

THE IMPOSSIBLE SPACES. A Commentary on Gen. 2:8-15

ABSTRACT

A close analysis of the text of Gen. 2:8-15, pertaining to the garden of Eden, shows the structural differences between said text and others from ancient mythologies that mention or describe a paradise. Likewise, that analysis suggests that the data provided by the Bible to locate paradise is merely a narrative device meant to dissipate all doubts as to the existence of the garden where God put human beings. Similarly to other spaces that appear in the Bible, the garden of Eden is but an impossible place. Throughout the centuries, however, recurring proposals have been made that aim to find paradise. As time went by, those proposals were progressively modified by the intellectual ideas dominant at any given era, thus leading the representations of the location of Paradise further and further away from the information provided by the biblical text.

Keywords: garden of Eden; attempts at location; history of biblical exegesis; narrative strategies.

1. Introduction

For centuries, the Bible has proved an inexhaustible source of motifs for art. Scenes, characters, places... have been endlessly represented. Those representations have decisively influenced the reception of the biblical texts, which became known to society not directly, but through their iconography.

This iconography, in turn, naturally followed different patterns in different ages, depending on the progress in representation techniques, theoretical ideas, biblical exegesis... Thus, the representations of the biblical motifs act as a converging point for very different intellectual approaches, and one from which exceedingly popular beliefs about the contents of the Scripture spring. An illuminating example of this can be found in Acts 15:8-9. The images in the scene narrating St. Paul's conversion have turned the idea that the Apostle-to-be fell from a horse into a widespread cliche, firmly rooted in popular culture, despite not fitting the actual narration.

Similarly, the passage of Gen. 2:8-15, that narrates how God grew a garden in Eden and put there the first human being, has generated numerous representations that heavily draw from imagination in order to give details about the garden of Eden, on account of the scarce information provided in the Bible.

Moreover, alongside the representations of paradise, during the Middle and Modern Ages, high culture hosted a debate about the location of the garden of Eden, with multiple proposals. Throughout the centuries, the elements taken into consideration to locate paradise have changed according to the intellectual momentum at any given time.

As time goes by, the ancient interest about paradise being in the East – a reference that varies as the notion of East is widened by different kinds of expeditions to Asia – gives way to the desire to locate the common source of the four rivers flowing from the garden, which first requires for them to be identified. Furthermore, this task is more and more influenced by several cultural factors that reveal a deep intellectual change in the attitude towards the sacred Scriptures.

This paper intends to offer an overview of the different approaches to the matter, comparing it to the contents of the biblical text and looking into the reasons for the shifts happening in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. In comparison with the representations of the garden of Eden, the iconography of the rivers of paradise holds a minor place in art history. It probably contributes, however, more efficiently to highlight the impact that external factors both to the Bible and to the religious institution that receives and transmits it have on the interpretations of the biblical text.

2. The structure of the text

Similarly to other texts of ancient mythologies, the Bible mentions the existence of a paradise, in the following well-known terms (Gen. 2:8-15)¹:

⁸And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. ¹¹The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹²and the gold of that land is good: there is bdellium and the onyx stone. ¹³And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. ¹⁴And the name of the third river is Hiddekel: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates. ¹⁵And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

As can be seen, this fragment is framed by two affirmations regarding man: God put man into the garden of Eden that He had grown (v. 8) and “the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (v. 15).

The information about what the garden was like is very scarce. It takes up just v. 9 – “And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” – and partially v. 10: “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads.”

In contrast, the biblical text devotes four verses (11-14) to identifying the four branches in which the ancient river was parted. Obviously, whoever could locate those four heads and determine their common source would have found paradise. Which, according to v. 8, should be placed in Eden, “eastward”.

¹ I take the translation from the *King James Version*, according to the digital edition at http://www.gasl.org/refbib/Bible_King_James_Version.pdf [retrieved on 12.07.2021].

Thus, in contrast with the concision in the description of paradise – the reader only learns that it contained “every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” –, Genesis generously provides ample geographical data: the garden is in Eden, eastward, and from it flow the four rivers, the names and the courses of which are specified profusely.

This way of proceeding is all the more surprising if compared to that habitual in other works of ancient and medieval mythology that deal with paradises. Even though in Greek mythology the garden of the Hesperides is said to be located westward, as its name implies, no further details are provided. The same goes for Dilmun as mentioned in the poem *Enki and Ninhursag*, although the author is likely to rather have in mind an idealized Sumerian city. And the same applies to Islamic Yanna.

Quite the opposite, those texts usually indulge in listing the wonders that paradise has to offer. Let us consider the description of Dilmun, where details are meant to convey the prosperity of a Sumerian town blessed by the gods (Jiménez Zamudio: 20-21; Alster)²:

49Q-49V. The city's dwellings are good dwellings. Dilmun's dwellings are good dwellings. Its grains are little grains, its dates are big dates, its harvests are triple, its wood is wood.

50-54. At that moment, on that day, and under the sun, when Utu stepped up into heaven, from the standing vessels (?) on Ezen's (?) shore, from Nanna's radiant high temple, from the mouth of the waters running underground, fresh waters ran out of the ground for her.

55-62. The waters rose up from it into her great basins. Her city drank water aplenty from them. Dilmun drank water aplenty from them. Her pools of salt water indeed became pools of fresh water. Her fields, glebe and furrows indeed produced grain for her. Her city indeed became an emporium on the quay for the Land. Dilmun indeed became an emporium on the quay for the Land. At that moment, on that day, and under that sun, so it indeed happened.

The text enumerates at length the goodness of Dilmun: its houses, the fruits of the soil, the waters... And not differently do the Koran and the hadiths proceed when they discuss the future delights that await the righteous: they shall find rivers of milk and honey, orchards, and houris...

Interestingly, the Bible itself contains an example of the approach that favors a minutely detailed description of paradise over any attempt at locating it: the passage where the prophet Isaiah recounts what the new heavens and the new earth will be like. Frequently in terms subconsciously transposed to the world as Genesis narrates it (García-Jalón, 2006: 434), the fragment reads as follows (Isa. 65:17-25)³:

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no

² Translation taken from <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> > etcsl [retrieved on 12.07.2021].

³ Translation taken from the *King James Version*, at http://www.gasl.org/refbib/Bible_King_James_Version.pdf [retrieved on 12.07.2021].

more heard in her, nor the voice of crying. There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die a hundred years old; but the sinner being a hundred years old shall be accursed. And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them. And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord.

Truth be told, it could be gathered that this text is more deeply influenced by Eastern mythologies than the one in Genesis. The latter seems more interested in the location of paradise than in paradise itself. Given the abundant cartographic data, Gen. 2:8-15 appears to be challenging the reader to locate the garden of Eden. Which, as a matter of fact, has been an endeavor undertaken by many in the course of history, with the available data as a starting point. This alone makes elaborating on the cartography of paradise worth our while.

3. The data to locate the garden of Eden

The first piece of information provided by Genesis is that the garden was located in Eden, eastward. The biblical text mentions Eden repeatedly, be it as a name of person (e.g., 2 Chron. 29:12; 31:15; Ezek. 27:23), as a name of place (e.g., 2 Kings 19:12; Isa. 37:12; 2 Kings 19:12), or in an ambiguous manner (e.g., Isa. 37:12). None of those texts, however, offers any elements that may allow to locate the land of Eden. We do know that *eden* means *delight*, which is a suggestive piece of information in itself.

As it happens, the land of Eden must not have been familiar to the addressee of Genesis, since the text feels compelled to point out that Eden was "eastward". Needless to say, this indication is hardly informative at all: not only is it vague, it does not even specify eastward of where. The authors who have glossed this annotation have observed that the East is the noblest place on earth, supporting this view with a wide array of arguments.

This very same lack of familiarity on the reader's part with the names appearing in the text, as well as the almost non-existent information to identify the places that are discussed, resurfaces again apropos of the four streams that branched away from the river originating in Eden.

About those three rivers, in addition to the names, some supplementary information is given to the reader. This suggests that the sole name is not considered informative enough to identify which river it is. If we are to accept this reasoning, the opposite happens with the fourth river: it is said to be the Euphrates, and this fact alone seems to be regarded as sufficient for the reader to ascertain the identity of it.

It seems now necessary to revise the translation we have used, so as to clarify some aspects.

The first river mentioned is the Pishon. It is said to encircle the entire land of Havilah. That said, in Hebrew, the phrase "land of Havilah" has at least two different interpretations.

According to the first one, Havilah is a toponym and its function is explanatory to “land of”. In this case, Havilah would be a hapax in the biblical text. As for the second one, Havilah should be understood as a name of person, acting as a noun complement with possessive meaning. In the Bible, Havilah is listed among the children of Cush, oldest son of Ham and grandson of Noah (Gen. 10:7; 1Chron. 1:9). MT admits either reads, whereas LXX favors the latter.

Be as it may, the location of this land is impossible. The biblical text offers profuse information about it: in Havilah there is gold, good gold, and bdellium and lapis lazuli also abound. For all their abundance, though, each of these pieces of information is not quite useful in itself, so much so, that if the reader had actually attempted to identify the river, they would have hardly made any progress at all.

About the second river, the Gihon, it is said to encircle the entire land of Ethiopia. In rendering it so, the translator follows LXX. In contrast, MT speaks of “land of Cush”. We find this name, Cush, again, after appearing as Havilah’s father in the first occurrence. The Scripture mentions somewhat frequently the Cushites, understanding as such a dark-skinned people (Jer. 13:23). Based upon the translation of LXX and on Flavius Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1, 6), it is safe to assume that Cush should be identified with a territory more or less coincident with present-day Ethiopia.

Regarding these first two rivers, one more consideration is to be added: an ethymological analysis of the names of the rivers shows that they are common names. *Pishon* means “stream”, or perhaps “pouring”. As for *Gihon*, it means “spring” or “flowing” (Douglas: s.v.). Thus, not even the names of the rivers shed light on where paradise could be.

To name the third river, the version we have used adheres to MT, which calls it Hiddekel – ethymologically, *arrow, fast-paced course* – and strays from LXX, which usually translates Hiddekel as Tigris, on the assumption that the former is the Hebrew name for the latter. In doing so, it follows a tradition originating in the uses of Old Persian (Douglas: s.v.). This practice of LXX, however, is not without exceptions.

In the codices Vaticanus and Alexandrinus, Dan. 10:4 leaves untranslated the name Hiddekel, in contrast with Sinaiticus, which renders it as Tigris. The three codices record the name of the river in inverted commas, as an explanation of the sentence that precedes said explanation, so the translated text reads: “I was by the great river, namely the Tigris [the Hiddekel]”. When MT behaves in a similar way, the editor suggests that it is an interpolation.

At any rate, also in the case of this third river a piece of information is added that helps to identify it: it is said to run east of Asyria. Once again, this observation encourages to conclude that the mere name is not enough to identify what river we are talking about.

The only difference between the supplementary information provided about the first river and the following two is that, unlike in the first case, in the other two some references are introduced that are supposedly known to the reader – the land of Cush and Asyria, respectively – and consequently require no further explanation.

Finally, the fourth river mentioned is, in MT, the Phrat, about which no information but the name is provided, always translated as Euphrates in the old versions, probably following also in this case the usual Old Persian nomenclature (Douglas: s.v.).

To sum it up, at this point we can take a step forward. The biblical text, which is not focused on describing paradise, but rather on providing data about its location, actually offers very little information in this regard, since the data is hardly informative at all, despite its abundance.

4. A narrative strategy and its meaning

From a present-day perspective, everything concerning the location of the garden of Eden should probably be regarded solely as a pragmatic resource: the text draws the reader's attention towards the possible location of paradise, persuading them to accept its existence implicitly (García-Jalón, 2003). Thus, it is rooted in the reader's conscience that there exists an idyllic place, untouched by the corruption of sin, and which could be theoretically accessed. That would explain that attention is mainly paid to the cartographic data, no matter how extensive yet barely informative it may be, at the expense of the description of paradise. It seems as though the text were challenging the reader to embark upon a quest to find the paradisiacal garden, which implies accepting its existence without the shadow of a doubt.

This kind of resources is not unusual in the Bible. When Ezekiel describes his vision of the temple, the overwhelming profusion of information actually prevents from figuring out exactly the blueprint of the building (Ezek. 40-43). This has led to many different interpretations and to a number of proposals as to what it was like (Martínez Casas, Fadón Salazar, and Villar del Fresno; Goudeau). Something similar was pointed out by Laguna Paúl regarding the so-called "House of the Forest of Lebanon", and can also be said about the distribution of the promised land in Josh. 14-21 (García-Jalón and Guevara: 174-239).

As regards the location of paradise – as well as the rest of the instances above mentioned and others that can be found in biblical literature –, the effectiveness of this narrative strategy is proven by its results: many authors and travelers have pursued the task of finding the garden of Eden or reflecting upon where it is.

If things were so, if what we are dealing with here was just a narrative strategy to dissipate all doubt about the existence of paradise, it would be necessary to consider the reasons why the biblical text gives so much importance to the existence of the garden that God grew in Eden. To this end, a brief consideration must be made.

Indeed, the biblical account of Eden heavily borrows from ancient mythologies (Kramer: 37-41; Bottéro and Kramer): the existence of a garden that contains a grove, the trees of knowledge and life, the possibility for man to attain immortality if he eats the fruits of those trees, the tempting snake, the punishment for transgression...

But the coincidence of these elements cannot make us forget the fundamental differences between those mythical stories and that of Genesis. When discussing the importance that Genesis gives to the location of the garden, we have already pointed out some of those differences. It is now time to look deeper into it.

As Blázquez Martínez (Blázquez Martínez: 110) accurately states, "en el relato del Paraíso el jardín no se designa como jardín de Dios, ni como morada de los dioses. Está plantado sólo para el hombre". ["in the narrative of paradise the garden is not presented as a garden of God, nor as a dwelling of the gods. It has been grown for man only".] This element is crucial.

In contrast with the garden described in the Sumerian poem *Enki and Ninhursag* or the garden of the Hesperides in Greek mythology, the garden of Eden has been made for man to inhabit. And contrary to Islamic mythology, the garden is not appointed as a reward for the righteous (Asín Palacios: 192-212), but rather as the place where the first man dwells.

To this must be added that the garden of Eden is grown by God at the beginning of time. Meant for the human being, it appears right before the creation of man and linked to it. Once again, we find here a key difference between Genesis and the mythological narratives enumerated or mentioned so far.

In this context, the fact that Adam is put in Eden can be seen as the last step in the creating process. If Adam is created good and must live in harmony with the world, which is also good, it becomes necessary for him to inhabit a place where that harmony is possible, where there are plenty of fruit trees suitable for feeding upon effortlessly and without animal sacrifice or exploitation of land. That is a restricted world, different from the world that man will have to inhabit after sin. The idea that such paradise exists is in agreement with that of a creator God who has done everything right and who has put man in an environment fit for him to reach fulfillment.

Consequently, defending the existence of paradise on earth becomes of the essence in order to properly appreciate the divine creation as narrated in Gen. 2. It also makes evident that the handling of the elements taken by Genesis from the narratives of the neighboring cultures and, above all, the narrative function assigned to paradise itself, differs substantially from that given to and accomplished by it in other surrounding narratives.

5. The search for paradise

An interpretation such as the one above proposed is far from the ideas about meaning that prevailed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. During those periods – and even in years much closer to our age –, the mainstream idea was that texts represented reality. By virtue of that belief, when Alfonso X decides to write a *General Estoria*, he extracts from the Bible the information pertaining to the first ages of man and uses this source just the same as he uses others when it comes to narrating later eras (Sánchez-Prieto Borja, Díaz Moreno, and Trujillo Belso). Likewise, Thierry de Chartres assumes that Gen. 1 provides the necessary elements to develop a scientific astronomy (Reinhardt and García Ruiz).

To this belief another one must be added that is inherited from Antiquity and still applies nowadays: any allegorical interpretation must be based upon the literal understanding of the text and, when literal understanding meets certain conditions, the allegorical reading is rendered unnecessary.

As it stands, it comes as no surprise that, despite the scarcity and imprecision of the information provided by the biblical text to locate paradise, throughout history, numerous biblical exegetes and many travelers and expeditioners have tried to locate it. Not long ago, Juan Gil (Gil, 2004/2005) published a comprehensive summary of those attempts that, in view of their extent, can be considered an illustrative sample.

According to Gil, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, quite a few thought that the garden of Eden was in fact the entire earth, or that it should be regarded as a state or a symbolic place. Those beliefs, however, were held by a minority, whereas the mainstream conviction was that paradise was located in a specific area.

In all of them, the biblical fact that paradise was located eastward played a major role. So much so, that in the oldest medieval narratives, the four rivers are barely taken into account in locating the garden (Gil, 2004/2005: 196).

In agreement with the importance given to the East in the first medieval texts that deal with the location of paradise, the Burgo de Osma Beatus depicts a map of the earth on the upper side of which Eden appears (Gómez Mayordomo: 60). There, the four rivers are represented in the form of a cross meant to fill the world. This is a model of representation that will be imitated by other works of the time.

But as time goes by, the rivers gain more and more prominence. Retrieving an idea passed down from Antiquity, it is taken for granted that two of those rivers are the Tigris and

the Euphrates, and it is thought that the other two have to be the Nile and the Ganges, which were deemed sacred at the time. Any objections that could be risen about the possibility that these four rivers may have a common source are ruled out by arguing that the flood narrated in chapters 7 and 8 of Genesis would have substantially altered the shape of the earth (Gil, 2004/2005: 219-220), even though prominent medieval theologians had maintained that the waters of the flood did not affect paradise.

Meanwhile, some Christian authors spread a tradition originating in Muslim cultural circles, according to which the two other rivers would be the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya (Gil, 2004/2005: 197). They are two mighty water streams that spring from the Aral Sea or the surrounding area, which, considering the present-day configuration of earth, gives this proposal a certain geographic coherence. We have two rivers whose sources are relatively close to each other and whose courses run parallel to those of the Tigris and the Euphrates, and at a reasonable distance that allows to think that all of them could be born in a far-off common spring. Nevertheless, no one, that we know of, ever attempted to locate said spring.

That said, if we take into consideration either the Muslim proposal or a possible common source for the Tigris and the Euphrates that could offer some insight into the location of paradise, the territory of Armenia was a suitable place to seek Eden. Moreover, this hypothesis is further supported by the fact that on the Armenian border rises Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark came to rest after the flood (Gen. 8, 4), which endowed Armenia with a certain biblical lineage and invited to search for paradise there. That is why, in the 13th and 14th centuries, a number of Franciscans visiting the region considered reaching the limits of the garden of Eden. And in the 15th century, the Castilian ambassador to the Sultan also mentions something along those lines.

However, as the great medieval journeys begin, many of them undertaken by Franciscan friars, the idea of East expands and gradually the East that Genesis speaks of in order to locate paradise shifts to the Far East. Factoring in the idea of the four rivers, a place in the Far East must be found where four mighty water streams flow.

Over the years, these ideas will be abandoned and replaced by the belief that paradise must have been located somewhere near Old Palestine, or even right there.

All the proposals so far discussed, illustrative of the approaches to the issue dominant in the Middle Ages, entail no substantial change in the interpretation of the information provided by the biblical text. The opposite happens when, in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the trading and geographic expeditions, as well as the recurring missionary journeys, encourage the idea that paradise is to be located in Africa (Gil, 2004/2005: 200-201). Such proposals are of the utmost importance. First of all, they are somewhat symbolical interpretations, as they ignore the literal interpretation of the information provided by Genesis. In addition, this disregard for the literality of the biblical words reveals a new way of interaction with the sacred Scripture that becomes more and more marked as the Renaissance progresses.

In this age, some support the idea that paradise must be located in the New World (Gil, 2004/2005: 207-210), citing reasons not taken from the biblical text, but from mythological traditions of Antiquity that pertain to the characteristics of sacred rivers. The location of paradise somewhere in America has, occasionally, a marked political intention (Hurtado Ruiz).

Aside from this case, those who claim that the garden of Eden must be sought in Africa or America are ultimately joining an intellectual movement that spreads all over Europe from the Renaissance on, and that can be traced in very different initiatives with the desacralization

of the biblical text as their common denominator.

This desacralization is already evident in the early 18th century (Krzemien: 54), but in an incipient stage it is announced by the debate about the primeval language that takes place in the 16th century. In opposition to the so far commonly accepted idea that the primitive language had been Hebrew (Eskhult), in the 16th century there was no shortage of opinions that proposed as the primitive language those spoken by the authors of the theory in point (Perea Siller), which led Demonet-Launay to speak of the desacralization of Hebrew in as early as the 16th century (Demonet-Launay).

The desacralization – of the biblical texts and, more precisely, of Hebrew – responds to the shift of paradigm as regards to the understanding of the literal meaning of the Scripture. This literal meaning is no longer defined by the authority of the Church, and results from the mere study of the texts instead. Pablo of Santa María's criticism to Nicholas of Lyra's hermeneutics aptly exemplifies the consequences that, according to the Spanish author, this change entailed (García-Jalón, 2018).

Thus, the interpreters, although unknowingly and even intending the opposite, become judges of the text. This allows them to interact with it in a new way, with the interpretations both literal and symbolic easily mixed up, and the assessment of which parts of the text should take preference becoming a decision left to the reader's discretion.

This could be what leads to the proposals that locate paradise in Africa and, above all, in the just-discovered America, completely disregarding the information provided in the biblical text. A line of thought is followed that recognizes the traits attributed to sacred rivers by the classical tradition of mythology in some American rivers (Gil, 2013). As a result, the characteristics that secular literature assigns to a paradisiacal place are favored over the concision of the biblical description of the garden of Eden, and are taken as indicators of the identification of some American places and the lost paradise.

In this way, the transformation of the intellectual mindset from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance determines biblical interpretation: openly in the location of paradise, in an implicit manner in the reading of many other passages of the Bible.

In addition to this cartographic interpretations, supposedly founded on the literal sense of the Scripture, there were always iconographic representations, where the allegorical senses prevailed. Obviously, both of these models of exegesis – literal and allegorical – are not mutually exclusive, although each of them produces different models of representation. As has just been shown, literal interpretations result in cartographic productions, whereas allegorical interpretations, more abundant in the Middle Ages, despite not starting then and never really being abandoned, generate a profusion of representations (Gómez Mayordomo; Morris & Sawyer). Gómez Mayordomo (Gómez Mayordomo: 76-77) points out that

Durante la Edad Media, los ríos del Paraíso personificados se documentan en variedad de soportes desde principios del siglo IX hasta el siglo X, sobre todo en la Europa occidental. La iconografía que prevalece en dichas obras es la derivada del prototipo más utilizado en la Antigüedad Clásica de los dioses-rio, consistente en la figura fluvial reclinada y apoyada sobre una urna, de la que mana su propio caudal. Las imágenes medievales, en cambio, representan a los ríos del Edén ya no apoyados, sino que normalmente son ellos los que portan grandes vasijas de las que se desprende el agua. Otra característica que se mantiene es que a menudo suelen aparecer en las cuatro esquinas de la composición principal, que como dijimos hacen referencia a las cuatro partes del mundo al que fluían.

[During the Middle Ages, the rivers of paradise personified are recorded in an array of media from the early 9th century up to the 10th century, mostly in western Europe. The iconography predominant in those works derives from the prototype most used in Classical Antiquity of the river-gods, consisting of the fluvial figure reclined and leaning on an urn, from which his own stream flows. The medieval images, on the other hand, represent the rivers of Eden not leaning, but typically carrying big vessels from which the water pours. Another trait that remains is that they often appear in the four corners of the main composition, in reference, as we said, to the four parts of the world towards which they flowed].

Consequently, the use of elements from old mythology to represent biblical contents, which in the Renaissance would lead to stray farther and farther away from them to locate paradise, is also hinted at in the Middle Ages, even if just in the iconographic representations.

Needless to say, symbolic interpretations of the four rivers were frequent since Christian Antiquity, linking them to virtues, the four gospels, the four cardinal points vivified by the baptismal waters... They are adaptations to Christianity of similar approaches that can be already found in the primitive rabbinic writings.

There were also some who argued that anything concerning paradise must be understood symbolically only. So did Origen maintain, and Guillaume Postel agreed with him centuries later. Opposing their view, however, both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as the vast majority of authors – including Voltaire, always prone to label his opponents as naive (Gil, 2004/2005: 214) –, argued that symbolic interpretation could not be at the expense of the affirmation of the actual existence of the garden of Eden.

6. Conclusion: the impossible places

In sum, the interpretation of the sense that paradise and its location has is determined by the intellectual mindset prevailing in textual interpretation at any given time. To the initial literalism of the Middle Ages follows a much more relaxed interpretation as the Renaissance progresses, whereas nowadays it opens up to textual analysis in the light of the recent contributions from narrative studies.

It is precisely that very capacity of the text to bear the different hermeneutic perspectives throughout history that proves its literary quality. Biblical accounts of the origins of the world cannot be read as naive narratives oriented to a gullible audience, but rather as semantically dense, complex constructions that embrace a wide array of interpretations while resisting submission to any of them.

Quite probably, the garden of Eden is but one those impossible places that are common in the Bible, by means of which the text plays with the reader using highly efficient rhetorical devices that persuade them to accept without question what should in principle be more controversial, and that lead them to discuss vehemently minor aspects instead. This approach avoids the controversy between literal and allegorical interpretation by means of ignoring the idea that all texts are referential.

If this thesis is maintained, the process of creation would not have ended until God grew in Eden the garden where man in his original state was to dwell. And thus, the challenge to find paradise would remain forever open.

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