

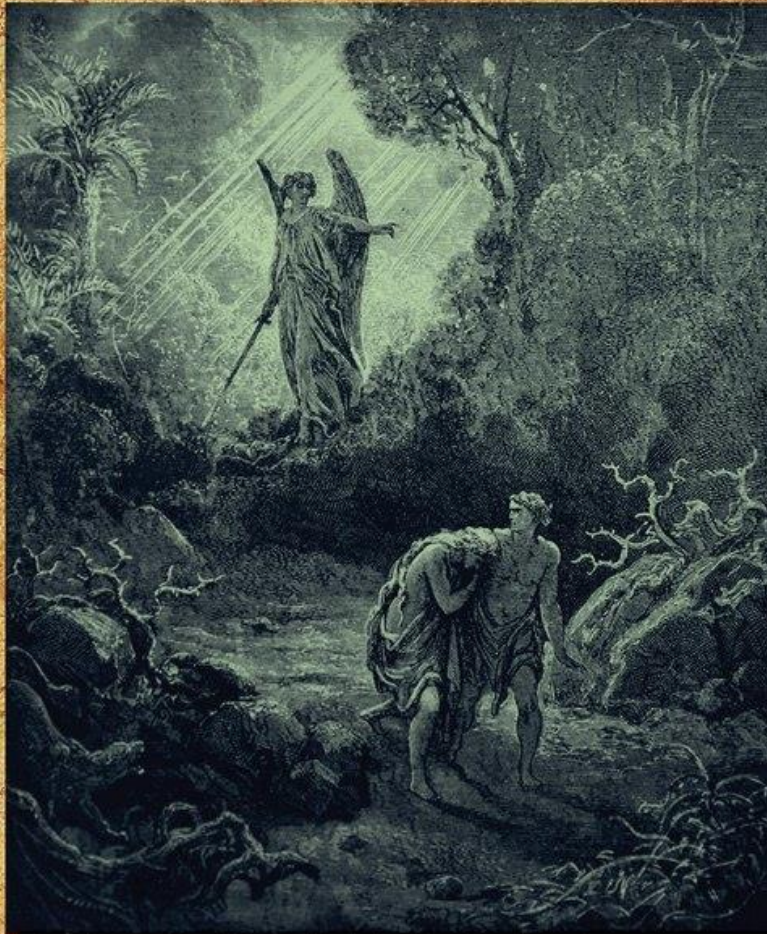
Where was Eden?

Lita Cosner and Robert Carter

“A RIVER flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is the Tigris [Hebrew: *Hiddekel*], which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates [Hebrew: *P'rath*]. (Genesis 2:10–14)”

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A classic engraving of Adam and Eve being driven from the Garden.

GENESIS 2 reads like it is describing actual geography, but the sort that doesn't exist anywhere on today's globe—which is exactly what we would expect if today's geography was totally reshaped by the global Flood in Noah's day.

Yet, many people believe Eden should be located somewhere around Mesopotamia. Could they be right, and how can we know?

Genesis places Eden in the real world

There are many different ways to handle this passage. Some Bible commentators, sadly, argue that it is misguided to try to find Eden on a map, because, they say, Genesis was never intended

to communicate a location on the globe. They draw analogies to the Temple or other spiritual meanings to explain the details given in Genesis 2. In their view, trying to locate Eden would be like trying to find Santa's workshop at the physical North Pole.

On the other hand, many people try to argue that Eden was in the Middle East, specifically in lower Mesopotamia, maybe near ancient Ur or Sumer. They assert, correctly, that there is nowhere else in the historical passages of Scripture that gives an 'unearthly' geography, and there is nothing in the text that indicates anything other than an actual geographical description. As Derek Kidner comments: "verses 10–14 go to some lengths to present it as an actual, not an allegorical or mythical spot."

There are alternate possible locations proposed, but the goal is to 'find' Eden by looking at today's geographical clues.

Yet, this view is in error, too.

Think about it—the Flood was global and highly destructive. Huge amounts of sediment were deposited on the continents, and massive amounts of erosion occurred during the Recessive Stage as the waters drained off the continents. Plus, the continental plates moved around, raising mountains and creating deep basins. Why would we expect the modern landscape to reflect the pre-Flood landscape?

Eden is not findable on today's globe

As we would expect from the above consideration, nothing on today's Earth matches the geographical clues provided in Genesis. Any proposed location for Eden must include four rivers originating from one source. Today, there are only a couple of examples of *two* rivers originating from the same lake or spring (e.g. Isa Lake in Yellowstone National Park (USA), because it sits on the continental divide, drains in one direction to form the Lewis River, which flows toward the Pacific Ocean, and in the other direction to form the Firehole River, which flows toward the Gulf of Mexico). This is because today's landscape is shaped by erosion, and it is nearly impossible for an erosional landscape to produce multiple rivers from one source. Even if initially such a system existed, the lowermost or fastest-eroding outlet of any drainage area tends to dominate and eventually takes over.

Contrary to common opinion, the Tigris and Euphrates of Genesis 2 cannot be the modern rivers flowing through Syria and Iraq today, because they do not share the same source. And while today they merge just before they reach the Persian Gulf, this was not true historically: Pliny (AD 23–79) claimed they emptied into a common lake in the time of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). Incidentally, the low-lying area of Mesopotamia would have been mostly underwater right after the Flood, and the shoreline seems to have changed

drastically even in historical times (the shoreline is constantly being added to as sediments are dumped into the Persian Gulf at the mouth of the Tigris/Euphrates).

What about shared names?

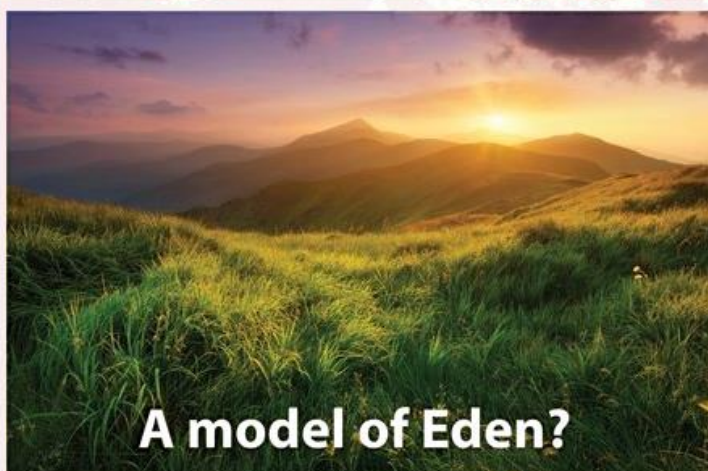
There are a number of names that are used for landmarks in both the pre-Flood world and the post-Flood world. For instance, Genesis 2 says the Hiddekel river flows east of Asshur. In Daniel 10:4, the Hebrew word Hiddekel is used to refer to the modern Tigris river. The ancient, post-Flood city of Asshur (the capital of the Assyrian empire in its several different forms) is on the west bank of the Tigris/Hiddekel (therefore the river is to its east). So the pre-Flood and post-Flood Hiddekel rivers are associated with places called Asshur. Does the loose connection between a river and a region both before and after the Flood tell us that Eden is somewhere nearby? Even if we ignore the Flood's effects on the land surface, not unless there are a lot more confirmations. But this is all we have. If Eden is in that area, *all* of the geographic details must match, not just one or two.

The Hebrew word P'rath, used both for a river in Genesis 2 and for the modern Euphrates, is significant because it forms the eastern border of the land promised to Abraham's descendants (Genesis 15:18). Yet Genesis 2 mentions it with no other geographical data. This is strange, considering it is the most important river in the region today and factors heavily in the historical biblical narrative (see, for example, Genesis 15:18, Genesis 31:21, Deuteronomy 11:24, Joshua 24:2, and 2 Samuel 8:3).

Havilah and Cush are two other place designations that occur both before and after the Flood.

We have three options for interpreting these duplicated names:

1) The pre-Flood and post-Flood regions are identical. While biblical creationists like Luther, Calvin, and others held this view, it is not a viable option today, in light of current geological knowledge. For example, on average there are several kilometres of sedimentary rock, laid down during the Flood, beneath the surface of the Middle



A model of Eden?

If we tease out all the geographical clues possible from Genesis 2, we can arrive at a rough model for Eden. Since the single river coming out of Eden breaks up into *four* rivers, we know that Eden must be higher than the surrounding region—perhaps much higher. There is etymological evidence for this. The name 'Pishon' means 'bubbling', and 'Gihon' means 'bursting forth'. Since all four rivers share the same source, this cannot be describing the river flowing out of Eden. It must be describing something about the rivers after they divided and went their separate ways. So it might indicate that the rivers flowed fairly rapidly, which may indicate a significant drop in elevation. We cannot be certain, but the language clues are interesting.

Ezekiel 28 is full of Edenic imagery and refers multiple times to the 'mountain of God'. A mountain location would also explain how there was apparently only one entrance to Eden that needed to be guarded (Genesis 3:24). All other routes could have been impassable due to the steepness of the terrain at other points.

There is also extrabiblical evidence associating Eden with a mountain. For example, some scholars make the case that the most ancient form of Chinese writing contains pictographs that hearken back to the biblical accounts of Creation, the Fall, and Noah's Flood. Consider the following series of symbols:



Of the several pictograms that mean 'garden' in the most ancient Chinese script, this one has a mountain standing prominently within it (after Nelson, E.R. and Broadberry, R.E., *Genesis and the Mystery Confucius Couldn't Solve*, Concordia Publishing House, 1994).

Additionally, early religious buildings, from Mesopotamian ziggurats to Egyptian and Mesoamerican pyramids, share a 'mountain-like' shape. The idea that the gods were associated with high mountains is almost universal in ancient cultures—to the point where mountains were considered holy places, and ancient people even constructed artificial mountains as places of worship.

There are many possible layouts that would include the necessary geographical elements of 1) a garden in a larger area called 'Eden'; 2) a relative elevation for the source of the river (possibly but not necessarily mountainous); and 3) an eastward progression of features, which is an assumption based on the overall implication from Genesis 2–4.

What is clear, however, is that no modern-day candidate for the location of Eden possesses characteristics resembling this rough schematic. In particular, low-lying Mesopotamia, which is a flat alluvial plain, is disqualified.

References and notes

1. Hughes, J.R., 'An examination of 'Eden's geography erodes flood geology'' CRSQ 34(3):154–161, 1997. See also creation.com/confucius-mystery.

East today. Equating the pre- and post-Flood landmarks fails to appreciate the devastating geological impact of the global Flood.

2) Post-Flood places are named after pre-Flood places. This is the most common biblical creationist explanation. While this was probably the case for some landmarks, like the Hiddekel and P'ath, we know, for instance, that some post-Flood places with pre-Flood names were named after post-Flood people. Some of the re-used names are generic enough to be applicable in multiple places, so simple renaming is not a full explanation.

The most likely explanation seems to be that:

3) Pre- and post-Flood places share certain popular, generic names. The early chapters of Genesis contain several repeated names. For example, men named Enoch and Lamech are descendants of Adam's first son, Cain (Genesis 4:17–18), but a different Enoch and Lamech were descendants of Adam's third named son, Seth, and are listed among the ancestors of Noah (Genesis 5:18–30). This is even more remarkable when one considers the sparse name data we have for that period.

If *people's* names could be re-used on such a scale, then surely it is not a stretch to imagine that generic names could also be reapplied to places. So a post-Flood location called Havilah (Genesis 25:18), which can roughly be translated 'sandy place', may have been named after one of several post-Flood men named Havilah (the second son of Cush or the 12th son of Joktan, Genesis 10:7, 29), who happen to share a name with a pre-Flood place called Havilah (Genesis 2:11), which may or may not be named after a pre-Flood person unmentioned in Scripture.

Genesis is history!

In the end, we are forced to conclude that the rivers of Genesis are not the modern rivers, even if they share the same names. There is no reason to expect a geographical association between the two sets of names; names get re-used too often, and the Flood caused massive changes to the landscape, to the point where there should be no correlation between pre-Flood and post-Flood geography.

We want to encourage our readers to dig deeply into the word of God. When

we study Scripture, we must carefully examine the entire text to discern what it intends to communicate. Secularists and compromised Christian scholars (e.g. those who maintain the idea of a local flood in Genesis to appease long-age thinking) have caused much confusion. In the case of the location of Eden, however, we do not have to chase fables and accidental associations. It is no longer with us. ■

References and notes

1. This article is adapted from a much more in-depth technical study available at creation.com/eden-1 and creation.com/eden-2.
2. Kidner, D., *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL, p. 67, 2008.
3. Pliny, *Natural History* VI:XXVI.

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