

Reading ‘places’ in Genesis 1–11

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The debate about Genesis's genre is influenced by the perceived historicity of Eden in Genesis 2. A method for examining the genre of the early chapters of Genesis is to identify the relative frequency of deixis indicators, in particular the author's use of places. The distribution and type of place references suggests that the author intended an historical genre for Genesis 1–11, but that there is a discontinuity between old and new worlds as a result of the Flood. The use of place names associated with Eden is thought to be for etiological purposes.

Given the dispute over the genre of Genesis 1–11, this paper first overviews the dispute historically, focuses on the role that the description of Eden has played in the dispute, assesses a representative evangelical scholar's indeterminacy, and then offers a potential solution based on the deixis of place names which supports the historicity of Genesis 1–11.¹

The usual considerations in this debate are the relationship between Genesis and historical events, and the relationship between Genesis and other Ancient Near Eastern texts. Classical readings such as Augustine and Origen have tended towards reading Genesis as an allegory but usually based on an underlying presupposition that the authorial intention was to write historically first of all.² Thomas Aquinas, for example,

“... insisted on the primacy of the literal and held that it was sufficient for doing theology. He affirmed a literal garden of Eden ... declaring that ‘the things which are said of Paradise in scripture are set forth by means of an historical narrative. Now in everything which scripture thus sets forth, the truth (of the story) must be taken as a foundation and upon it spiritual expositions are to be built.’”³

There is a well-worn debate over the extent of linguistic and structural dependency between Genesis 1 and the other ANE cosmological texts.⁴ The debate centres over whether we should view Genesis 1 as a polemic against other cosmologies of the sort found in Mesopotamia.⁵ The argument turns on the relationship of certain key words such as *tehom* and *tohu vabohu* being connected in some way to mythological conflict. *Tehom*, the deep, is read as a demythologized water goddess, Tiamat in *Enuma Elish*, and *tohu vabohu*, which the NIV translates as ‘formless and empty’, is understood as some kind of malevolent chaotic force that God has to overcome in order to create the universe. For many readers of Genesis, then, these words are codes for a conflict that has been deliberately removed or suppressed by the author in order to turn Genesis 1 into a polemic against the equivalent ANE worldview which still has a cosmic battle at the heart of their creation narrative.

I have followed David Tsumura's arguments against such linguistic dependency and argued that to read conflict into Genesis 1 (or even to believe that it has been removed from the text) is to read against the grain.⁶ Kenneth Matthews' *Genesis* commentary takes a similarly nuanced approach to the idea of polemic as a description of the genre of Genesis. Rather than seeing the texts as a historicization of myth for polemic reasons, he thinks it “doubtful that the biblical writer intentionally set out to attack pagan notions, as the word ‘polemic’ has come to mean.”⁷ Instead, the text of Genesis 1 should be read as a calm series of highly structured, if somewhat enigmatic, statements.

If we extend our discussion to the first 11 chapters of Genesis, we note that many accept some correspondence between the biblical record and history and consider it to be part of the authorial intention, whilst others deny this as a possible category at all. Walter Brueggemann, for instance, writes, “[o]ur exposition will insist that these texts be taken neither as history nor as myth.”⁸ A similar view is taken by George Knight in his commentary on Genesis 1–11. He sees the genre as being picture language, a genre that the author both invented and perfected in these chapters. “Thus in the Genesis Prologue he uses a distinctly different *Gattung* from that which he employs from Genesis 12 onwards.”⁹ Bernhard Anderson also believes the genre of Genesis changes after Genesis 11.

“Passing from Genesis 11 to Genesis 12, we leave the nebulous realm of primeval history and enter the historical arena of the second millennium BCE ... [N]one of the episodes of the primeval history is anchored to anything with which a modern historian could deal.”¹⁰

However, the historical sceptic Hans Barstad makes the point that this distinction is a modern category, one that would not have been recognized by the initial readers of Genesis. He writes: “To the biblical authors there was no difference between the ‘historicity’ of, for instance, the Primeval Story and that of other stories in the Hebrew Bible.”¹¹

Genesis 2 as example

A prime example of the complexity and confusion of the position of some on the question of the genre of these chapters in Genesis can be seen from Bruce Waltke's various comments on the rivers of Eden in Genesis 2. In a brief introduction, Waltke believes that "the author of Genesis represents himself as a historian, not as a prophet who receives visions of events",¹² and thinks that the creation account has "historical solidity... [but] is not merely a historical account".¹³

When thinking about the references to the four headwaters, he writes that the "geographic depictions express the historical basis of the account".¹⁴ He sees the details in 2:10–14 as part of the material that validate the "coherent chronological succession of events" by "locating his story in time and space".¹⁵ Yet when talking about the source of these rivers in Eden he refers to it as the "heavenly river" that is "symbolic of the springs of living water, the life that issues from the throne of the living God".¹⁶

Waltke is pulled in two directions by the text; its 'other-worldly' content in the narrative evokes symbolism, yet its very 'this-worldly' features (place names) implies historicity. Waltke notes the geographical problems associated with the names of the four headwaters. "Havilah is in Arabia, so Pishon should be identified with Arabia, possibly the Persian Gulf. According to Gen. 10:8, Cush should be in western Iran. Is Gihon one of the rivers or canals of Mesopotamia?"¹⁴ An earlier illustration of the same confusion comes from George Knight:

"Although we are speaking in symbols, these rivers are meant to be geographically definable within the known world of ancient near-eastern man. The Tigris and the Euphrates we know. What Pishon and Gihon represent bring us only to guesswork So what we now have are two historical rivers, and two symbolic rivers, as if to show us that we are to think in terms of the two areas of theological enquiry at once."¹⁷

In the last century, Dr E.A. Speiser, the Chairman of the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, argued that the physical background of the account of the rivers in Genesis 2 was authentic, and

should be taken seriously, and he made attempts to identify the Pishon and Gihon with rivers currently in the Persian Gulf.¹⁸ In an article in 1959 he wrote:

"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 2:8ff., in any case, and to his ultimate source or sources, the Garden of Eden was obviously a reality."¹⁹

Rather like the search for Atlantis, many have tried to locate Eden's rivers in the hope of finding the divine garden. Marco Polo attempted to find it somewhere in the Mongolian borders. The Jerusalem Targum suggests it might be in India.²⁰ Some today think it lies near or beneath the waters of the Persian Gulf.²¹

Is the hunt for the location of Eden based on Genesis 2 reasonable today, and if not, then why not? Most agree that despite the familiar sounding names of Hiddeqel/Tigris, Ashur, Cush and Euphrates, we simply cannot identify Cush with Ethiopia or Nubia,²² nor Ashur with Assyria.²³

Claus Westermann concludes that "we cannot then identify the first two rivers with any rivers known to us."²² If that is so, and if we cannot associate the lands with their modern namesakes, then we cannot hope to identify the location of Eden. It is just not useful geographical data, and the usual response to this conclusion would be to attribute the narratives of Genesis 1–11 to myth or symbolism.

Cassuto's solution

However, the solution that Umberto Cassuto has put forward might help us to understand the tension between the historical and geographical details within the text and the lack of historical and geographical correspondence on the ground today.²⁴ Cassuto begins his commentary on this section by asking what the purpose of this reflection on the four rivers is. Some, like Waltke, think that the five verses about the rivers "function as a pause in the narrative".²⁵ That is, they have a literary value in the narrative. John Collins thinks of it as an excursus in the text.²⁶ But Cassuto thinks that the value of these passages is



Figure 1. The location of Eden by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516)

Table 1. Distribution of location deixis for Genesis 1–12

Chp	Number	Places
1	0	
2	12	In the East; Eden; Pishon, Havilah; Gihon; Cush; Tigris; Ashur; Euphrates; Garden of Eden; in the garden
3	8	Middle of the garden; in the garden, Garden of Eden
4	2	Land of Nod, east of Eden
5	0	
6	0	
7	0	
8	1	Mountains of Ararat
9	0	
10	23	Territories; Babylon; Uruk; Akkad; Kalneh; Shinar; Assyria; Nineveh; Rehoboth Ir; Calah; Resen; borders of Canaan; Sidon; Gerar; Gaza; Sodom; Gomorah; Admah; Zeboyim; Lasha; Meshah; Sephar; eastern hill country.
11	5	Shinar; Babel; Ur of the Chaldeans; Canaan; Harran
12	9	Harran; Canaan; great tree of Moreh; Shechem; hills east of Bethel; Bethel; Ai; Negev; Egypt

to describe a state of nature that existed prior to the fall of humanity. Genesis 2, he thinks, describes the irrigation of the earth before Adam and Eve were disobedient and before the ground was cursed. Prior to the fall, the earth was watered from the $\eta\delta$ ($\bar{\epsilon}d$), Genesis 2:6, as a gracious gift; after the fall, it rained only at God's discretion. He writes:

“We remarked earlier that the conditions envisaged here are different from those prevailing in our present world; before the first man's fall, the ground absorbed moisture from below and the waters of the springs and streams sufficed to irrigate the whole face of the earth (see above, on v. 6); but after man's sin, when it was decreed as his punishment that the subterranean waters should be insufficient for his needs, and he was compelled to depend on rain water, the world-order, including the rivers mentioned in our passage, suffered a change. At first they had all issued from one place, but now they became separated and far-removed from one another, two flowing in one direction and two in [an]other. Nevertheless, they are all still in existence, serving to remind us of the former state of bliss.”²⁷

The advantage of Cassuto's approach is that it reframes the discussion of the geographical details of the text. Instead of being location markers to be identified today, they are *memories* of the way things were before the world changed, and all attempts to locate Eden today must end in frustration. Cassuto was well aware of the various suggestions as to where to find Eden, but writes:

“But in the light of our exposition all these theorizings are valueless. Our text, as stated, describes a state of affairs that no longer exists, and it is impossible to determine the details on the premise of present-day geographical data. The garden of Eden according to the Torah was not situated in our world.”²⁸

Cassuto argues that the fall of Genesis 3 has changed the geography of the world. There is now a new world today and an old world that is no longer accessible but still described in ‘real world’ terms and concepts. It seems to me that an approach of this kind might point towards a solution to the problem of historicity in Genesis 1–11.

Deixis

I now want to turn to some analysis of the text in light of this proposal. The proposal is that, from the author's perspective, the world now is not the same as the world then, but the accounts of both are equally historical. What is required is evidence to support this viewpoint that the author's intention was to write historically about the old world and the new. One way of addressing this question is to turn to the literary features associated with historicity, namely places, times, and names. These reference details are known as deixis or indexicality, and are indicators that the genre of the author's intention was historical.²⁹ These terms are what Charles Fillmore calls the “major grammaticalized types” of deixis.³⁰ John Lyons, in his *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, call deixis the “‘orientational’ features of language which are relative to the time and place of utterance”.³¹ To simplify this study somewhat the decision was made to consider only very unambiguous deictic features of place. For instance, instead of the terms ‘here’ and ‘there’, this study only included specific place names.

The result of studying deixis can be illustrated using the example of Genesis 12, the story of Abram, starting from the beginning of the *toledoth* of Terah. What we see in this passage is a narrative with some standard historical features in the narrative. There is a good mixture of personal names identifying realistic characters, set in particular places (which seem to require no explanation as to where they refer, so we can assume that the reader was expected to know them), and a smaller number of key time markers to guide the reader as to where the story fits in the passing of time. In particular, the place deixes are fairly extensive, and the reader is expected to know them directly: Ur of the

Chaldeans; the place called Harran; Canaan; the great tree of Moreh at Shechem; the hills east of Bethel; Ai to the east; the Negev (south); Egypt. This extensive amount of contextual information indicates to the reader that the genre of this section is historical narrative.

When we do a similar exercise for Genesis 1–11, however, we get an interesting distribution of location deixis. The deixis indicators for place are outlined in table 1.

The results are significant. In Genesis 1–8, the location deixes are rather vague indicators, occurring almost exclusively in Genesis 2–4, and all related to Eden. The garden is ‘in Eden’, and the two trees are in the middle of that garden, v. 9. The *‘ēd* water is brought up from Eden, v. 10, and the four headwaters flow out from there to the lands of Havilah, Cush and Ashur that are directly connected to Eden through these rivers, Pishon, Gihon, Hiddekel, and Euphrates. This is especially seen in the ‘Land of Nod’ reference in Gen 4:16. Quite apart from the ambiguity over whether it should be thought of as the ‘land of wandering’, the writer does not expect the reader to have independent knowledge of its location because it is followed by an additional location indicator, namely ‘East of Eden’. There are no more location deixes until Genesis 8 when we read about the place where the Ark landed, namely the Mountains of Ararat, after the Flood.

From then on there is a significant increase in the number of location references that need no additional explanation: the reader is just expected to know these places: Babylon; Uruk; Akkad; Kalneh; Shinar; Assyria; Nineveh; Rehoboth Ir; Calah; Resen; borders of Canaan; Sidon; Gerar; Gaza; Sodom; Gomorah; Admah; Zeboyim; Lasha; Meshah; Sephar; and so on. The location deixes of Genesis 2–4 should be understood differently from those from Genesis 8 onwards. Those before the Flood are all in relationship to Eden; after the Flood, geographical references are assumed to be knowable independently.

Explanation

The observation that the use of location deixes is not uniform throughout Genesis 1–11 is significant and requires a coherent explanation. The reader is not expected to know the whereabouts of the geographical features of Genesis 2–4 independently, and each is related to Eden. This is in stark contrast to the geography of Genesis 8 onwards where these locations are stated without any extra explanation, indicating that these locations were known and accessible to the intended reader. This distinction is missed by Munday who thinks that “the post-Flood landscape had real correspondence with the pre-Flood landscape, and that this correspondence was sufficiently close to permit the audience to generally understand the garden location.”³²

The best way of accounting for this distinct distribution of deictic indicators is to revise Umberto Cassuto’s explanation

for how to understand the geographical references for the rivers of Eden. He argued that the Garden of Eden was no longer ‘in our world’ because of the fall. However, from the location deixis pattern identified in this study, a better explanation is that the Garden of Eden is no longer ‘in our world’ because of the effects of the Flood, Genesis 6–8. There is no independent location deixis indicator prior to the Flood because all pre-Flood locations, including Eden and the tree of life, have been destroyed by the waters of Noah’s Flood.

This perspective finds support in the New Testament: “By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed” (2 Peter 3:6).

This verse points to a clear sense of discontinuity between our world and the pre-Flood world (‘the world of that time’). This reading enables us to suggest a way of explaining why many commentators have struggled to settle on the correct genre for Genesis 1–11. By focusing on the rather ‘other-world’ and inaccessible feel of the geographical place names, commentators have tended to disassociate the narrative from history. However, if we accept that the biblical author considered the Garden of Eden, or indeed any human settlement or natural feature, to be no longer geographically accessible to the reader (because of the effects of Noah’s Flood on the earth) then this allows us to acknowledge the various deictic features of the text as indicating a genre of historical narrative without giving encouragement to those who would seek to find the geographical source of the four rivers today.

A challenge to this view would be to ask why the author gave such attention to the places and features of the four headwaters if they are nowhere relevant to the geography of the rest of the text. The mention of the gold in Havilah beside the Pishon, according to Cassuto, was to emphasize that gold didn’t originate in paradise, and therefore shouldn’t be seen as coming from the ‘garden of the gods’. Cassuto comments: “The very *best* gold is simply a natural substance, a metal like any of the other metals, which are found in the ground in one of the countries of our own world.”³³ Thus Cassuto sees the purpose of the mention of gold and jewels at a distance from Eden was to relativize their connection with Eden: “this indirect association alluded to here by the Torah, which at the same time rejects the direct relationship that the poets held to exist, suffices to give the gold and the *bdellium* and the *šōham*, and generally all precious stones, the character of tokens and memorials of the garden of Eden.”³³

We can explain the reason for including the names of the pre-Flood rivers by noticing that, apart from the Pishon, the names mentioned in Genesis 2:10–14 also have a post-Flood referent. The land of Cush is also the name of a son of Ham in Genesis 10:6; the land of Ashur was the son of Shem in v. 22. Havilah, in Genesis 10:7, is the name of one of the grandsons of Ham and one of the great-great grandsons of Shem in v. 29, and also a land named in Genesis 25. The

use of these place names after the Flood carries over the memories of the pre-Flood world. It is a vehicle of tradition and remembrance associated with the paradise of Eden.

A more contemporary example is in AD 1620 when the Pilgrim Fathers sailed in the ‘Mayflower’ from Plymouth in England and landed near Cape Cod. They named their first permanent settlement ‘Plymouth’ in ‘New England’. That is, they took a name from the old world with them into the new world in order to invest their environment with tradition.

We see this when the manna in the wilderness is compared to Bdelium in Numbers 11:7. We see it again in the biblical reusing of the name Gihon for a river in Jerusalem. The Israelites did not think they had found the original river Gihon when they gave the spring near Jerusalem that name (1 Kings 1:33), but instead wished to ascribe to Jerusalem the theological significance that the original Gihon had in Eden.³⁴ That is, Jerusalem was to be considered like a New Eden. The river section in Genesis 2 is therefore, amongst other things, etiological, explaining the historical origins of the names of important places.³⁵

Claus Westermann declares that “all attempts to explain or locate the sources of the four rivers geographically are ruled out” on the basis that the “intention of the author ... was not to determine where paradise lay.”³⁶ Rex Mason says that “the writer does not intend us to try to identify the exact topography of the garden.”³⁷ I agree with them both: all attempts to identify the location of the paradise of Eden today are considered hopeless, but not because the language is “hazy and primitive”³⁸ or mythological. The author of Genesis intended to write of these places historically whilst at the same time knowing that Eden was destroyed with the cataclysmic Flood and therefore no longer exists in our post-Flood world.

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