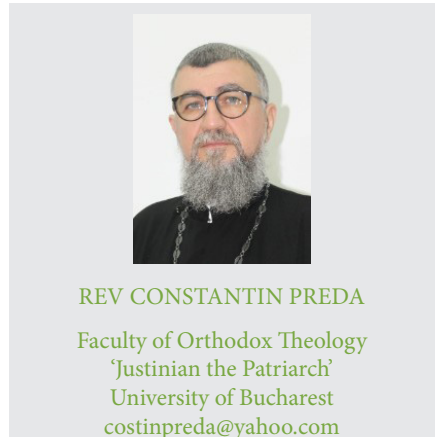


THE SYMBOLISTIC GEOGRAPHY OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN (GN 2:8-14)

Abstract

The present study aims to map the symbolic geography of the Garden of Eden, which God created for Adam and Eve. It points to a mythical space loaded with eschatological symbolism. At the centre of the garden were two symbolic trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. While the tree of life confers eternal life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents the reason for the fall into the sin of the first humans. The Garden of Eden evokes beauty and rest and has been part of the human imagination since ancient times. The river that flows out of Eden and divides into four arms, encircling the surrounding lands, symbolises the source of life and fertility and is known in religious history and linked to the concept of the 'centre' of the world. The study explores the meanings and origins of the names of the four rivers, analysing them in their geographical and symbolic context. It also considers possible links between the earthly Paradise, the river, the King of Judea and the sanctuary of Zion. Finally, it compares this representation of the Garden of Eden with the image of Gehenna, it's opposite in the Bible, the place where eternal fire burns and where God will manifest his wrath.



Keywords

Eden, river, trees, sacred space, symbolism

The Names Given to the Garden of Eden

According to the Holy Scriptures, God created a living space for Adam and Eve, a space whence they were expelled after they fell into sin. In Hebrew tradition, this is a mythical place, which, at the beginning of creation, used to be an earthly paradise for

the first humans and which turned into an eschatological symbol, so that the garden of Eden became the picture of heavenly paradise, where the souls of the righteous will rejoice. In the Hebrew text (MT) of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, it says that ‘The Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden (גַּן־עֵדֶן) and there He put the man whom He had formed’ (Gn 2:8). The text suggests that the garden did not take up the entire territory of Eden, but only a clearly delimited area within it (Busi 1999, 39-44; Bockmuehl and Stroumsa 2010; Luttikhuisen 1999; Delumeau, 1997). The Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), alongside the Latin one, the Vulgate (Vg), as well as subsequent commentators, who followed these two translations, noted that the noun *eden* was derived in Hebrew from the same root that referred to ‘being fertile, plenteous’ (Wigorer 2006, 191; Mihăilă 2021, 145-59); nevertheless, many researchers do not construe the term ‘Eden’ as a proper noun, but rather a common one, derived from Sumerian (acc. *edin* = ‘plain, steppe’) or via Akkadian (acc. *edinu*). There is even an attested settlement — *bit adini* — located on the middle Euphrates and bearing this name ever since the Assyrian occupation (Soggin 1991, 63). Thus, the garden is supposed to be located in a lowland area. Since the garden was found in Eden, it was named ‘the garden of Eden’ (cf. Gn 2:15; 3:23; Ez 36:35; Jl 2:3).

In the Holy Scriptures, it also appears under the name of ‘the garden of the Lord’ (גַּן־יְהוָה) (Gn 13:10; Is 51:3), ‘the garden of God’ (גַּן־אֱלֹהִים) (Ez 28:13; 31:8-9), or, simply and briefly, Eden (Is 51:3; Ez 28:13; 31:9). The Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), renders the term *gan* (‘garden’) from Genesis 2:8 and even the term *Eden* from Isaiah 5:3 by means of the Persian term *παράδεισος*, which means ‘enclosed parc’ or ‘garden of delight’ (*paradisus voluptatis*), hence the term ‘paradise’ used to refer to the garden of Eden. In Romanian, it has been translated as *rai*, a Slavic word which became established in theological speech as ‘grădina Raiului’ (the garden of Rai).

Thus, upon the first mention of the word Eden in the book of Genesis, one notes that it is located between a garden and a cardinal point, namely *east*. Thus, this specification has topographic value, first and foremost, since the biblical narration makes the distinction between the garden and the space where it is located, adding the essential detail of the cardinal point. In reality, the accuracy of this beginning is mere appearance, as the particularities of the following text introduce us to a *symbolic geography of Eden*, one of the most evasive themes in the whole of Scripture

(Busi 1999, 39). One is compelled to remark, first of all, that Eden is introduced into the account without any anticipation as if the reader should already have been familiar with the place and capable of granting due value to the geographical specification pointing to the east at the end of the sentence. Was Eden supposed to be ‘eastward’ from the point of view of the onlooker? Or is it that the garden is located ‘eastward’ of that region? Such an indication might refer to the relative position of the garden with respect to Eden, as the following verse in Genesis 2:10 appears to suggest: ‘Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden and from there it parted into four river heads. The garden seems to be located in the place where the four rivers of the world were born, northwest of Mesopotamia and north-northeast of Canaan (Soggin 1991, 63).

What makes the narration even more ambiguous is the terms ‘Eden’ and ‘garden’, which merge in the middle of the episode into the phrase ‘garden of Eden’, which accompanies the most intense emotional stage of the account. The story definitely continues in a kind of backwards movement towards the east, as if Eden were found in the west, as God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden and ‘placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden and a flaming sword that turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life’ (Gn 3:24), while Adam himself would settle down ‘east of Eden’ after the expulsion (Gn 4:16).

The Two Trees in the Middle of the Garden of Eden

As shown by the context, the name of the place is supported by the etymological value of the term *eden*, which means ‘delight’, ‘pleasure’ in biblical Hebrew. *Gan Eden* is thus a ‘garden of delight’ as well, where ‘out of the ground the Lord God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food’ (Gn 2:9); ergo, it is a space of beauty and rest as evoked by the vegetation, one that has been part of the imagination of the Oriental man from time immemorial. Nevertheless, the ‘garden of Eden’ is a space reserved for God, in the middle of which there are *two symbolic plants* of an extraordinary nature: ‘the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ (Gn 2:9). In this setting that seems to induce peace and delight there is, however, an interdiction in force, as, according to God’s commandment, the man may eat of the fruits of each plant, except for ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’, for, the moment he does, he will die. In the story about the snake’s temptation, ‘the tree of life’ seems to become invisible, as Eve’s undivided attention is drawn to ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’: ‘And the woman said to the serpent: “We may eat the fruit

of any tree of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said: ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’” (Gn 3:2).

The first of the two trees is ‘the tree of life’, an element found in the history of religions; in the present context, there is no mention of its purpose, yet the implication, as well as the suggestion of the immediate context (Gn 3:22), is that it gave eternal life to the one eating its fruit. A similar notion is encountered in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Sumerian king and hero: he sets off in search of the plant that gives life, finds it, yet loses it, because, while he was bathing, he left it unguarded and the snake ate it. In the *myth of Adapa*, on the other hand, the protagonist refuses the bread of life and the water of life, along with the knowledge they could confer upon him, knowing that such foods and prerogatives were reserved for the gods.

In the biblical narration, ‘the tree of life’ does not play any explicit role, nor does it do so in the rest of the Hebrew Bible: it is briefly mentioned again only in Proverbs 11:30; 13:12, and 15:4, yet it is used in a metaphorical sense, as it is at the end of the New Testament, in the Book of Revelation 22:7; cf. 2:7, where it becomes an important element of eschatological restoration. Aside from the already cited occurrences, others can be found in Mesopotamia and Egypt, in Chinese Buddhism and even in the Celtic world. In Mesopotamia, the character linked the most closely to ‘the tree of life’ is the king, who is represented in bas-reliefs or on seals next to ‘the tree of life’, in his capacity as custodian of the latter.

The other tree, the one ‘of the knowledge of good and evil’, however, plays a central part in the narration, especially in chapter three of Genesis, where it constitutes the reason for the fall into the sin of the first humans. It is therefore important to know exactly what it means and why God placed an interdiction that proved to be difficult to observe. Several attempts were made to draw up an explanation of the expression ‘knowledge of good and evil’.

First of all, ‘the knowledge of good and evil’ is thought to refer to physical, intellectual and moral maturity, a meaning that occurs sporadically in the Hebrew Holy Scriptures; however, such an explanation does not appear legitimate, as God has never imposed upon man any limitations in this respect in order to keep him in a state of immaturity, of eternal childless.

The second explanation pertains to the sphere of sexuality, already familiar to Ibn-Ezra; however, the mention of marital relations in Genesis 2:24 seems to preclude this interpretation. Such an explanation is favoured historically and religiously,

through the binomial eros-thanatos in the classical world, yet it is not mentioned in the Holy Scriptures.

A very frequently encountered interpretation is the one that might be labelled as pedagogical: man needs to acknowledge that he is not God and that he needs to obey His commandments, irrespective of their intrinsic content, and, implicitly, needs to acknowledge God as the Lord and Master of his life.

J. Alberto Soggin proposes a solution for understanding this phrase that is based on the latter's stylistic form. 'Good and evil' is a rhetorical device called merism. It is intended to show the whole by means of contrasting or extreme terms. In this case, 'good' and 'evil', two opposing categories, indicate the sum total, the object of the verb *jādā* = 'to know'. A verb with a wide semantic scope: it refers firstly to the act of acquiring 'knowledge', both theoretical and practical, and, secondly, to sexual intercourse. It thus appears that the expression 'knowledge of good and evil' refers to omniscience, as well as omnipotence, two exclusively divine prerogatives and therefore definitely not accessible to man. This brings to mind again *the Babylonian myth of Adapa*, according to which man is offered both the water and the bread of life, which is nothing other than divine knowledge. That explains the initial interdiction and the subsequent punishment for trespassing against the divine commandment. Assigning a botanical identity to the trees (such as fig tree or apple tree), which has occurred over the history of scriptural interpretation, finds no justification in the biblical text (Soggin 1991, 64; Mihăilă 2017, 113-4).

After the breaking of the commandment and the tasting of the forbidden fruit, the garden momentarily became a space of knowledge, which manifested itself, first and foremost, as fear of nakedness and the birth of the feeling of shame; the first consequence of the transgression against the divine commandment was the knowledge of one's own nakedness or nudity, an effect that concerns the body. 'The garden of Eden' became a place where the first humans hid, while the trees were no longer pleasant and desirable, but a screen that concealed them from 'the presence of the Lord God' (Gn 3:8). At the end of this episode, all the vegetation of Eden would remain hidden by God's curse, which would enclose man into an earthly, hostile landscape: 'Both thorns and thistles it [the ground] shall bring forth for you and you shall eat the herb of the field.' (Gn 3:17-18). It is only the tree of life that will appear again in the narration, evoked by God's mysterious words in expelling Adam and Eve: 'lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever' (Gn 3:22). Thus, the fruit of the tree of

life is presumably an antidote which would heal the transgression against the divine commandment and could give humans back their lost immortality, yet – for reasons the text does not specify – this antidote would be forbidden by God, who would place ‘cherubim and the fiery sword which turns every way’ (Gn 3:24) to guard the way to the tree of life.

The Four Rivers and the Neighbouring Lands

‘Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden and from there it parted and became four river heads. The name of the first is Pishon (פִּישׁוֹן); it circles the whole land of Havilah (הַבְּלִיָּיִם), where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and the onyx stone are there as well. The name of the second river is Gihon (גִּיחוֹן); it circles the whole land of Cush (כּוּשׁ). The name of the third river is Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur; and the fourth river is Euphrates (Gn 2:10-14).

Out of Eden flowed a river that watered the garden, a veritable primordial river (Soggin 1997, 587-9). It is worth noting that the Hebrew term *rōš* (רֹאשׁ) is used with the meaning of ‘origin, beginning, extremity’ of a river, i.e. ‘spring’. From a topographical point of view, it is an unusual situation: normally, there are one or several watercourses that come together into one, while the opposite only occurs in the case of an estuary in the form of a delta. However, such an unusual situation finds its explanation in the text: it consists in the very fact that *of the primordial river all the others are born*. The motif of the primordial river is known in the history of religions: in the present context, it plays the role of the original river, whose spring feeds the world’s entire water system and which is known to all religions, from India all the way to Native Americans in North America. The concept appears to be related to the notion of the ‘centre’ of the world (*tabbur*), which is construed as a flat circle; such a centre possesses a particular holiness, as the latter emanates and radiates into all things. The Hebrew Bible itself knows two such sanctuaries that bear the significant name of ‘centre or middle of the earth, navel of the earth’ – *tabbur ha’areṣ* (תְּבַרְבְּרַת אֶרֶץ): *Mount Gerizim* above Shechem (acc. Jgs 9:39; later a sanctuary for the Samaritans) and *Zion* (Ez 38:12); this name would continue to be used until the Middle Ages to also refer to the Holy Sepulchre.

‘The centre or navel of the earth’ (ὀμφαλός τῆς γῆς) is the name given to the cave of Calypso in the *Odyssey* I, 50 and from it four rivers spring (*Odyssey* I, 70) (Graves 2018, 608). The very number four was used in Israel and in the Ancient Near East in relation to topographical concepts such as the four cardinal points (acc. Zec 2:1);

sometimes it was used to indicate completeness or perfection (acc. the four kingdoms in Dt 2:34).

Thus, the garden appears as a symbolic place whence radiates only that which is good, beautiful and useful, a true centre of the world and even of the universe.

The names of the four rivers, the second in particular, are loaded with meanings of a more symbolic rather than topographical nature (Soggin 1997, 587). The *Pishon* (פִּישׁוֹן) seems to be the 'original spring' (acc. the stem *pwš*, 'to jump', yet also used with the meaning 'to burst', 'to flow from a spring'). The stem has been placed by biblical exegetes in connection with related Egyptian terms indicating great waters or canals. The term is not attested anywhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures and is only found in the Greek text of Ben Sirah 24:25 (Φισων). This river flows around ('circles') the land of Havilah (הַבִּילָה), 'the sandy one', from *hōl*, 'sand'. In Genesis 25:18, Havilah is one of the names of Northern Arabia and Strabo (XVI,4,2) calls Arabs *χαυλοταιοι*, which is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew stem. The coastal area was known in ancient times for its auriferous sands, which contained pure gold. Bdellium was a viscous resin used in ancient pharmacopoeia and, in spite of being highly appreciated, it was not a precious stone; it, too, came from Arabia. The 'shoham' (שׁוֹהַם) stone is probably the onyx; the LXX translates it as *ὁ λίθος ὁ πράσινος*, 'the greenish stone', probably emerald. It is unclear how the author of the biblical account saw a river flowing through a region that classical authors call *Arabia deserta*; some commentators believe that the river was mistaken for the Red Sea in its eastern gulf (today's Gulf of Aqaba), yet that is unlikely, considering that the ancients made the distinction between freshwater and saltwater, such information being known about Mesopotamia at the time, even though it is not mentioned in the biblical account of creation. In any case, the description is rather vague and that is why one wonders if the author had a concrete region in mind or if we are dealing with a *symbolic-mythical geography*.

The *Gihon* (גִּיחֹן) has previously been identified as various rivers: the Nile (as early as Jer 2:18 LXX; Josephus Flavius etc.), the Ganges in India. It is in relation to the Gihon that the 'land of Cush' (כּוּשׁ) seems to be mentioned, namely ancient *Aethiopia*, today's Nubia and Sudan, which it seems to surround. However, none of these hypothetical identifications can explain how the Nile could have followed such a route, even though one must admit that anything is possible in a *symbolic-mythical topography*! E.A. Speiser attempted to identify 'the land of Cush' with the Kassites of Babylonia, who occupied Mesopotamia until the late 12th century BC, yet this seems

impossible, as it would entail the existence of a third river beside the Tigris and the Euphrates (Soggin 1997, 588).

However, the reality is different and much more complex: to the primordial river (if one may call the Pishon thus) corresponds the 'primordial, original spring', in accordance with the stem *gyh / gwh*, 'to burst out with force' (referring to the water of a spring), which seems to be attested in Job 38:8 (יִגְוֹ), where the water of the sea 'bursts out of the maternal womb'.

The *Gihon* is the name given by the Hebrew Bible to the spring located in the valley in the southeastern part of Jerusalem, at the foot of the Ophel, today called the Fountain of the Virgin, in fact, the only one in the City, whose waters have been abstracted and channelled inside the City walls via an ingenious and complex water system. During the time of King Hezekiah, a tunnel was built carrying the water from the spring to the pool of Siloam. It is with this 'spring' that Ibn-Ezra already unwaveringly identified *gîhôn* – the *Gihon*.

In the First Book of Kings 1:33.38.45 (MT), *the spring – Gihon* is placed in connection with the king's crowning ceremony (acc. also Ps 110:7, an otherwise recent composition, according to which the freshly crowned sovereign was supposed to go to the Gihon and drink water in order to complete the ritual). And, since, in ancient times, Zion was called 'the navel of the earth' (acc. Ez 38:12), one might ask the question whether in the ancient geography located *in illo tempore* there may not have been a connection between earthly Paradise (the place where the first man created by God was put), the river in question, the king of Judaea, and the sanctuary of Zion, acc. Psalm 46:5, which says: 'There is a great river and its streams gladden the City of the Lord, the temple and the tabernacle of the Most High', a statement that cannot be considered otherwise than in connection with the *topography of Jerusalem*. In Ezekiel 47:1 there is also such a spring that lies at the origin of the eschatological river that will make the oriental desert fertile at the end of time; such a spring, along with its stream, seems to correspond, according to the cult, to *the archetypal spring of origins*. It appears thus fairly clear that we are dealing with *symbolic geography* and not, as one often reads, with real rivers in the geographical sense of the word (Soggin 1997, 588-9).

Gan Eden and Gehenna (Heaven and Hell)

Alongside this representation of the garden of Eden that God prepared in order for man to live happily in it, the Holy Scriptures paint the picture of another place,

regarded with disgust, the opposite of Paradise, namely *Gehenna*, a ravine found south of the City of Jerusalem, also called 'the Valley of the sons of Hinnom' (*Ghe ben hinnom*). The Valley of Hinnom is located near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, near the Ophel, the City of David and the Gihon spring. According to the Hebrew Bible, in this place, human sacrifices were made to the god Moloch (4 Kgs 16:3) and it was regarded with disgust, as the place upon which the wrath of God would fall. The valley later came to be used as a place for storing Jerusalem's waste. Its putrid and incessant fires were evoked by Jesus when, He, too, referred to them as a sign of God's judgment and the definitive defeat of the devil (acc. Mt 5:22; Mk 9:47-49), which gave rise to a long-going association of *Gehenna* with Hell, a frightful place full of torment and suffering.

Jewish scholars of the post-biblical era regarded the expulsion of the first humans from the Garden of Eden as merely temporary, as they believed that an inevitable force would presumably restore all souls to their original state. The path of such a return was different, however, as it reflected a fundamental dichotomy of the world: *the contrast between the children of Israel and the other peoples (goim)*, which required the supernatural space to be divided into the Garden of Eden and *Gehenna*, the first being reserved for the children of Israel, while the second was meant to be a place of torment and suffering for the other peoples. While the children of Israel would have returned to the Garden of Eden by following the path marked by the coherent symbolism of biblical prescriptions, the return of the gentiles appeared to be a strenuous process, as it lacked awareness and was undergone passively. Thus, *Gehenna* was construed as a mirror image of Eden, intended to receive sinners who did not receive their due punishment during their lifetime and to confer greater value upon the reward prepared for the Jews.

In spite of the essential difference in nature between the two places, they were pictured as being very close to each other, as shown by *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* VII,14, a midrash compilation probably written in the 8th century AD based on materials from late Jewish Antiquity: 'Gehenna and Eden. What is the distance between them? The stretch of a palm. Rabbi Yohanan used to say: they are parallel so that one can see from one side into the other'. *Gehenna* and Eden are thus very close to each other, as are moral deeds and violations of the law, the distance being often so subtle it turns out to be imperceptible.

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