufficiently active during the period in question to constitute a sizable and perennial river. And if šōham was actually lapis, Arabia's stake in the matter would have to be given up.

To sum up, the above discussion has not produced anything like a Treasure Island³²⁾ map of Eden, for all the reported gold of Havilah. What I have tried to show is that the biblical text, the traditions of ancient Mesopotamia, the geographic history of the land at the head of the Persian Gulf, and the surviving building practices in that marshy country point jointly to an older garden land, richly watered, and favored by religion and literature alike - the kind of Paradise, in short, that local tradition still locates at the confluence of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Accordingly, the physical background of the biblical Garden of Eden outlines a real, though remote and atypical, sector of the ancient Near East.

- 1) Cf. especially Friedr. Delitzsch, *Wo lag das Paradies?* (1881); A.H. Sayce, *Dictionary of the Bible I* (1898), pp. 643 ff.; S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 8th ed. (1911), pp. 57-60; W. F. Albright, "The Mouth of the Rivers", *AJSL* 35 (1919),

pp. 161-195, and "The Location of the Garden of Eden", *AJSL* 39 (1922), pp. 15-31. See also M.D. Cassuto, *Genesis: From Adam to Noah* (1953), pp. 75-79 (in Hebrew).

- 2) Loc. cit.
- 3) R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946), p. 260.
- 4) Such an approach has long been characteristic of Professor Johannes Friedrich, to whose honor this paper is a small token contribution.
- 5) Cf. my paper on "In Search of Nimrod", *Eretz-Israel* 5 (1958), pp. 32*-36*.
- 6) With the Hurrian adjectival suffix -hi; for the occurrences see E. R. Lacheman, *BASOR* 78 (1940), pp. 21 f.
- 7) N. Avigad and Yigael Yadin, *A Genesis Apocryphon* (1956), p. 32.
- 8) The old rabbinical authorities were fully aware that this interpretation ran counter to the explicit miqqedem "in the east" of Gen. 2:8. This is why they took the word to mean "in the past"; cf. L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* 5 (1925), pp. 13 f.
- 9) It should be emphasized, however, that ever since the appearance of Delitzsch's monograph (see fn. 1) a small group of scholars has held to the equation of the present Cush with the Kassites.
- 10) Cf. Ginzberg, op. cit. 1 (1909), p. 132. Islamic tradition followed suit.
- 11) Cf. Sayce (fn. 1).
- 12) Derived from an indigenous term which appears as Idigna in

Sum., Idiglat in Akk., Hiddeqel in Heb., Deqlat in Aram.,
and Dijlat in Arab.

- 13) Col. xxi 15.
- 14) So Sayce (loc. cit.; also J.W.Dawson, *Modern Science in Bible Lands* (cited in Driver's *Genesis*, p. 58, fn. 1).
- 15) Cf. H.Tadmor, *JNES* 17 (1958), p. 138.9'.
- 16) *Randglossen* 1 (1908), p. 9.
- 17) In his paper on "Dilmun, the Land of the Living", *BASOR* 96 (1944), p. 28, fn. 42.
- 18) Cf. P.Buringh, "Living Conditions in the Lower Mesopotamian Plain in Ancient Times", *Sumer* 13 (1957), p. 35.
- 19) "'Ed in the Story of Creation", *BASOR* 140 (1955), pp. 9-11.
- 20) Cf. *BASOR* 96, pp. 27 f.
- 21) *Gilg. Ep.* XI 196.
- 22) *Das Gotteshaus und die Urformen des Bauens im alten Orient* (1930).
- 23) Cf. Gavin Maxwell, *People of the Reeds* (1957).
- 24) See especially G.M.Lees and N.L.Falcon, *Geographical Journal* (1952), pp. 24 ff.
- 25) Cf.fn. 18. This may explain why Akkadian sources sometimes refer to that region as Nār marratum "Bitter River".
- 26) Buringh, loc. cit., p. 36.
- 27) R.Campbell Thompson, *A Dictionary of Assyrian Chemistry and Geology* (1936), p. 58.

- 28) The often adduced Akk. sāmtu "red stone" does not have the same sibilant.
- 29) It is interesting to note that Job 28:16 mentions šōham together with sapphire, which may suggest similarity while precluding actual identity.
- 30) Thompson, op. cit., p. 129.
- 31) Buringh, loc. cit., p. 37.
- 32) For mythical accounts of fabulous treasures cf. the Copper Scroll from Qumran see the discussion by J.T.Milik, *Bibl. Arch.* 19 (1956), pp. 60-62, with parallels from Josephus and some Islamic sources; see also S.Mowinckel, *JBL* 76 (1957), pp. 261-65.