

PART A  
GENESIS



## THE STORY OF PARADISE IN THE LIGHT OF MESOPOTAMIAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE

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### I

It is a great pleasure indeed to contribute to this Festschrift in honour of John Emerton. Since Genesis is one of the major areas of his interest I would like to present some of my thoughts about a most interesting narrative in this part of the Hebrew Bible – the Story of Paradise.

Beside numerous articles published in recent times, a number of important and stimulating books on this story have also appeared in the last two decades. I have in mind the works by E. van Wolde, J. Barr, T. Stordalen, M. Arneht, P. Kübel, and T. N. D. Mettinger.<sup>1</sup> It is not my intention to give a survey of these and other publications, rather, I will focus on some of the motifs in the story of paradise. In doing so, I will pay special attention to the question of how the culture and literature of Mesopotamia might help us better understand specific elements of the narrative. Through the years scholars have taken into account points of (supposed) agreement between the Paradise narrative and myths from Mesopotamia,<sup>2</sup> but recent studies, such as by Stordalen, M. Dietrich, and Mettinger, provide more detailed discussions in this regard, especially pertaining to the garden of Eden, to

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<sup>1</sup> E. van Wolde, *A Semiotic Analysis of Genesis 2–3. A Semiotic Theory and Method of Analysis Applied to the Story of the Garden of Eden* (SSN 25; Assen, 1989); J. Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality. The Read-Tuckwell Lectures for 1990* (London, 1992; Minneapolis, 1993); T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden. Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (CBET 25; Leuven, 2000); M. Arneht, *Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt... Studien zur Entstehung der alttestamentlichen Urgeschichte* (FRLANT 217; Göttingen, 2007), pp. 97–147; P. Kübel, *Metamorphosen der Paradieserzählung* (OBO 231; Fribourg/Göttingen, 2007); T. N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative. A Literary and Religio-historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (Winona Lake, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970), pp. 279, 286, 291–292, 301–302.

the four rivers, and to links between the Paradise narrative, on the one hand, and the myth of Adapa and the Gilgamesh Epic, on the other.<sup>3</sup>

Before entering the garden, a remark on the question of the literary unity of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 is in order. A number of studies, such as those by O. H. Steck and E. Otto, and recently by Arneth and Mettinger, have made it clear, and convincingly so in my view, that the Paradise narrative makes perfect sense if taken as a literary unity.<sup>4</sup>

The following topics which, in my view, are crucial to the story will make up the structure of this essay: A. The prohibition, B. The garden of Eden, C. The frame of the narrative, and D. The two trees. I will conclude with some summarizing statements, including a brief discussion about the theme of the story.

## II

### A. *The Prohibition*

As soon as “the man” is in the garden of Eden, the Lord God commands him, saying:

You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day you eat of it you shall certainly die. (Gen. 2:17)

This verse raises the following well-known questions: What does the expression “the knowledge of good and evil” mean? How is one to interpret the phrase “on the day that...”? And what about the expres-

<sup>3</sup> Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, pp. 94–98, 111–116, 139–155; M. Dietrich, “Das biblische Paradies und der babylonische Tempelgarten. Überlegungen zur Lage des Gartens Eden”, in B. Janowski und B. Ego (eds.), *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalische Kontexte* (FAT 32; Tübingen, 2001), pp. 281–323; Mettinger, *Eden Narrative*, pp. 100–122. See also A. S. Kapelrud, “You Shall Surely Not Die”, in A. Lemaire and B. Otzen (eds.), *History and Traditions of Early Israel. Studies presented to Eduard Nielsen* (VTSup 50; Leiden, 1993), pp. 50–61, and A. Schüle, “Made in the ‘Image of God’. The Concepts of Divine Images in Gen. 1–3”, *ZAW* 117 (2005), pp. 1–20.

<sup>4</sup> O. H. Steck, *Die Paradieserzählung. Eine Auslegung von Genesis 2,4b–3,24* (BST 60; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970); E. Otto, “Die Paradieserzählung Genesis 2–3: Eine nachpriesterschriftliche Lehrerzählung in ihrem religionshistorischen Kontext”, in A. A. Diesel et al. (eds.), “*Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit...*” *Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit: Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag* (BZAW 241; Berlin, 1996), pp. 167–192; Arneth, *Adams Fall*. For other views, see e.g. M. Witte, *Die biblische Urgeschichte. Redaktions- und theologiegeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Genesis 1,1–11,26* (BZAW 265; Berlin, 1998); Kübel, *Metamorphosen*.

sion “you shall die”? I leave aside the first issue for a moment; I will come back to it later (section D). As to the interpretation of Hebrew *Mwyb* in the verse, opinions differ. Some argue that the word “day” should not be taken in the strict sense of a (one) day,<sup>5</sup> but rather in a more global sense (a period of time). Mettinger is of the opinion that “on the day” should be taken in a rather loose sense.<sup>6</sup> He further notes that this expression is “not necessarily temporal”. “Here, and in some other instances as well, it carries more of a conditional sense” (p. 22). Hence his translation runs as follows: “for *if* you eat of it you shall certainly die” (p. 23). Regarding the phrase “you shall certainly die” he states that it is not to be understood in the light of death sentences occurring in the hophal, as other scholars do. On the contrary, the plot of the whole story, he argues, revolves around a test of the first two humans: Will they obey the divine commandment or not? When they fail the test, it is stated in 3:19 that they will die: man “must return to the dust”. Mettinger thus sees a close relationship between 2:17 and 3:19b (“In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground”, that is to say, till you die).

This interpretation reminds me of the way the narrative was read in Antiquity. The understanding of the passage in Early Judaism seems to have been that it was the disobedience of Adam and/or Eve that led to the state of man’s mortality. For instance, Ben Sira 25:24 reads: “In a woman was sin’s beginning: on her account we all die”.<sup>7</sup> There are also pertinent passages in the New Testament such as Romans 5:12, and 1 Tim. 2:13–14. The underlying idea is that man was created as an immortal being (cf. Enoch 69:11 [“created as the angels”]; Wisd. 2:23).

Another example of this interpretation is to be found in the version of Symmachus; his rendering of the final part of Gen. 2:17 reads: “on the day on which you will eat of the tree you will be mortal (θνητός)”.<sup>8</sup> The phrase “on the day that” is taken here in a temporal sense: from that day on you will be mortal. In this way Symmachus solved the problem that man did not die on the day that he ate of the tree of

<sup>5</sup> So e.g. J. Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1910), p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 305.

<sup>7</sup> On the allusions to Gen. 2–3 in the Wisdom of Ben Sira, see J. J. Collins, “Interpretations of the Creation of Humanity in the Dead Sea Scrolls”, in M. Henze (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran* (SDSSRL; Grand Rapids, 2005), pp. 31–34.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Salvesen, *Symmachus in the Pentateuch* (JSSM 15; Manchester, 1991), pp. 9–10.

knowledge. It is interesting to see how the author of Jubilees dealt with this issue. Jub. 4:30 comments on the high lifespan of Adam (930 years) as follows: “He lacked seventy years from one thousand years because one thousand years are one day in the testimony of heaven. For this reason it was written regarding the tree of knowledge: ‘On the day that you eat from it you will die’. Therefore he did not complete the years of this day because he died during it”.<sup>9</sup> This passage too reflects the idea that the clause “you shall die” was understood as referring to natural death, i.e. to man’s mortality.

A famous scholar of Antiquity, Philo of Alexandria, held a different view on the expression “you shall die”. “Wherever Moses speaks of ‘dying the death’, he means the penalty-death, not that which takes place in the course of nature” (*Leg. Alleg.* I 107). This observation is well taken because the Hebrew phrase *môt tāmût* is related to the well-known expression in the hophal as attested in the laws, *môt yûmât*. The difference is due to the fact that in Gen. 2:17 it is part of a direct speech in the sense of a verdict conveying the notion of death penalty. For a parallel see 1 Sam. 22:16: “And the king said, ‘You shall surely die (*môt tāmût*), Ahimelech, you and all your father’s house”’. And so it happens in the next verse. Hence the pertinent phrase in Gen. 2:17 is best understood as referring to a death sentence.

But what about the expression “on the day”? It conveys a temporal meaning, although it also carries a conditional notion because, if man obeys, the punishment will not be carried out. The idea that “on the day” should not be taken in the strict sense, but rather in a more global way (after some time), is not convincing. The story of Genesis itself contains clear evidence that it should be taken strictly. In Gen. 3:5 it is said by the serpent to the woman: “For God knows that *on the day* you eat of it your eyes will be opened...”. As is clear from what follows in vv. 6–7, as soon as they had eaten of the tree, their eyes were opened, that is to say, on the same day.

If taken this way, 2:17 warns us that the day man eats of the tree of knowledge he will receive the death penalty. In other words, man is threatened with instantaneous death as soon as he eats of the forbidden tree. This reading is confirmed by a passage in the book of Kings which provides a fitting parallel to our verse – 1 Kings 2:37, 42. These

<sup>9</sup> J. C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees Translated* (Leuven, 1989), p. 30. For this explanation, see also Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, 81.

verses are about King Solomon who said to Shimei that he should stay in Jerusalem, and should not leave this city. “For *on the day* that you go forth, and cross the brook Kidron, know for certain that you shall die (*môt tāmût*)” (v. 37). The same wording is also found in v. 42. As the story goes, Shimei did not obey the command of the king, and died the same day (v. 46).

In sum, I agree with those scholars who understand Gen. 2:17 as referring to the death penalty, in the sense of an instant punishment.<sup>10</sup> This raises, of course, the question of why the death penalty was not carried out in our story, but that is another matter.<sup>11</sup>

As noted above, Mettinger is of the opinion that the verse under discussion is related to 3:19b. This however is not plausible since, according to 3:19, man will die because he was made out of dust: at the end of his life he will “return to the ground, *for* out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. This passage is not referring to 2:17, but to the creation of man in 2:7 (cf. “taken out of the ground” and “dust”).<sup>12</sup> Thus, man was created as a mortal being. Gen. 3:19b does not refer to the death penalty in 2:17, but is about natural death, which is not seen as purismen,<sup>13</sup> but which is due to the fact that “man is taken from the ground”.

### B. *The Garden of Eden*

I now want to discuss a major element of the Paradise narrative – the garden of Eden. In Gen. 2:8–9 we read:

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; and the tree of life was in the midst of the garden as well as the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The garden is depicted as a place full of wonderful trees, a wonderful place to be, all the more so since one may freely eat of (nearly)

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Skinner, *Genesis*, pp. 67, 95; Barr, *Garden of Eden*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> For comments on this issue, see e.g. Skinner, *Genesis*, p. 67; Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 377; O. Procksch, *Die Genesis übersetzt und erklärt*. 2. und 3. Aufl. (KAT; Leipzig/Erlangen, 1924), p. 37; P. A. Bird, “Genesis 3 in der gegenwärtigen biblischen Forschung”, *JBTh* 9 (1994), p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Arneth, *Adams Fall*, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Barr, *Garden of Eden*, p. 9. For another view, see Arneth, *Adams Fall*, p. 103.

every tree (2:16f.). The text of verses 8–9 raises the following questions: What kind of garden does it refer to? Where is the garden of Eden located? And since the text has it that God planted a garden “in” Eden, the relationship between “the garden” and “Eden” is to be discussed as well.

In his book *Echoes of Eden*, Stordalen offers an extensive discussion of the issue of the “Eden Garden” (as he calls it).<sup>14</sup> He distinguishes three types of gardens: royal gardens, cultic gardens, and gardens in mythic stories. The first type is well known from Neo-Assyrian sources: kings like Assurnasirpal II, Sargon, and Sennacherib planted royal parks which are best understood as symbolizing their royal power. The second type includes gardens as cultic sites as attested in Mesopotamian sources. As to the third type, Stordalen points to gardens such as the Cedar Forest (or Forest Garden) and the Jewel Garden in the Gilgamesh Epic – two gardens which “were located at the borders between the divine and the human world” (p. 285). He reaches the conclusion that the third type provides the most likely backdrop to the Eden Garden in Gen. 2–3.

A crucial issue at stake here is the identification of the four rivers in Gen. 2:10–14. According to Stordalen, the four rivers are best understood as four cosmic rivers. Pishon is identified by him as the Red Sea and the Arabian Ocean. “Pishon would then extend water from the cosmic ocean at the rim of the earth. A similar apprehension would be presumed for the Nile (his identification of the Gihon, vdK), Tigris and Euphrates” (p. 285). What does this mean for the location of the Eden Garden? In the light of the Babylonian world map which depicts the way the world was perceived at that time, Stordalen answers this question as follows: “Eden is a land outside the terrestrial disc” – as depicted on the Babylonian world map – “The river emerging in Eden first waters the garden, then forms the cosmic ocean round the earth, and subsequently forms four rivers extending blessing from the corners of the earth to its central region. This places the Eden Garden outside the regular world, probably at the far shore of the cosmic ocean” (p. 299; cf. p. 474). He then continues by saying that this “coincides with mythic literature presenting gardens as cosmic border areas between the human and the divine world” (p. 299), and here he refers,

<sup>14</sup> Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, pp. 94–104, 111–116.

among other things, to the two gardens mentioned above – the Forest Garden and the Jewel Garden in the Gilgamesh Epic.

Stordalen's work provides an important and stimulating contribution to the topic. I like his idea that the Eden Garden is a place outside the terrestrial disc (see below), but his theory raises further questions. First, the two gardens in the Gilgamesh Epic, the Forest Garden and the Jewel Garden, do not fit the picture provided in Gen. 2. Both gardens differ from the one in Gen. 2 because they are not places with trees "pleasant to the sight and good for food". One could argue that the Jewel Garden was a place "pleasant to the sight" because of the jewels involved, but certainly not a place with trees good for food. Second, the location of both gardens in Gilgamesh does not concur with the place proposed by Stordalen for the Eden Garden because they are not located at the other side of the ocean surrounding the earth. And thirdly, one wonders whether his identification of the four rivers is plausible.

Consequently, as to the question which type of garden in ancient Near Eastern sources suits best as a parallel, we are left with the temple garden, and the royal park. Recently, Dietrich has argued that the garden of Gen. 2–3 should be seen in the light of the temple garden as known from Babylonian sources.<sup>15</sup> Although this view makes sense in some respect, the difficulty is that it is based on the assumption that man was created *in* the garden (p. 294). According to the story of Gen. 2, however, man was created outside the garden as is clear from vv. 8, 15: he was put in the garden after he was created (on this aspect, see further below). In my view, the so called royal garden provides the most appropriate parallel. Assyrian kings like Sargon II and Sennacherib planted wonderful parks outside their capital cities, Dur Sharruken and Nineveh respectively. These were places full of all kinds of trees. The park of Sargon II is described thus:

Einen Park, eine genaue Nachbildung des Amanus-Gebirges, in dem alle aromatische Bäume des Hatti-Landes (und) sämtliche Obstbaumsorten des Gebirges angepflanzt sind, legte ich um sie (i.e. the new city) herum an (Bull Inscription).<sup>16</sup>

According to one of the letters from the correspondence of Sargon II, the people of Suhu were collecting saplings of almond, quince and

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich, "Paradies", pp. 293–301.

<sup>16</sup> A. Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad* (Göttingen, 1994), p. 304.

plum trees and were transporting them to Dur-Sharruken. In another letter we read that cedar and cypress saplings should be pulled and brought, as commanded by the king.<sup>17</sup> Regarding its symbolism Stordalen points out that “[t]he ideology of Assyrian royal gardens stands firmly within general Assyrian royal ideology” (p. 98).<sup>18</sup>

Seen from this perspective it can be said that in Gen. 2–3 God is the king who planted his royal garden.<sup>19</sup> It is only natural then to read in Gen. 3:8, that God was walking in his garden, in the cool of the day. The garden in Eden is a royal park. It is interesting to note that the LXX rendering, *paradeisos* for Hebrew *gan*, is in line with this idea because the Greek word actually means a park, including among other things, the gardens of oriental kings.<sup>20</sup>

However, Stordalen would object that this idea is not convincing since the concept of royal garden does not have a “mythical significance” as he considers is the case in the story of Gen. 2–3, seen by him rightly as a myth.<sup>21</sup> This is the main reason why he prefers to look for gardens in mythic stories as parallels. Here we touch on an important issue. In line with what is generally taken for granted, Stordalen adheres to the view that the garden of Eden, though consisting of two elements – “garden” and “Eden” – represents one motif, the result being that one has to look for parallels for the “Eden Garden”. For myself, I doubt whether this assumption is right. This leads to the following question: What about Eden?

According to Gen. 2:8, “The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east”. The garden is located “in” Eden, and that is why it is called the garden “of” Eden in the rest of the narrative.<sup>22</sup> As the text of 2:8 differentiates between the garden and Eden the question arises, Where and what is Eden? Eden is located “in the east”,<sup>23</sup> and the name carries the notion of delight and happiness.<sup>24</sup> In Gen. 2:10 it is said that

<sup>17</sup> For both letters, see S. Parpola, *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part I: Letters from Assyria and the West* (SAA 1; Helsinki, 1987), pp. 176–178.

<sup>18</sup> On the issue of symbolism, see also M. Novák, *Herrschaftsform und Stadtbaukunst* (Saarbrücken, 1999), pp. 347–349.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Eccl. 2:5 where Solomon the king is supposed have said, “I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees”.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Eccl. 2:5 (*pardēs // gan*). See *RIA*, X, pp. 332–33.

<sup>21</sup> Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 286.

<sup>23</sup> Contra Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, pp. 268–270, who opts for a reading of *miqqedem* in the temporal sense.

<sup>24</sup> See Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, p. 257.

“a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden”, which means that Eden is seen as a source of water for the garden, that is to say, sweet water.

It is an old question where Eden might have been located as a garden. The story of Genesis contains a clue which, as far as I know, has been overlooked by most scholars.<sup>25</sup> I have in mind the terminology used in 2:8 and in 2:15:

“and there he put the man whom he had formed” (v. 8);  
 “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden (to till it and to keep it)” (v. 15).

Man was created outside the garden of Eden and later on the beasts as well as the woman were created in the garden. This raises the question how he got to the garden. The answer is that God “took” him, and “put” him there. This seems to imply that the place where the garden is located (Eden) is an area which is not accessible to man. Interestingly, we touch here upon a concept that is also found in Mesopotamian literature.

As is well known, the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic (Standard Version) offers the story of the flood as told by Utnapishtim to Gilgamesh. At the end of this moving tale Utnapishtim reveals to Gilgamesh how he and his wife became immortal beings (XI, 198–205). It reads thus:

Ellil came up into the boat,  
 And seized my hand and led me up.  
 He led up my woman and made her kneel down at my side.  
 He touched our foreheads, stood between us, blessed us:  
 “Until now Ut-napishtim was mortal,  
 But henceforth Ut-napishtim and his woman shall  
 be as we gods are.  
 Ut-napishtim shall dwell far off at the mouth of the rivers”.  
 They took me and made me dwell far off, at the mouth of the rivers.<sup>26</sup>

So the gods took Utnapishtim and his wife and put them in a place far off, designated as “the mouth of the rivers”. As is clear from the rest of the epic, this is a place at the other side of the ocean; a place where

<sup>25</sup> But see Schüle, “Image of God”, pp. 12–13, who regards this element as belonging to a set of allusions to the making of a divine image in Mesopotamia according to the *mis pi* ritual.

<sup>26</sup> Translation according to S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia. Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and others* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 115–116.

man cannot come, although an exception is made for Gilgamesh. It is the place where Utnapishtim and his wife live their eternal lives, as immortals. According to the Babylonian world map this place is one of the isles at the other side of the bitter sea, called “oceanos” by the Greeks, surrounding the terrestrial disc.

Which isle might be meant here? In the Sumerian flood story we are told that king Ziusudra, the hero of this story, also became immortal: “(Who) gave him life, like a god, Elevated him to eternal life, like a god”. In line 206 it reads, “They (the gods) settled (him, Ziusudra) in an overseas country, in the orient, in Dilmun”.<sup>27</sup>

It seems plausible that the location referred to in Gilg XI is the same as mentioned in the Sumerian text – Dilmun.<sup>28</sup> On that isle, far away, in the orient, the gods settled the hero of the flood, as someone with eternal life.<sup>29</sup>

As may be clear, these Mesopotamian texts shed light on the terminology employed in Gen. 2:8,15. This applies not only to the verbs “to take” and “to put”, but also to the phrase “in the east”. It strongly suggests that Eden is a location like Dilmun, or even is Dilmun. Furthermore, the fact that the Mesopotamian texts speak of this as a place of eternal life is helpful in understanding another feature of the story in Gen. 2–3 – the presence of the tree of life, i.e., of life in the sense of immortality (on this tree, see further below).

Notably, the passage in Gilg XI contains yet another element which seems to provide a further clue for a better understanding of the narrative in Genesis, namely, the expression “the mouth of the rivers”. It reminds me of the picture evoked in Gen. 2:10 where one reads about “the river” flowing out of Eden, a river from which “the four rivers” originate. Before dealing with this possible link between Mesopotamia and Genesis, a few remarks on the identification of the four rivers mentioned in Gen. 2:11–14 are in order.

<sup>27</sup> M. Civil, “The Sumerian Flood Story”, in W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis. The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford, 1969), p. 145.

<sup>28</sup> See A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*. Vol. 2 (Oxford, 2003), p. 520.

<sup>29</sup> For parallels in Greek literature, see Homer, *Od.* 4.561–569 (“the Elysian plain”), and Hesiod, *Works and Days* 167–173 (“the isles of the blessed”). Cf. M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 166–167. This concept is also attested in Early Jewish sources; see 1 Enoch 32:2–3, and Josephus, *War* II,156 (“an abode beyond the ocean”).

The number four is usually taken as symbolizing the four corners of the earth, and hence the four rivers are often regarded as encompassing the earth. As we have seen, Stordalen thinks these are cosmic rivers. Mettinger holds the same opinion because as he puts it, we do not have “a real-geography world here” (p. 16). The idea that the four rivers symbolize the four corners of the earth makes good sense, but this does not necessarily imply that they are to be seen as rivers encompassing the earth, as cosmic rivers. To give an illustration of this point of view: In Gen. 10:10–12 we read about four cities, in Babylonia, and in Assyria, respectively. Also in this case the number four is symbolic, referring to the four corners of the earth, but the cities involved are not at the rim of the terrestrial disc. On the contrary, they are cities in Mesopotamia. The same may well apply to the four rivers in Gen. 2. Two rivers are well known – the Tigris and the Euphrates. But what about the Gihon and the Pishon? According to an ancient tradition, the Gihon is often equated with the Nile, and the Pishon with the Ganges.<sup>30</sup> Recently, however, Dietrich has argued, on good grounds, that these two rivers are to be taken as the Ulay (Greek: Eulaios; now Karcheh) and the Uqnu (now Karun).<sup>31</sup> If so, the text of Gen. 2:10–14 refers to four rivers mentioned in an order ranging from east to west, ending up with the Euphrates as the westernmost one.

Be that as it may, the picture of a river flowing out of Eden, in Gen. 2:10, may well go back to the expression “the mouth of the rivers” in Gilg XI because the latter designates, just as in Gen. 2, a special place, a place where man is “put” by the gods. It has been suggested by scholars that the phrase in Gilg XI refers to the mouth of the Apsu, the source of sweet water.<sup>32</sup> According to the myth of Enki and Ninhursag, Dilmun is depicted as a place where the sweet waters are flowing out

<sup>30</sup> So e.g. Josephus, *Antiquities* I,38–39.

<sup>31</sup> Dietrich, “Paradies”, pp. 308–314. So already G. Hölscher, *Drei Erdkarten. Ein Beitrag zur Erdkenntnis des Hebräischen Altertums* (Heidelberg, 1949), p. 39. For the river Ulay, see also Dan. 8:2,16. As pointed out by Dietrich (“Paradies”, p. 314), the name Cush in Gen. 2:13 refers to the area called Kassu which in Neo-Assyrian times is the name of the mountainous region north of Susiana. For Gihon in connection with Cush – Cassites, see also E. Noort, “Gan-Eden in the Hebrew Bible”, in G. P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), *Paradise interpreted. Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity* (Themes in Biblical Narrative, 2; Leiden, 1999), p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> See George, *Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 520. On this phrase, see also W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, 1998), pp. 104–105.

of the ground.<sup>33</sup> This is in line with the idea in Gen. 2:10 that the river flowed out “to water the garden”.

To summarize this section on the Garden of Eden: the expression “the garden of Eden” turns out to represent a combination of two different elements known from Mesopotamia: a royal park, on the one hand, and a location outside the terrestrial disc (Dilmun), on the other. Interestingly, the passage in Gilg XI quoted above sheds light on three components of the narrative in Gen. 2–3: first, the use of the verbs “to take” and “to put”, related to a location far away; second, the motif of eternal life, and thirdly, the picture of a river flowing out of that special location.<sup>34</sup> However, the idea of a royal park planted in a location as Eden is not attested in Mesopotamian sources. This feature of the story of paradise is due, in my view, to the literary creativity of its author. The same may apply to the idea of the four rivers as being related to a river flowing out of Eden in Gen. 2:10, although the link between the one river and the four rivers might have been evoked by the phrase “the mouth of the *rivers*”.

### C. *The Frame of the Narrative*

#### *Gen. 2:4b–7*

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens,

- (5) when no shrub of the field was yet in the earth  
and the plants (greens, cereals) of the field had not yet sprung up –  
for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth  
and there was no man to till the ground;
- (6) but a flood went up from the earth and watered the whole face of  
the ground
- (7) then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground,  
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;  
and man became a living being.

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden...

(Gen. 2:8–3:22)

#### *Genesis 3:23*

therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden,  
to till the ground from which he was taken.

<sup>33</sup> Enki and Ninhursag, 56 (cf. *ANET*, p. 38).

<sup>34</sup> According to the Gilgamesh Epic, Gilgamesh was “clad only in a lionskin” (see X. 6) on his journey at the rim of the earth, trying to find his way to the place where Utnapishtim and his wife are living. This element may shed light on Gen. 3:21 (God made for the man and his wife garments of skin).

Both passages, 2:4b–7 and 3:23(–24), can be seen as the beginning and ending of the story because they are clearly related to each other by way of an inclusio.<sup>35</sup> In 2:5 we are told that, although earth and heaven had been made, it was not yet raining on earth and man was not yet there “to till the ground”. The same expression, “to till the ground”, also occurs in 3:23: “to till the ground from which he was taken”. The latter part, “from which he was taken”, refers back to 2:7. Man is not only “taken from the ground” / “formed of dust from the ground” (2:7), but “the ground” is also basic to his destination. According to the story of Gen. 2–3 man was created in order “to till the ground”.

The text of 2:5–6 refers a situation which is marked by the idea of “not yet”. No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, because God had not (yet) caused it to rain. No plants (greens, cereals) of the field had yet sprung up, because there was no man to till the ground. According to v. 6 a flood watered the surface of “the ground” making it a fertile area. Then the story goes on to tell that God formed man of dust from the ground and made him a living being. So everything seems in place now: man is there in order to till the (fertile) ground so that plants might grow. However, and this comes as a surprise, one has to wait until the end of the story before man is going to actually till the ground. Before that situation is reached, one which according to 2:5 is considered to be normal reality of life, it is said that God planted a garden in Eden and that he put man in that garden. As argued above, man is brought to a location far away, somewhere outside the terrestrial disc.

What does all this imply? It implies that man does not belong in the garden of Eden. He is put there for one reason or another, but as is clear from the outset (2:5) he cannot stay on there; he has to leave the garden, at a certain moment, in order to fulfil his real duty, namely, to till the ground. This raises of course the question of how to understand the last part of 2:15 where we read that man was put in the garden “to till it and to keep it”. Usually, this phrase is taken as being in line with the expression about tilling the ground, but I do not think this is right.<sup>36</sup> Verse 15 contains a motif – that of the gardener of a royal

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Van Wolde, *Semiotic Analysis*, p. 84.

<sup>36</sup> The feminine suffix in both infinitives of v. 15b does not refer to the Hebrew *gan* (which is masc.), but presumably to the “ground” of the garden (v. 9). For other suggestions, see D. Carr, “The Politics of Textual Subversion: A Diachronic Perspective on the Garden of Eden Story”, *JBL* 112 (1993), p. 578.

park (cf. the verb “keep”) – which is different from the notion of tilling the ground by a farmer. Here again we touch on an element which we know from Mesopotamia: the idea of the king as gardener, which fits the image of the garden as a royal park.<sup>37</sup>

In short, the whole section on the garden of Eden turns out to be an intermezzo, an interlude one might say. To be more precise, being marked by the idea of “not yet” it is a prelude, a pre-history. This raises the question of why this prelude is part of the story. Why was a garden planted in Eden, and why was man put there?

#### D. *The Two Trees*

Among the many wonderful trees in the park of Eden two trees are mentioned in particular: “and the tree of life was in the midst of the garden as well as the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (2:9b). The latter one, the tree of knowledge, has a crucial role to play in the story: It is the tree of which it is said that man should not eat otherwise he would be sentenced to death. However, at the end of the story the *two* trees do show up again, in Gen. 3:22–23:

Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever”. Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

I will not deal with the issue of the one-tree hypothesis in an earlier version of the story. As has been argued by a growing number of scholars, the story as it stands, including the two trees, makes perfect sense.<sup>38</sup>

In the passage just quoted (3:22), both trees are related to each other: having eaten of the tree of knowledge man should not eat of the tree of life as well. In his recent study, Mettinger offers a new view on the relationship between the two trees. In line with his idea that the story

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, pp. 97–98. See also M. Hutter, “Adam als Gärtner und König (Gen. 2,8.15)”, *BZ* 30 (1986), pp. 258–262. For examples of the theme of the gardener who becomes king, see R. Drews, “Sargon, Cyrus and Mesopotamian Folk History”, *JNES* 33 (1974), pp. 387–393.

<sup>38</sup> See the literature referred to in n. 4. As to the issue of the two trees, see also e.g. Mettinger, *Eden Narrative*, pp. 5–10; J. Krispenz, “Wie viele Bäume braucht das Paradies? Erwägungen zu Gen. ii 4b–iii 24”, *VT* 54 (2004), pp. 301–318; Kübel, *Metamorphosen* (passim).

of paradise is to be seen as presenting a divine test, he argues that the trees have different functions in this test: “the tree of knowledge served as the test case; the tree of life was the potential reward if the humans passed the test” (p. 60). I think the idea of a divine test is well taken. I will come back to it below.

The two trees each symbolize a particular motif. The tree of life is the tree by which one can attain everlasting life (3:22), that is to say, eternal life in the sense of immortality. The issue of immortality is part of the story.<sup>39</sup> As argued above, this motif fits Eden as a location in the east because, according to Mesopotamian traditions, this is a place where humans live an eternal life (i.e. Utnapishtim, and his wife; Ziusudra).

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil has raised a lot of discussion about what kind of knowledge is implied here. The main possibilities are: 1. the acquisition of human qualities; 2. sexual consciousness; 3. ethical knowledge; 4. universal knowledge.<sup>40</sup> The last one seems to be widely accepted nowadays. I agree with Mettinger that this interpretation is the most plausible one. Good and evil, or even better, good and *bad*, are best understood as referring to a totality. Hence, the phrase encompasses knowledge and wisdom.

The wisdom as presented in our story does not seem to be ordinary wisdom, but rather divine wisdom because in 3:5 and 3:22 this knowledge is presented as wisdom like that of the gods. According to the serpent, who is depicted as an animal possessing great wisdom, if man eats of the tree of knowledge he will be “like the gods”. Notably, the serpent got it right because at the end of the story God says, “Behold, man has become like one of us”.<sup>41</sup>

There is reason to believe that the knowledge and wisdom in the Paradise narrative has to do with kingship. In his dissertation Vriezen drew attention to 2 Sam. 14:17, 20 where David as king is depicted

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Barr, *Garden of Eden*, p. 4. The view that the Tree of Life symbolizes rejuvenation (see Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, p. 292; Kübel, *Metamorphosen*, pp. 112–114) is not plausible since it is hardly in line with Gen. 3:22.

<sup>40</sup> See Mettinger, *Eden Narrative*, pp. 62–63 (with bibl.). He does not refer to magical knowledge as an explanation for the phrase; for (criticism of) this interpretation see e.g. Skinner, *Genesis*, p. 96.

<sup>41</sup> On this issue, see R. W. L. Moberly, “Did the serpent get it right?”, *JTS N.S.* 39 (1988), pp. 1–27.

as having wisdom like the angel of the Lord.<sup>42</sup> In v. 17 the woman of Tekoa says, “for my lord the king is like the angel of the Lord to discern good and evil”. In v. 20 she puts it this way, “But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth”.

The wisdom of David as king, which has to do with discerning good and evil and which is characterized as knowing all things, is said to be a wisdom like that of the angel of the Lord. This concept is very similar to the motif of divine wisdom in our story. The link between kingship and divine wisdom is also attested in Mesopotamian sources. The myth of Adapa is important in this regard. One of the first lines of this text, often cited in relation to the Genesis story, reads thus:

To him he (Ea) had given wisdom,  
eternal life he had not given him.

This passage is interesting because it is about the two motifs which are also found in our story – wisdom (cf. the tree of knowledge), and eternal life (cf. the tree of life).<sup>43</sup> The (divine) wisdom of Adapa was proverbial as is clear from Mesopotamian sources.<sup>44</sup> Kings of Mesopotamia were eager to compare themselves with Adapa, the wise. So, for instance, Sargon II:

Der König, offenen Sinnes (eig. offenen Ohres), befähigt zu jeglichem Beruf, (darin) dem Weisen (i.e. Adapa, vdK) gleich; der in Rat und Weisheit Grosse erreichte und an Einsicht hoch hinauswuchs.<sup>45</sup>

All this is not to meant to deny that man in Gen. 2–3 is humankind in general. The words spoken by God to the woman and to the man in Gen. 3:15–19 are about daily life. At the same time, however, the aspect of divine knowledge seems best understood against the backdrop of kingship and royal ideology.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> T. C. Vriezen, *Onderzoek naar de paradijsvoorstelling bij de oude Semietische volken* (Wageningen, 1937). See also H. Pfeiffer, “Der Baum in der Mitte des Gartens. Zum überlieferungsgeschichtlichen Ursprung der Paradieserzählung (Gen. 2,4b–3,24). Teil II: Prägende Traditionen und theologische Akzente”, *ZAW* 113 (2001), p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Mettinger, *Eden Narrative*, p. 108.

<sup>44</sup> See A. Piccioni, *Il poemetto di Adapa* (Budapest, 1981), pp. 82–101.

<sup>45</sup> See Fuchs, *Inschriften*, p. 292.

<sup>46</sup> The serpent as presented in Gen. 3 evokes also the idea of kingship (great wisdom). For the serpent symbolizing a king, see Isa. 14:29!

## III

In the final section, I would like to make the following summarizing statements and concluding remarks.

1. In the light of Mesopotamian culture and literature, the expression “the garden in/of Eden” represents a combination of two distinct elements – the garden as a royal park, and Eden as the place far off, overseas, in the orient, Dilmun, where immortal humans were supposed to live.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the story of paradise betrays a great familiarity with motifs known from the Gilgamesh Epic: the idea of taking someone and putting him at a special place, the motif of eternal life as related to that place, and the picture of a river flowing out of Eden (cf. “the mouth of the rivers”).
2. The story about the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8–3:22) turns out to be a particular episode in the narrative as a whole. Man was created to till the ground, but before he did so God planted a garden in Eden and put man there. The garden episode is presented as an interlude, or even better, as a prelude, or pre-history, in line with the notion of “not yet” in 2:5.
3. As to the two special trees in the garden: in the light of Mesopotamian traditions the tree of life fits Eden as place of immortality, whilst the tree of knowledge, symbolizing divine and royal wisdom, is best understood as being related to the idea of the garden as a royal park. Both trees visualize two motifs that are also found in the myth of Adapa – wisdom and immortality. The fact that our story presents these motifs as “trees” is due to the concept of the royal park being a place full of trees.
4. The issue of immortality is part of the story. According to Mesopotamian belief, the gods, when creating humankind, established for humankind death, and for themselves, life.<sup>48</sup> The idea that man was created as a mortal being is also basic to Gen. 2–3, since he was

<sup>47</sup> Hence, the garden-Eden symbolism of Gen. 2–3 is different from that of Ezek. 28 and other places in the Hebrew Bible (for a detailed discussion of the passages involved, see Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, pp. 321–454). The garden of Eden as depicted in Gen. 2 is not related to the idea of the garden as a sacred mountain as in Ezek. 28. Ezek. 28 reflects mythic traditions of West Semitic origins (cf. Ugaritic literature), whereas Gen. 2–3 is better understood in light of the literature and culture of Mesopotamia.

<sup>48</sup> See Mettinger, *Eden Narrative*, p. 110.

formed out of the “dust of the ground”. The difference between Mesopotamian myths and Gen. 2–3 is that in the latter the decision that man must remain mortal, was made for a particular reason – namely, because man had acquired divine wisdom.

5. The tree of knowledge of good and evil plays a crucial role in the story of paradise. It was forbidden to eat of this tree, under penalty of death. However, for one reason or another, this penalty was not implemented when the woman and man ate of the tree. The knowledge of good and evil is quite special: it is divine wisdom, and it has to do with the great wisdom of kings, wisdom like that of Adapa (as in Mesopotamian sources). The underlying interest of the story concerns the wisdom and power of kingship. However, in contrast to 2 Sam. 14 and the Mesopotamian sources, in Gen. 2–3 this knowledge is presented and viewed as being bad and dangerous; otherwise, it would not have been forbidden.
6. One wonders why the story of the garden in Eden was created as the main element of the narrative as a whole. According to Mettinger, this story is about a divine test of obedience to the commandment; its theme is the issue of disobedience and its consequences, which “should be seen as being inspired by Deuteronomistic theology” (p. 64).<sup>49</sup> I like his idea of viewing the story of the garden as a test, but, as argued above, I do not think his interpretation that “obedience to the commandment leads to life (i.e. eternal life), disobedience to death” (p. 64), is convincing. Instead, I would suggest that our story is better understood as a test like the one found in 2 Chron. 32:31. There we read, about king Hezekiah:

And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.

In the light of this passage, it can be stated that the garden episode is meant to provide a particular insight into human nature, – to know what is in the heart of man – by way of an event of pre-history, before real history starts. Quite similar to what is told in Chronicles, the test of Gen. 2–3 is arranged, and fully so, by God.

<sup>49</sup> For the idea of a “test”, see also Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, p. 248. The assumption that Deuteronomistic thinking is implied here is shared by Arneft (*Adams Fall*, p. 147).

7. This raises, finally, the question of what turned out to be in the heart of man. As noted above, the knowledge of good and evil is viewed negatively, quite differently from 2 Sam. 14 as well as from the references to the divine wisdom of kings in Mesopotamian sources. One is led to ask why? The story of Gen. 2–3 is made up by using major motifs and concepts going back to Mesopotamian culture and literature. At the same time, however, the story as it stands, marked by a combination of a royal park and Eden as a special place, reflects a critical stance towards the royal ideology of Mesopotamian kings, particularly the Assyrian ones.<sup>50</sup> There is a passage in the Hebrew Bible which may help us to answer the question of what is in the heart of man – Isa. 10:13–14. This passage, which may also provide a historical background to the story of paradise, is part of the taunt of the king of Assyria (Isa. 10:5–15), a prophecy dating to the end of the eighth century B.C. The crucial point is that this passage contains a negative view of the wisdom of (Assyrian) kingship:

For he – the king of Assyria – says, “By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples; and as men gather eggs that have been forsaken so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped”.

### *Epilogue*

Dear John, I want to congratulate you most heartily on your eightieth birthday. I wish you all the best, good health, and many happy returns now and in the future, together with your wife, Norma, and many others. Your age reminds me of a great man in the Old Testament – Barzillai, friend of king David (2 Sam. 19). When David returned to Jerusalem, Barzillai the Gileadite “went with the king to the Jordan, to escort him over the Jordan”. David then invited him to become a member of the court, in Jerusalem, but Barzillai declined, by saying, “I am this day eighty years old. Can I know good from evil? Can your

<sup>50</sup> This also applies, in my view, to the story of Gen. 11:1–9; see A. van der Kooij, “The City of Babel and Assyrian Imperialism: Genesis 11:1–9 Interpreted in the Light of Mesopotamian Sources”, in A. Lemaire (ed.), *Congress Volume Leiden 2004* (VTSup 109; Leiden, 2006), pp. 1–17.

servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women?” (2 Sam. 19:35).

John, you too are a great man and scholar, as well as a very kind and helpful person. Like Barzillai, you are this day eighty years old. It is my sincere wish that you, unlike what Barzillai was saying, will still be able, in many years to come, to provide us with your wisdom in our field of research and beyond, to taste what you eat and drink at the high tables in Cambridge and elsewhere, to listen to singing men and women in the courts and colleges of this lovely city, and to walk in the paradisiacal gardens of St. John's.