

In Search of Eden: A Cosmological Interpretation of Genesis 2–3

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ABSTRACT

Past suggestions for the locality of the biblical Eden mostly fell into the trap of either assuming a real historical setting, or supposing that the garden in Eden had a fictional or fantastical setting. Even in those cases where scholars did assume a mythical setting for the garden, they were more interested in locating the possible historical garden on which this mythical garden may have been modelled than trying to identify the exact imagined position for the garden within the mythical cosmography of the ANE. It is concluded that it is futile to assume a locality for Eden within the boundaries of our natural human world, because it was perceived as being located outside our known world in the mythical in-between space of the eastern horizon. The Garden in Eden retained most features of the ANE mythical garden of the gods. These include: its sense of abundance, water-richness, the eastern horizon as the source of cosmic rivers like the Euphrates and Tigris, its association with mythical monsters, guards and spells (cherubs and a flaming sword), wondrous (magical) trees, the allusion to a garden of gems and its association with life and immortality.

A INTRODUCTION

When the respective cosmologies (or worldviews) of a sender (author) and a receiver (reader) differ this fact may cause severe "noise" within the communication process, resulting in miscommunication and confusion.¹ This fact was practically illustrated to the author when he was hiking with an anthropologist friend in a deep rural part of the Limpopo Province, South Africa. When entering the wall of an artificial lake they were warned by the traditional Northern Sotho guard about the presence of a large snake frequenting the inside of the wall. The author immediately thought about the possibility of an African rock python or a black mamba, until his anthropologist friend corrected his thoughts by commenting on the strong belief in the mythical water snake in traditional African communities.²

¹ Cf. Richard Nordquist, "Noise," n.p. [cited 31 March 2014]. Online: <http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/Noise.htm>.

² Cf. Myth Beasts, "Mamlambo," n.p. [cited 12 March 2014]. Online: <http://www.mythicalcreatureslist.com/mythical-creature/Mamlambo>.

This incident underscored two very important principles which could easily lead to a misinterpretation of ancient and/or traditional texts such as the OT:

- (i) How easy it is for a modern (i.e. post-Enlightenment) Western exegete to misconstrue the meaning of an ancient text by wrongly assuming a modern scientific cosmology for such a text, whilst the ancient text originated within the magico-mythical cosmology of pre-scientific times.³
- (ii) That within a magico-mythical cosmology (e.g. in traditional Africa) a mythical water snake is considered as just as real as any ordinary or natural snake. To therefore think that a mythical creature is/was viewed by traditional or ancient people as either fictional or fantastical would be a serious misconception.

With these two principles as guidelines, the *purpose of this article* is to explore the possible imagined setting for the biblical Garden in Eden (Gen 2:4b–3:24) and to suggest that, rather than considering historical or fictional settings for the Garden in Eden, the possibility of a *mythical setting* should be considered.⁴ It will further be argued that within a magico-mythical cosmology such a mythical setting was assumed to be just as real as any historical or natural setting.⁵

³ Cf. Peet J. van Dyk, "Significant Versus Symbolic Universes: Sorting Out the Terminology," *JSem* 20/2 (2011): 422–444.

⁴ Cf. Magnus Ottosson, "Eden and the Land of Promise," in *IOSOT Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986* (ed. John A. Emerton: Leiden, Brill, 1988), 178; Terje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 261–270; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 14–15.

⁵ From a modern (Post-Enlightenment) perspective a mythical setting would be regarded as *similar* to a historical setting in the sense that both would be *assumed* to be "real" by the first audience, whilst fundamentally *differing* from it in the sense that (in the light of modern scientific inquiry) it would be appreciated by the modern reader that such a mythical setting is most probably not real – that is, imaginary. Mythical settings further differ from fictional settings, because fictional settings are known to be imaginary (at least within modern literature), whilst mythical settings were assumed by the first audience to be "real" or non-imaginary. Within contemporary literary theory it is appreciated that history, fiction and myths are constructs and that they are therefore all to some extent fictional. Within a critical realist philosophical framework and fuzzy logic one can however argue that these three genres vary on the continuum between "real" and "imaginary" and thus can be distinguished in terms of their assumed links to reality. cf. Peet J. van Dyk, "A Fuzzy Interpretation of the Bible: Going Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism," *R&T* 9/3-4 (2002): 163–182.

B LOCALITIES PREVIOUSLY SUGGESTED FOR EDEN

To fundamentalist biblical readers the locality of the Garden in Eden is of great potential importance, because if its locality could be determined, it may "prove" (sic!) the historical accuracy of the biblical record and thus support fundamentalist beliefs. Notwithstanding the rather vague indications for the locality of Eden in Gen 2:8, some scholars nonetheless felt it proper to suggest (based on how free they allowed their imaginations to roam) such diverse localities as: somewhere in Mesopotamia (the most popular choice for obvious reasons), Arabia, Kashmir, Somaliland, Australia or even the North Pole.⁶ Current creationists are equally adamant that Eden really existed in historical time and space, but usually argue that it was either destroyed during the Deluge and/or is currently buried under the waters of the Persian Gulf between Iraq and Iran.⁷

In contrast to these attempts, most historical-critical scholars have reached some kind of consensus that the indications for the locality of Eden are either too vague or too conflicting to determine an accurate locality for it with any amount of certainty. For example, Driver gave a detailed discussion about proposed localities by earlier scholars such as Keil, Friedrich Delitzsch, Sayce, Hommel, Delitzsch and Dillmann and Haupt, who suggested various lesser streams and wadi's as possibly signifying the two "missing" rivers in Genesis (i.e. Gihon and Pishon) and then conclude that all these suggestions "do not agree sufficiently with the Biblical descriptions to be probable."⁸ Alternatively other scholars attributed the uncertainty about the locality of Eden to the possibility that the J-narrative in Gen 2-3 was based on two older sources or traditions, which suggested different localities for the Garden.⁹

Within more literary or narrative approaches towards the Genesis text, a fictional setting for the Garden is most commonly assumed, resulting in little or no interest in trying to imagine the possible setting for the garden narrative.¹⁰ This is understandable because within narrative analysis even the possibility

⁶ Edward Robertson, "Where was Eden?" *AJS* 28/4 (1912): 254.

⁷ E.g. Gerard Wakefield, "Lost River of Eden Discovered by Satellite," n.p. [cited 10 March 2014]. Online: www.creationism.org/wakefield/. Also see the similar view expressed earlier by Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 19-20.

⁸ Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes* (London: Methuen, 1904), 57-60.

⁹ E.g. Robertson, "Where was Eden"? 258; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (2nd ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), 284.

¹⁰ E.g. Ellen van Wolde, *Story of the Beginning: Genesis 1-11 and Other Creation Stories* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 41; and George W. Coats, *Genesis: With An Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 57-59; pay no attention to the possible setting of Eden.

that fantastical settings could to some extent be based on real settings, would contribute very little to the understanding of the narrative itself.

Most scholars agree that the Hebrew term *miqedem* in Genesis 2:8 is a geographical description, wishing to indicate that the garden was located in the east, or towards the east of Palestine.¹¹ In contrast to fundamentalist views, scholars like Driver regarded this geographical indication as referring to an "ideal" (not real) locality as "pictured by the Hebrew narrator."¹² According to this view the locality and description of the Garden in Eden may have been based on a real antecedent or earthly template, but that the locality is nonetheless "ideal" in the sense that the historical garden has been fictionalized by adding many details (some of them fantastical), which did not belong to the original one. Gunkel described this process as the "*künstlerische Verarbeitung des gegebenes Stoffes*" suggesting that he did not regard the Genesis narratives as entirely fictional or as the result of the free fantasy of the narrator.¹³

If it is therefore accepted that the Garden in Eden is an ideal garden (following Driver and Gunkel) it begs the next important questions: where was this ideal garden supposed to be located? Was it pictured to either be on this earth (e.g. somewhere in Mesopotamia) or in mythical space (e.g. on the eastern horizon)? If the Garden was assumed by Ancient readers to be located in mythical space, what does this imply and how does this differ from ordinary space? To answer these questions we need to first briefly discuss the nature of myths and mythical space.

C MYTHS AND MYTHICAL SPACE

1 How Myths Should Be Interpreted

Exactly how the term "myth" should be defined has long been a contentious issue.¹⁴ One of the reasons for this is the popular usage of the term to denote a "widely held, but wrong belief." Although there is some merit in this popular usage of the term, it does tend to obscure the high regard in which myths were held in traditional non-Western societies and in Ancient cultures (i.e. communities believing in a magico-mythical cosmology). In such communities myths were generally held to be the highest form of truth, always of a religious nature and to be interpreted in a literally true (not symbolic) way.¹⁵ This implies that past events, as recorded in myths, were regarded as "real" events.

¹¹ E.g. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (7th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 7; Speiser, *Genesis*, 16; and Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 286.

¹² Driver, *Book of Genesis*, 57–60.

¹³ Gunkel, *Genesis*, XLVIII.

¹⁴ Cf. John W. Rogerson, *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974).

¹⁵ Cf. Van Dyk, "Symbolic Versus Significant," 422–444.

In this sense myths should more accurately be termed as "assumed-to-be-true religious history" and any symbolic or allegorical interpretation of them should be viewed as a later form of secondary interpretation. This secondary symbolic or allegorical interpretation of myths already started in ancient Greece when the literal truth of mythical literature, such as the works of Homer, was no longer acceptable to the philosophers and historians.¹⁶

Most scholars of mythology have not sufficiently appreciated the fact that myths and mythology were always directly linked to a magico-mythical cosmology. With a few exceptions (primarily in classical Greece) this prescientific, pre-Enlightenment cosmology or worldview held sway before the current scientific era.¹⁷ Myths were foundational to this magico-mythical cosmology in the sense that they explained when and how the cosmos originated and how it functions. In that sense they fulfilled the same function as modern science, which also is foundational to our current scientific cosmology. However, myth differs fundamentally from modern science in the sense that myth believes in an alternative magico-religious (i.e. supernatural) system of cause and effect, which operates next to a natural system of cause and effect.¹⁸ It was specifically this assumption of mythology which was challenged during the Renaissance-Enlightenment when the magico-mythical cosmology was replaced by the current scientific cosmology.¹⁹

The problem for modern readers of myths (including the Genesis creation narratives) is that when they realise that myths are based on a mistaken and outdated magico-mythical cosmology (incompatible with our current scientific one), they often interpret them in a symbolic or allegorical way without realising that they were originally *intended* to be taken literally. In terms of Gadamer's hermeneutics,²⁰ this implies that the horizon of the text is misinterpreted and that the modern (symbolic) horizon of the reader²¹ is mistakenly assumed to be identical to the horizon of the text.

¹⁶ Cf. Michael Webster, "Ways of Interpreting Myths," n.p. [cited 12 March 2014]. Online: www.gvsu.edu/webster/ways.htm.

¹⁷ Van Dyk, "Symbolic Versus Significant," 422-444.

¹⁸ The fact that myth accepted an alternative magico-religious system of cause and effect does not imply that it displayed a "childish" or "primitive" kind of mentality (versus Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth and Primitive Psychology* [London: Norton, 1926], 2-5).

¹⁹ Cf. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 34.

²⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd ed.; London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 292.

²¹ Cf. Van Dyk, "Symbolic Versus Significant," 422-444.

2 Mythical Space

According to the Greeks the cosmos was defined into "our familiar world" (*oikoumenē*), within which empirical investigation is possible, versus the unfamiliar regions beyond our known world, which are delimited by the mountains on the horizon.²² This *terra incognita* can further be subdivided into a) the in-between (liminal) space (e.g. the horizon); and 2) the afterworld (i.e. the heavens and the underworld).²³ Both these areas are left-overs of primeval mythical times and can therefore be described as *persistent mythical space*.²⁴

Mesopotamian cosmology shared these ideas about mythical space as is clear from the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic that related how Gilgamesh travelled to the eastern horizon (or *terra incognita*) in search of immortality.²⁵ For our purposes we will focus on the in-between (liminal) mythical space only.

The following aspects were attributed by the ancients to in-between mythical space:

- (i) In-between mythical space is located on the border of the human world and the afterworld.²⁶ Mythical space lies beyond the known world and therefore beyond the ordinary laws of nature.²⁷ The horizon and the earth's naval were the most important areas regarded as in-between mythical space in the ANE cosmography.
- (ii) Due to its special position within the cosmos these in-between spaces acted as gates or portals to the heavens or the underworld. It was in close proximity to the abode of the gods and was therefore frequented by the gods and other supernatural creatures.
- (iii) Mythical space was separated from ordinary space, either by distance (i.e. they were far away) and/or by almost insurmountable barriers (e.g. mountains, deserts, forests). Access to mythical space was further guarded by supernatural creatures (e.g. monsters) and/or magical spells and was therefore not accessible to ordinary mortals.

²² Cf. Christopher Woods, "At the Edge of the World: Cosmological Conceptions of the Eastern Horizon in Mesopotamia," *JANER* 9/2 (2009): 175.

²³ Heda Jason, *Ethnopoetry: Form, Content, Function* (Bonn: Linguistica Biblica, 1977), 194.

²⁴ Cf. Jason, *Ethnopoetry*, 193–195, who describes mythical space as persisting from the primeval period into current time.

²⁵ Woods, "Edge of the World," 176. The fact that Gilgamesh could travel to the in-between space of the horizon, otherwise inaccessible to humans, may be attributed to the fact that he was a demi-god.

²⁶ Jason, *Ethnopoetry*, 190, 198–199.

²⁷ Woods, "Edge of the World," 199.

(iv) Although mythical space was *terra incognita* and felt outside the familiar world, it was regarded by the ancients as just as real as the earth on which humans dwelled. Mythical space was therefore not regarded (within a magico-mythical cosmology) as a fantastical or fictional place—as modern readers may wrongly assume.²⁸ In contrast to the ancients view of mythical space (viewed from within a magico-mythical cosmology), modern readers of mythical literature would define mythical space, as space outside the natural cosmos and therefore viewed it as non-real (imaginary) space.

D THE EASTERN HORIZON AND THE GARDEN OF THE GODS

In the ANE the eastern horizon, or the edge of the world, was of great magico-religious significance.²⁹ It was the place where the three tiers of the cosmos (heaven, earth and underworld) came together.³⁰ This unique locality awarded great significance to the eastern horizon and defined it (and the western horizon) as in-between mythical space on the border of the human world and the afterworld.

1 The Horizon and the Gods

In ancient Egypt the gods (and other supernatural beings) were either associated with the eastern or western horizons. For example, the sun god Re (Ra), emerged each morning through the eastern gateway, which was located between the two cosmic pillars on the eastern horizon. Similarly the Mesopotamian sun god *Utu-Šamaš* was perceived to scale the eastern mountains each morning and “emerges through the gates of heaven in a thunderous event that ushers in a new day.”³¹ Just before sunrise the two gatekeepers on the eastern

²⁸ From a modern perspective we realise that mythical space was imagined (pictured) in terms of earthly examples, but then not in the sense that the narrators consciously fantasized about unknown mythical places by using symbols and images known to them. According to their magico-mythical logic the reverse was rather true, that is, mythical places resembled earthly equivalents (e.g. temples and royal gardens), because the earthly equivalents were deliberately modeled on these mythical places (for magical reasons).

²⁹ The earth’s navel was another place of such magico-religious significance. The exact locality of the earth’s navel varied greatly, because each nation perceived it as being within their own territory – usually associated with their primary cultic site or temple.

³⁰ The concept of a three tier cosmos was by no means unique to the ANE, but was also prevalent amongst the San (Bushmen) of Southern Africa, and according to neuropsychology was probably a basic human perception. Cf. David Lewis-Williams, “Building Bridges to the Deep Human Past: Consciousness, Religion, and Art,” in *The Evolution of Rationality* (ed. F. LeRon Shults; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 159.

³¹ Cf. Woods, “Edge of the World,” 186.

horizon (one for the heaven and one for the underworld) opened the gates on the eastern horizon in anticipation of the sun god's ascent from the underworld into the heavens. According to Babylonian cosmography the sun was extinguished while travelling through the underworld but "flared up" anew when emerging with sunrise on the eastern horizon.³² A gateway (portal) existed on the eastern horizon that linked this in-between space with the domains of the gods, who either resided in the heavens or in the underworld. This fact explained why not only the afterworld, but also the in-between space of the horizon had special links to the gods.

The Eastern horizon was also closely linked to the so-called "garden of the gods." The garden of the gods and the eastern horizon were pictured to be a place of abundance where plants grew to fantastical heights.³³ In Mesopotamian myths it was the only place where the Bull of heaven grazed.³⁴

Because the locality of the garden of the gods on the horizon was so well known to the ancients it would not have been necessary for storytellers to do more than allude to its position in the vaguest of terms. This would then be sufficient for the audience to know to which garden the narrator was referring.

2 Mythical Trees and Plants

Various mythical trees were associated with the eastern horizon. In Egypt two sycamore trees acted as the pillars supporting the heavenly dome, whilst in Mesopotamia the *hašurru*-tree (a conical conifer type of tree) was associated with the eastern horizon.³⁵ Because the eastern horizon was also the "symbol" of life and rebirth, it was specifically associated with trees or plants of life. For example, in the Gilgamesh Epic the eastern horizon was the place where Gilgamesh could dive into the primeval flood to retrieve the plant of life. The eastern horizon was thus seen as the place where one could seek rejuvenation or immortality.³⁶

³² Woods, "Edge of the World," 198.

³³ In Egyptian mythology the garden of the gods is described as follows: "I know that Field of Reeds of Re. The wall which is around it is of metal. The height of its barley is four cubits . . . Its emmer is seven cubits . . . It is the horizon-dwellers, nine cubits in height who reap it, by the side of the Eastern Souls." *ANET*, 33.

³⁴ Woods, "Edge of the World," 203–204.

³⁵ Woods, "Edge of the World," 189–190.

³⁶ Woods, "Edge of the World," 200.

A gemstone garden was also associated with the eastern horizon. In the Gilgamesh Epic this garden is described as having "trees of precious stone [which] bear fruit of jewels" (Gilgamesh IX).³⁷

3 The Primeval Flood and Cosmic Rivers

The eastern horizon was further associated with the cosmic sea (primeval flood—*tāmtu* or *Marratu*, or waters of death) whilst in Mesopotamia the mouths (*pî nārāti*) of the two cosmic rivers (Euphrates and Tigris) were located on the eastern horizon. In the Babylonian creation narrative (*Enuma elish*) these two cosmic rivers originated in the *Apsu* (fresh water primeval flood) and came forth from the eyes of the slain goddess Tiamat. According to the Babylonian Map of the World this cosmic sea was beyond the mountains of the sunrise (east) and sunset (west) and thus was perceived as a kind of cosmic river (stream) encircling the earth.³⁸

Although it may on the surface seem far-fetched that the old Babylonian Astral school suggested that the starry heaven was the mythical locality of the garden of the gods, whilst the cosmic rivers should be identified as the Milky Way and its branches,³⁹ their basic contention was correct in assuming a mythical and not an earthly setting for the Garden. Their view was primarily based on the fact that the description of the garden rivers makes no sense in terms of the geography of the earth, and on the fact that the garden of the gods was so closely associated with the gods (and thereby with the heavens) that it could not have been located on the known earth.

In Mesopotamia the Euphrates and Tigris rivers were regarded as two branches of the cosmic river, whilst in ancient Greece the River Oceanus was perceived as the freshwater stream which encircled a flat earth.⁴⁰

4 Accessibility to the Eastern Horizon

As mythical space, the eastern horizon was not accessible to ordinary mortals.⁴¹ In the Gilgamesh Epic the hero had to travel a very long distance, cross the primeval waters and could enter the eastern horizon only because he was two thirds a god (Tablet XI 205–206). As paradoxical liminal space, the horizon

³⁷ Cf. Wolf Carnahan "The Epic of Gilgamesh," n.p. [cited 5 May 2010]; trans Maureen G. Kovacs. Online: <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab1.htm>; Woods, "Edge of the World," 194–196.

³⁸ Woods, "Edge of the World," 195.

³⁹ Robertson, "Where was Eden"? 254.

⁴⁰ Theoi Greek Mythology, "River Okeanos," n.p. [cited 24 March 2014]. Online: <http://www.theoi.com/Kosmos/Okeanos.html>.

⁴¹ Woods, "Edge of the World," 194.

was a place where opposites converged.⁴² It was the line which separating life from death (i.e. the world of the living from the underworld).

Access to mythical spaces (e.g. the eastern horizon) was guarded by mythical creatures or monsters that could only have existed beyond our known world.⁴³ For example, in the Gilgamesh Epic the eastern horizon was guarded by a scorpion–man and woman, and in Egypt it was regarded as the realm of the god Aker (who was the deification of the horizon) who was mostly depicted as two lion or sphinx heads.⁴⁴ The eastern horizon in Mesopotamia was also associated with mythical bison–men, whilst the Greeks designated the unknown edges of the world as the domain of dragons.

E THE LOCATION OF EDEN

It can be concluded that the biblical garden in Eden was also—like in the other cosmologies of the ANE—located on the eastern horizon in mythical space and NOT in the known human world or within a fantastical setting. The reasons are as follows:

- (i) The generalised or vague description of Eden's locality as "towards the east" in Gen 2:8 is consistent with the eastern horizon and the fact that its cosmographical position was assumed to be well-known to the first audience. The fact that this location was outside the accessible human world, that is, in mythical in–between space, does not imply that the audience was ignorant of its supposed locality. Even though the ancient magico–mythical cosmography was, from a modern point of view, largely imaginary and wrong, the ancients nonetheless believed that they knew exactly what the cosmos looked like, as related to them by their myths.⁴⁵ As was argued previously in the discussion about mythical space and time, the fact that the garden in Eden was located outside ordinary time and space, does not imply that it seized to exist beyond primeval time, but only that, with the separation of the cosmos into its current areas, the region of the eastern horizon became inaccessible to living humans.
- (ii) The biblical garden in Eden should be regarded as the equivalent of the garden of the gods, located on the eastern horizon in ANE cosmography.

⁴² Woods, "Edge of the World," 176.

⁴³ Woods, "Edge of the World," 185.

⁴⁴ Woods, "Edge of the World," 185.

⁴⁵ Versus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 285. Cf. Terje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 261–270.

This is *inter alia* supported by the fact that Eden is also called the garden of God/YHWH in the Bible.⁴⁶

- (iii) Older commentators (e.g. Gunkel) thought that the name Eden may have been derived from the Akkadian word *edinnu* which means steppe,⁴⁷ but more recent evidence suggests that it should rather be related to the Aramaic inscription *m'dn mt kln* on the statue of king Gusan from Tell Halaf. In this inscription Eden means "area of abundance and lushness"⁴⁸ and this would be consistent with the concept of the garden of the gods on the eastern horizon.⁴⁹
- (iv) The fact that humans were originally placed in Eden is not an argument against its locality in mythical space.⁵⁰ During primeval mythical time (i.e. the time when the garden in Eden was planted) the cosmos was still incomplete and no divisions between the different components of the cosmos existed (e.g. between the human world and the afterworld). As the creation of our current post-primeval world progressed certain barriers were created to keep different sections of the cosmos apart (e.g. the afterworld and the human world). It is in this context that humans were chased out of the garden in Gen 3:23–24 and prohibited them from re-entering it again. This is consistent with the view that the garden in Eden now became part of mythical in-between space and thus inaccessible to ordinary living humans.
- (v) The association of supernatural creatures with the garden in Eden and the fact that its entrance was guarded both suggest that it was located in mythical in-between space on the eastern horizon. After humans were barred from Eden God placed cherubs (i.e. winged monsters)⁵¹ and a flaming sword to guard the entrance to the Garden. This is consistent with the general perception that mythical spaces were guarded by supernatural creatures, monsters and spells. The serpent in Genesis 3 was probably another supernatural creature associated with the eastern horizon.⁵² The fact that the serpent was crafty, could argue and may have had wings or legs (as is suggested by the fact that it was later condemned to sail on its belly) are all suggestive of the fact that it was per-

⁴⁶ E.g. Gen 13:10; Ezek 28:13; 31:9 and Isa 51:3.

⁴⁷ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 7.

⁴⁸ Ottosson, "Eden," 178.

⁴⁹ In the Persian period the Persian idea of paradise was applied to this garden of the gods and probably also to the biblical Garden in Eden. Cf. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, 261–270.

⁵⁰ Versus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 285.

⁵¹ Cf. Driver, *Book of Genesis*, 60.

⁵² In Egypt the snakelike monster Apopis was also associated with the horizon, although in that case with the western horizon.

ceived as more than an ordinary animal, but probably was viewed as a mythical beast of the same kind than leviathan.

- (vi) The fact that YHWH walked in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8) is consistent with in-between mythical space, which was perceived as being in close proximity to the afterworld with no absolute barriers between them. The Garden on the eastern horizon was perceived as being equivalent to the royal gardens of kings in the ANE. These royal gardens were adjacent to the kings' palaces and were used by the kings not only as a place of recreation, but they were also magically linked to the afterworld. In the same way the mythical garden on the horizon functioned as a garden of the gods and was located adjacent to the gods' heavenly/underworld palaces.⁵³
- (vii) The abundance of water and presence of cosmic rivers associated with Eden⁵⁴ is similar to the descriptions of the eastern horizon and the garden of the gods. Like elsewhere in ANE mythology, the description of the cosmic rivers in Gen 2:10–14 does not make geographical sense in terms of our current knowledge of the natural world. For that reason many exegetes have explained these discrepancies in Genesis as a lack of proper geographical knowledge on behalf of the author.⁵⁵ However, in terms of a magico-mythical cosmography all fountains and rivers were connected to the freshwater primeval flood (e.g. Apsu in Babylonian myths), which circled the whole earth like a stream and also fed the underground water sources. The mouth of this cosmic river (Apsu) was on the eastern horizon from where all the other cosmic rivers originated, including the Euphrates and Tigris. According to Gunkel the description of the cosmic rivers in Gen 2 boils down to a similar mythological picture: "a cosmic stream originated outside Eden, came into the garden to irrigate it and then divided into four rivers."⁵⁶
- (viii) The reference to onyx and other precious commodities in Gen 2:12 may be an allusion to the gem garden associated with the eastern horizon in ANE cosmography. That the cursory allusions in Gen 2:12 do refer to

⁵³ Cf. Peet J. van Dyk, *A Brief History of Creation* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2001), 63–68.

⁵⁴ The abundance of water in Eden is also mentioned in Gen 13:10 and Ezek 31:7–14.

⁵⁵ E.g. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 8: "Seine Geographie ist freilich eine sehr kindliche..."

⁵⁶ Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 8: "Den Strom stellt der Erzähler sich vor in 'Eden, außerhalb des Gartens, entspringen, dann durch den Garten fließend, und dann in vier Flüsse auseinandergehend. Da diese vier Flüsse nach seiner Meinung all Hauptströme der Erde sind, so glaubt er, daß alles große fließende Wasser aus dem Paradiese komme."

this gem garden, is supported by Ezek 28:13 where a whole list of precious gems are association with Eden.⁵⁷

- (ix) The prominence given to the mythical tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9.17) and the tree of life (Gen 3:22) is also congruent with the prominence given to mythical trees on the eastern horizon in ANE mythology. The tree (or plant) of life was well-known in Babylonian cosmography and was associated with the eastern horizon in the Gilgamesh Epic.
- (x) The fact that Eden was associated specifically with the tree of life (Gen 3:22) is congruent with the perception in ANE mythology that the eastern horizon was a place where immortality could be found (e.g. Gilgamesh travelled to the eastern horizon in search of immortality and dived into the primeval flood to retrieve the mythical plant of life).

F CONCLUSIONS

Past suggestions for the locality for the biblical garden in Eden mostly fell into the trap of either assuming a real historical setting (i.e. within the boundaries of our known natural world) or alternatively supposing that the garden had a fictional or fantastical setting of the same type as "Wonderland" and "Middle Earth" in the phantasies of *Alice in Wonderland*⁵⁸ and *Lord of the Rings*⁵⁹ respectively. Even in those cases where scholars did assume a mythical setting for the garden, they were often more interested in locating the possible historical garden on which this mythical garden may have been modelled than trying to identify the exact imagined position of the garden within the mythical cosmography of the ANE.

In the light of the arguments presented above, it can be concluded that it would be futile to assume a locality for Eden within the boundaries of our natural human world, because the garden was perceived as being located outside our natural world in the mythical in-between space of the eastern horizon. The well-known garden of the gods in ANE mythology was adapted within the monotheism of the OT to become the garden in Eden—the garden of the single God, YHWH. Notwithstanding this adaptation to monotheism, Eden still retained most features of the ANE mythical garden of the gods. These include: its sense of abundance, water-richness, its description as the source of the cosmic rivers like the Euphrates and Tigris, its association with mythical monsters,

⁵⁷ According to Ezekiel these gems included onyx (as mentioned in Genesis), but it also lists other precious stones like sapphires, emeralds, etc.

⁵⁸ Cf. Jackie Wullschlager, *Inventing Wonderland: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J. M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame and A. A. Milne* (London: Methuen, 1995).

⁵⁹ John R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 1993[1954]).

guards and spells (cherubs and a flaming sword), wondrous (magical) trees, the allusion to a garden of gems and its association with life and immortality.

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