

EDEN AS A PARADIGM FOR ECOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP

AN EXEGETIC EXPLORATION OF GENESIS 2.15-17

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Abstract

This article explores the role of Eden in human history and the contemporary era via exegesis of Genesis 2.15-17. Employing historical-critical exegesis, it scrutinizes four pivotal expressions in Genesis, proposing a novel translation with an emphasis on environmental stewardship. Insights from mythology and religious studies enrich the research, underlining the relevance of Eden's narrative to modern environmental conservation dialogues. The analysis offers interpretative insights that could advance revisions and translations of biblical texts while contributing to environmental discourse. The unique approach integrates Theology, exegesis, mythology, Religious studies and Environmental science, thereby positioning these ancient texts within contemporary discourse.

Keywords: pre-history, Paradise, Earth, the Tree of Knowledge, archetype

1. Introduction

Biblical prehistory reveals that authentic humanity, represented by the primal man and woman (Adam), is fundamentally realized in communion with God. Genesis establishes that God first crafted the 'Kingdom' - the world and Nature, only to introduce the most important creation, humans, to this Kingdom towards the culmination of His work. The role of humanity was to exercise rational dominion, an assertion made evident in Genesis 2.15-17 (NRSV translation), which states: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'"

The significance of this study lies in its illumination of the initial state of humans in Eden - a state characterized by an intimate and enigmatic union with a God whom they unconditionally revered and obeyed. The human role, as indicated in the act of Creation, is to be the image and likeness of God [1]. Our

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progenitors manifested their creative potential by ‘working’, an intellectual activity epitomized by naming the animals. Concurrently, they were expected to cultivate their spiritual advancement. Eden was a sacred territory, a space for the attainment of a higher, blissful state of the spirit.

The term ‘work’ places the Edenic human in the position of a good gardener or farmer. The term ‘keep’ tends to portray our ancestors as protective wardens. Yet, despite this Biblical narrative, it is logical to surmise that there was no real need to guard the Garden of Eden before the Fall. The harmony and perfection that reigned negated any need for protection, possibly excepting against irrational animals that could potentially damage natural beauty, much like rampaging elephants in Africa today. However, everything was perfect as created by God then. Animals, existing in a state of perfect harmony, posed no harm to humans and did not inflict damage on Nature. It was different post-Fall.

In a spiritual context, we see Eden replicated within the Old and New Testament Church. God intended and still intends to shield us from temptations in the holy environment of the Church, offering divine commandments for us to live a holy, godly and devout life. We can make offerings to God and, in turn, sacrifice for our neighbours according to our abilities, similar to the incarnate Son of God whose salvific work culminated with the cross, resurrection [2], and ascension to Heaven, back to the Father, into Paradise [3].

God wants us, through the Church, the Holy Scripture, and sacred Tradition, to discern good from evil, much like the knowledge that the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ symbolizes. God practices only good, knowing evil and sin in a purely theoretical sense. He never exploits His will for evil or sin. This is a lesson humans should learn during their earthly lives.

One of the core elements of this discourse is the aforementioned passage from Genesis 2.15-17, which encompasses four distinctive expressions (Eden, to work, to keep, tree of the knowledge of good and evil) that we will aim to analyse, translate, and interpret in a novel manner, shedding more light on the subject than has been previously done. These mythic-poetic terms used by the Biblical author offer fresh perspectives for understanding human interaction with the environment.

2. Historical and societal context of the studied biblical text

Humankind is now commissioned to steward the Earth under divine protection. Humans represent the zenith of God’s creative work; He “crowned them with glory and honour” and made them rulers over all creation (Psalm 8.6-9). The Garden of Eden, as the author of Genesis perceives it, was in Mesopotamia, located at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Genesis 2.14). Today, this territory would geographically correspond to the region of southern Iraq. Talmudic tradition suggests that Eden spanned across the territories of Israel, Arabia, and Mesopotamia, known for their fertile lands, abundant water sources, and gardens - places of prosperity and “sensual delights” [4].

The term Eden עֵדֶן is synonymous with 'paradise' and likely relates either: 1) to the Hebrew term for 'bliss', pleasure, or delight (Psalm 36.9), or 2) to the Mesopotamian term signifying 'plain'. Sumerian mythology, for example, describes a place called Dilmun, a land of immortality and freedom from pain, bearing a striking resemblance to the biblical Eden [5]. However, in this Sumerian paradise, only gods, goddesses, and animals exist, as humanity had not yet been created. In this divine garden, where the pure soil of life exists for the sake of animals and plants, fields and meadows, the gods created water that revives all [6].

This biblical paradise bears notable parallels to one of the ancient world's wonders - the Hanging Gardens of Babylon [7]. It would be more interesting to examine its Sumerian equivalent, E.DIN, translated as 'House of the Righteous'. Like the biblical account, this was a river valley flowing down from high mountains in the north. It was a place where people were free from disease and scarcity, filled with beautiful gardens and spring water, a place where people did not die. However, according to legend, a sin occurred here. The Sumerian mythology also knows a so-called 'plant/tree of life' called 'chu'. One of its inhabitants ate a forbidden plant. It was a plant that restored youth and ensured immortality. Gilgamesh heard about it from Utnapishtim (synonymous with the biblical Noah), and he set out for it. To acquire it, he had to dive into the sea, where at its bottom, he found a thorn plant similar to a rose. However, on his return journey, he lost it. A snake (!) stole it, having sensed its fragrance, taking advantage of Gilgamesh's inattentiveness while he bathed in the river. Thanks to this plant, the snake gained the ability to shed its skin and renew it, just like all reptiles do to this day.

Long-standing assumptions suggested that the Sumerian paradise should be sought in Bahrain, an area on the western coast of the Persian Gulf. This place, also known as Dilmun, does not correspond to the description of Paradise in the poem 'Enki and Ninchursaga'. While it is indeed a clean, virgin, and holy land, it lacks people, animals, and even water (!). According to the myth, it was Enki who ensured its supply of water and food. Its inhabitants likely called this place Agaru.

From a geological perspective, the correlation of Biblical Eden with real geographic locales remains speculative at best. The physical features of Eden, as described in Genesis, present a locale characterized by remarkable fertility, replete with copious water sources. These descriptions have often led researchers to consider the Fertile Crescent, a region that curves from the Persian Gulf, through modern-day Iraq and Syria, and down to Egypt, as the potential location of Eden. This region is characterized by rich alluvial soil and a favourable climate for agriculture, factors that may have contributed to the emergence of some of the earliest known human civilizations. Moreover, the presence of four rivers - Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates - as noted in Genesis 2.10-14, suggests a well-watered location.

However, the confluence of these four rivers into a single geographical area raises difficulties from a geological standpoint. The Tigris and Euphrates, for instance, do meet in modern Iraq to form the Shatt al-Arab, which then flows into the Persian Gulf. However, the identities and locations of the Pishon and Gihon remain uncertain, with theories ranging from rivers in modern-day Iran and Kuwait to as far as the Nile in Egypt or rivers in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, the considerable changes in the Earth's surface over the millennia since the texts were written, due to both natural geological processes and human intervention, have likely altered the river courses and landscapes of the region. Thus, the precise geographical correlation of the rivers mentioned in Genesis with current water bodies is challenging, if not impossible.

It is also crucial to recognize that the Biblical Eden is presented not merely as a physical space but also as a theological construct and a symbol. It embodies a divine ideal of a world free from sin, suffering and death. This understanding opens up the possibility that the Garden of Eden transcends literal geography, embodying an archetype of the perfect divine-human relationship.

In conclusion, while geological and historical data provide some clues about the potential physical location of the Biblical Eden, it is more than a historical or geographical site. It represents the divine ideal for humanity and the world, an ideal that remains influential in religious, philosophical, and cultural discourses to this day.

3. Exegetical analysis of essential concepts

God took the first human, placed him in the Garden of Eden, and established a law - a commandment - not to eat the fruit of a single tree. The man could consume the fruits of all the other trees in the garden. By bringing the first humans into the garden, God presented them with an eternal homeland in his proximity. This gift, however, does not imply an escape from duties and responsibilities. Man receives the explicit order to cultivate the garden and guard it. The command to cultivate could have also applied to the Earth, but this was a joyful and free service. In a way, it could be considered a form of worship, as both verbs in the Old Hebrew 'abad' עָבַד meant to serve, care for, and 'shamar' שָׁמַר meant to guard and was used to express the service of Levites and priests in the temple [8].

The Hebrew 'acholtochel' אָכַל implies that one can or will eat, and 'mottamut' מוֹת translates as you will surely die. It's an apodictic statement - indicating a prohibition to eat - an authoritative declaration 'lótóchal' אָכַל. From a rhetorical perspective, it is a clear expression of the speaker's authority. In the domestic context of this genre, it translates to parental or pedagogical authoritative instructions, also as divine guidelines (e.g. the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20.3).

The Hebrew (Masoretic) text translates the Garden of Eden גֶּן-עֵדֶן with the Septuagint (LXX) term as παραδείσω - (paradeiso), and Eden translates as a menagerie, garden, park, or paradise of Persian origin (Genesis 2.15). For a

person living in the Middle East, it is an oasis where God placed the human to care for it. To till or cultivate רָבַע , a similar expression is found in (Genesis 2.5). The term in the Septuagint is ‘εργαζεσθε’ (ergazeste), where the word εργάζομαι (ergazomai) translates as to cultivate, work, or toil. To keep רָמַץ , the Septuagint uses the word ‘φυλάσσειν’ (filassein), where the word φυλλάσω (fillaso) translates as to guard or protect.

The trees grew of their own accord, and a river(s) irrigated the garden, so human labour wasn’t strenuous. Thus, man’s duty to till and keep the garden is interpreted allegorically. According to the Torah, ‘tilling and keeping’ is the performance of positive commandments and the avoidance of what is prohibited (Pirkede Rabbi Eliezer [8]). The goal of human existence in this world is, therefore, to serve God. If he abides by this, his material needs will be met (Chumash). Kochan brings to our attention the ideas of Saint Gregory of Nyssa who in his commentary on the Beatitudes teaches that “man should employ all his abilities in the ‘tilling’ of the world, in creation, in virtue, in love, in order to become like God through this, because the pinnacle of a virtuous life is the imitation of God” [9, p. 30].

Holy Fathers (Ephrem the Syrian, Gregory the Theologian and Basil the Great) see the prohibition not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a divine pedagogical strategy. It signifies that the first humans were in the phase of maturation and moral development. The forbidden fruit was not inherently evil, but eating it prematurely - before Adam and Eve were morally ready - led to disastrous consequences. Their spiritual education required the cultivation of virtue, self-control and obedience before they could discern and handle the knowledge of good and evil in a responsible, God-pleasing manner.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil is thus viewed as a tree of decision, of free will. The teaching of Saint Isaac the Syrian views it as an icon of the future - every decision has its consequences. Free will does not imply the right to choose between good and evil but the freedom to choose good and thus to participate in the divine life. The choice of evil is a misuse of free will, a move away from its authentic purpose [10].

For Philo of Alexandria, the narrative of the Garden of Eden demonstrates that the human soul should strive for spiritual fruits, for divine knowledge, which is symbolized by the Tree of Life, instead of focusing on sensual, earthly goods symbolized by the Tree of knowledge of good and evil (Philo, *De opificio mundi*). The Fathers of the Church, in their exegesis of the Genesis narrative, suggest that Adam was intended to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when he had matured sufficiently. However, Adam failed to obey God’s commandment due to the temptation from the serpent (representing Satan), which caused the Fall of Man.

The transgression of the first humans is thus not the pursuit of knowledge but disobedience to God’s command, driven by pride and self-will. The commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge was temporary, intended for the period of spiritual and moral maturation. Adam’s sin was his self-willed, immature seizure of this knowledge, which he was not yet ready to handle

responsibly (as Chrysostom pointed out in his *Commentary on Genesis*). The punishment of death should be understood not merely in a physical sense, but also spiritually, as a separation from God, who is the source of life.

In summary, the narrative of the Garden of Eden presents the paradisiacal state as one of union with God, characterized by service, freedom, and moral responsibility. The Fall represents a departure from this state, caused by disobedience and misuse of free will, leading to a self-imposed exile from the divine presence. The hope of humanity lies in the return to this paradisiacal state, achievable through repentance, faith, and virtuous living.

4. Biblical and non-biblical context of the studied text

The biblical prehistory (Chapters 1-11 of Genesis) is an oral folk tradition recorded in a simple, relatively easily memorable manner. To decipher its message, it is both suitable and somewhat difficult to compare and 'confront' it with pagan myths. Without such analysis, however, we cannot attain a certain religious overview to understand their message. Both of these ancient traditions dealt with the origins of the world and humanity, the Fall, the question of good and evil or eternal life, the world's flood... monotheism or polytheism. However, it must be said that for believers (Jews and Christians), the biblical text is still sacred, infallible, because the scribe wrote it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The oldest religions often perceive the tree as a source of life, health and a symbol of eternity. In the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, several deities are more or less identified with different plants. Gaokerena was a mythical healing plant of uncertain botanical identity, also known as Haoma. It is often compared to the more well-known Soma mentioned in the Indian Vedas. Both are known for their medicinal and hallucinogenic effects and were also used to prepare drinks. Whether they were trees remains questionable, but their description mentions roots, trunk and branches.

In the reliefs from the Assyrian Empire period, there are complex structures of knots and branches found near the figures representing deities and kings. Similarly, shapes reminiscent of trees can be seen on the shields of the Urartu Empire warriors. A more specific connection from antiquity is known between the ancient Egyptian goddess Shu and the Agate tree, which they planted around her shrines.

Ficus religiosa, or Bodhi, was the tree under which Buddha achieved enlightenment. The Chinese variant of the tree of life is Fusang, often having a Phoenix in its crown and occasionally a dragon lying at its roots. Taoists revere the peach, a symbol of youth, wealth and longevity.

Judeo-Christian tradition knows the tree mainly in two forms. The first is the Tree of Knowledge from the biblical story of Adam and Eve's original sin. Its characterization 'tree of knowledge of good and evil' is interpreted by scholars as a figurative way of referring to everything that exists. In the Jewish religion, it is called Etz Chaim, and mentions of it in the Torah occur in several

other passages. The second is the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, an iconic symbol of this mystical stream, with ten interconnected nodes (Sefirot) expressing archetypes.

In Islam, another of the great monotheistic religions, the equivalent of the paradise tree is known as the Tree of Immortality, and Allah also forbade the first people to consume its fruits.

The ancient Celts considered a whole range of trees to be sacred. The birch was the tree of fairies, the oak played a role in druidic rites, ash seeds were used for divination, and the apple tree was revered as a symbol of immortality.

Yggdrasil, a significant concept of Norse mythology, is described in poetry as a tree at the centre of the nine worlds that make up the Universe. Germanic pagan cults worshiped the oak and Slavic ones the linden tree.

In pre-Columbian America, the motif of the tree is present in artefacts of all its major cultures. Among the Maya, the kapok tree (*Ceiba*), which is very similar in size and shape of the crown to the currently popular design versions of the Tree of Life, prevails. The stone carving Izapa Stela 5 found at an archaeological site in Mexico depicts a tree connecting the heavens with the underworld.

“In ancient mythologies, this tree has no parallel, but in the context of biblical narration, it plays a key role” [11]. It is the mythological-poetic expression of the scribe. Pagans perceived it as a magic tree, through which a person could get from Earth to Heaven. This is indicated by mythology and has also been preserved in the fairy tales of many nations.

In Greek mythology, there is talk of a garden where the Tree of Life grows with golden apples that provide gods with eternal youth. This tree is guarded by Ladon, who is characterized in the text as a dragon and ichnographically is depicted as a snake. So in this case, it is some kind of biblical mix - the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Trees have aroused great interest in humans from the beginning of history, and that was the reason why pagans began to deify them, pay them sacred honour, create sacred groves where they sacrificed to pagan deities. The Bible says that God or his messengers met with God-fearing people by the trees (Genesis 18.1). The bronze (copper) serpent on the pole (Numbers 21.8-9) or the wood of the cross, on which the Saviour died, has become a symbol of salvation and redemption for believers.

The biblical prologue is the spiritual history of the world's beginning, humanity, and events that happened long ago, which are expressed in the language of images, symbols and vivid pictures... The Bible, that is depth, its oldest parts, especially parts of the book of Genesis, are revealed according to the laws of logic, which do not separate concrete from abstract, image from idea, symbol from symbolizing reality. It is possible that it is a poetic or sacramental logic and its primitiveness is only apparent, at first glance [12].

The apocryphal Book of Jubilees points out that Adam and Eve resided in the Garden of Eden for seven years, cultivating and guarding it [13]. Angels assigned them work and taught them how to care for the garden. They tended to

the garden in a state of nakedness, unaware and unashamed. They protected the garden from birds, animals and livestock. They gathered and ate fruits, saving the remainder for later use, and stocking up their supplies.

The 'Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil' essentially stands as a symbol, eluding any botanical classification. It represents humanity's desire to be as wise as the Creator and to progress in knowledge and acquisition of new and appropriate insights at the right time. Hence, any speculation about whether it was an apple, fig, pomegranate or other known fruit is irrelevant.

It is important to note that work is expected from humans even before the fall. Paradise is not a place for idleness and inactivity. Work is part of human nature from the beginning. Pagan myths *Enuma Elish* and the epic of *Atrahasis* speak of humans created for the purpose of working in place of the gods (EE 6, 33-36; A 1, 190-197) [14], such as digging irrigation canals. Interestingly, in Mesopotamia, the Sumerians and Egyptians had a well-developed irrigation canal system because they fully understood the need and significance of water and its life-giving effects. In some cases, they even deified it, such as the Nile River in Egypt.

Scripture does not suggest that the Creator passed his duties onto humans. Work is an integral part of human life. Only after the fall and expulsion from paradise did work become more strenuous and challenging. Work before the fall is portrayed as a normal, intellectual activity, which consisted of naming animals. Adam was the first zoologist and botanist. Even plants needed to be studied and named, although the Holy Scripture does not mention this directly. Naming things in the world emphasizes that humans rule and reign over the created world [15].

In Sumerian literature, one preserved tablet discusses the earliest human impressions of the golden age of humanity. It is an epic composition about Enmerkar and the land of Arrate. The third chapter, consisting of 21 verses, describes a distant time of peace and tranquillity that ended with the fall of humanity from this bliss. We learn: "In ancient times, when snakes, scorpions, hyenas, lions, wild dogs, or wolves did not exist in the world, there was no fear or terror and man had no enemies... and Sumer was a great country, where divine laws ruled."

Under the influence of Greco-Roman thinking, many saw the Garden of Eden as a place of effortless bliss. The idea of work did not fit here.

The mystical tractate *Zohar* (13th century AD) mentions the Garden of Eden with the word - PaRDeS - this designation has become familiar and preserved in the Hebrew tradition [16] and was probably adopted from Greek paradise.

In the Qumran finds, an apocryphal book of Genesis was discovered, registered under the abbreviation 1Q20 [17]. The text was written in Aramaic and recounts the events of Genesis 6-15 at the first person from the perspective of various biblical characters such as Lamech, Noah, and Abram [18]. Unfortunately, it does not address our topic.

A Jewish legend speaks of Cain being born from the relationship of Eve with the serpent. Cain is thus a devilish son. The Qumran Scrolls speak of the existence of demons, offspring of the fallen angels who rebelled against God and had sexual relationships with women on Earth (1 Enoch 6, 4). Apparently, this was an interpretation of the text as God's sons took human daughters when there was a great moral decline before the flood, and giants were born in the world.

Behind the biblical narrative hides a much older story, from which only faint traces are preserved in the biblical narrative. This older narrative originates from a world far removed from the Israelite one, from the world of polytheistic myths, where we encounter not only conflicts of humans with some gods, but also disputes between individual gods. One narrative is found in the early Christian writing of Physiologus (around 200 AD), which could go as follows: "The gods created humans, but withheld from them the secret of procreation. One of the gods - the serpent god, reveals this secret to humans. When humans consume the fruit of a certain plant, the fruit of the mandrake similar to the apple of Paradise, the passion of love awakens in them. The first humans follow the advice of the serpent god, reach for the fruit of love, and taste the delight of sexuality. They are punished by the other gods for this, but the secret of procreation could no longer be taken from them. The fruit and root of the mandrake in Genesis 30.14 and in many other cultures are considered an aphrodisiac, a means to stimulate libido." [19]

5. The Patristic context of the studied text

In the Patristic context of our subject matter, a prominent Orthodox theologian, Vladimír Losský, underscores the reality that human transgression has engendered the fallen state of the world. This concept implies that sin has disrupted even the essence of language itself, consequently creating hurdles in our understanding of the Holy Scripture [20]. This complicates our task of interpreting ancient biblical texts, as the original meanings have been distorted or obscured through the lens of our fallen condition.

Saint Philaret posits an interesting perspective on the geographical extent of Paradise. He suggests that while the entire Earth was not considered Paradise, it might be fitting to metaphorically depict Paradise as the Earth's principal city or capital. This conception implies that Paradise had a particular significance or centrality in the original divine plan for Creation, serving as a spiritual centre or focal point [21].

Saint John of Damascus elaborates on the existence of a paradisiacal ocean, derived from the four rivers - the Euphrates, the Tigris, the Gihon and the Pishon - that flowed out of Eden, irrigating the entire Earth [22]. This imagery suggests a direct connection between the spiritual abundance of Paradise and the physical fertility of the Earth, a harmony that presumably was disrupted by the Fall. Saint Cyprian of Carthage perceives a symbolic meaning in these rivers of Paradise, equating them to the four Gospels of the New Testament. He proposes that, much like the rivers that hydrate the Earth, the Gospels in the Church

quench the spiritual thirst of the faithful and cleanse the impure through the sacrament of Baptism [23]. This analogy underscores the sustaining and purifying power of the Gospels, evoking their foundational role within the Christian faith. Saint John Chrysostom emphasizes the awe one should feel before the Church's sacraments, drawing parallels between the altar and the rivers of Eden. He explains that, akin to the rivers that nourished the world, the altar pours forth spiritual rivers that irrigate the soul [24]. This highlights the sanctity and importance of the sacraments as well as their transformative potential.

Returning to Saint John of Damascus, he elucidates that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil signifies recognition of diversity and understanding of human nature. This deep self-awareness unveils the grandeur of the Creator, presenting a majestic revelation for those who attain perfection. This interpretation offers a nuanced understanding of the tree's significance and its connection to divine wisdom [25].

Therefore, in this patristic interpretation, Paradise is not merely a physical place; it is also a symbol of spiritual realities and divine truths. The narrative of Paradise and the Fall becomes a profound allegory for understanding humanity's relationship with God and the spiritual journey of the Christian faithful.

These insights, drawn from the interpretations of revered Church Fathers, offer invaluable context and depth to our understanding of the Genesis narrative. Their wisdom serves as a bridge, connecting us to the biblical past and enriching our present spiritual experience.

6. The secular and spiritual-moral aspects of Paradise

We currently reside in a secular age where media offer manifold material substitutes for genuine Paradise. One notable instance is the advertising of exotic holidays in renowned five-star resorts, promising an 'all-inclusive' experience. Travel agencies offer stays in pristine, untouched natural environments, far removed from the bustling civilization, as a potential haven. The culinary industry assaults our senses and tastes, offering a taste of Heaven on Earth with its delectable offerings. Consumerism, particularly during the festive seasons, promotes the act of gift giving as the 'most spiritual message of Christmas' by shopping centres, conveniently forgetting the actual event of the birth of a Saviour in Bethlehem. Drug dealers advertise narcotics as a means to achieve an ecstatic and unforgettable experience; the notorious use of LSD in rock concerts in the previous century was blasphemously offered as a 'substitute' for the Holy Eucharist. Football stadiums, which host the world's most prestigious leagues, are designated as 'sanctuaries' by sports commentators. Live television broadcasts promise a genuine sports 'pleasure-experience'. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in nations where football has practically become a religion. In the realm of the arts, attempts are made to elevate the human spirit. It is unsurprising that bands like Led Zeppelin have emerged, whose phenomenal track 'Stairway to Heaven' attempts to captivate the listener and transport them

to a conceptual musical heaven, filled with harmonious heavenly chords [J. Page, R. Plant, *Stairway to Heaven*, Led Zeppelin IV, Atlantic Records, 1971, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCOdXYoC_bo/, accessed 14.03.2023].

However, the Gospel tells us that it is only those who strive - those who work on their spiritual progression - that will seize the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 11.12, NRSV). It also informs us that only the narrow path - one of suffering, self-restraint, avoidance of sin, and enduring illnesses - leads to the Heavenly Kingdom (Matthew 7.13-14, NRSV). The addictions with which a person struggles throughout their life are predominantly harmful and detrimental. Only moral and personal dependence on God can be considered beneficial and useful. It is only with His assistance and our effort that we can work on cultivating ourselves, transforming the passions that enslave us into virtues. We should aim for our lives to be “spiritually healthy and materially adequate” [26, p. 3], not excessive. We ought to guard our thoughts and views, for merely by looking at another woman, we can commit adultery in our hearts (Matthew 5.28, NRSV). To change the world, we must start with ourselves. While we are utterly dependent on God, we are also architects of our happiness. Free will is a great challenge, but also a great responsibility granted by God, which is in our hands. It is up to us whether we turn to God face-forward. Sometimes, like the prodigal son, we turn our backs to Him (Luke 15.11-32, NRSV), or like our first ancestors, we play hide and seek with Him (Genesis 3.9-10, NRSV).

7. The psychological and archetypal significance of the text

Archetypes, regarded as primordial images, are intertwined with particular universal symbols that appear in the symbolic representations of myths and certain kinds of dreams. As dynamic elements of the collective unconscious, they embody the human experience with key life objects and events, serving as eternal themes and motifs of human existence. These archetypes are remnants of species-wide experiences, essentially archaic forms of emotions and imagery. Their activation may even trigger certain experiences of our ancestors [27].

This subject matter was also examined by Mircea Eliade, a phenomenologist, morphologist, and historian of religion. According to Eliade, there were significant events in the religious realm ‘at that time’ (*in illo tempore*), which have come to serve as a pattern for many activities and situations that can be seen as repetitions of these initial occurrences [28]. Each sacred myth correlates with an archetype, and each ritual, each act - if it is to have any meaning - is a repetition of an archetype. Myths associated with the creation of the world, humankind and the Universe are of unique significance in this context. This includes cosmological myths that delineate the order and construction of the world, as well as the organization of Nature. In myths, the period following the creation of Earth, Heaven and mankind is often portrayed as a paradisiacal period - the so-called ‘golden age’. Sacred history lies in the timeless moment of world creation and this moment is continually reflected in

rituals and myths, enabling humans to comprehend the meaning of their own existence and their psychological participation or co-participation in the continuation of the sacred creative force.

Modern theory on the use of symbols owes much to the pioneering work of Carl Gustav Jung [27, 29]. His depth psychology draws from a wide array of cultural historical material and knowledge about symbolism, which has been developed by fields such as Archaeology, Ethnography, History of religion, and mythology [29]. Jung found a striking similarity between the symbols of different cultures, especially those appearing in the myths and rituals of Eastern and Western religions. According to Jung, a symbol emanates from the collective unconscious and expresses the deep-seated inner strength of our psyche, continuously stimulating our thoughts and feelings. The systems of symbols, formed over centuries, have crafted a distinctive, universally valid language, reflecting and expressing age-old inner mental forces.

8. Discussion

To thoroughly understand the biblical text of Genesis 1-11 without knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek languages, appropriate expert commentaries and interpretations, a familiarity with pagan myths, and a certain religious overview, to grasp the time when the work was created and to whom it was originally addressed, is almost impossible. It is vital to compare ancient and modern Bible translations and to attempt to analyse their sacred text. In terms of sequence, our first step should be to study the Introduction to the Old Testament, and subsequently, as a second step, to examine the biblical text itself alongside its interpretation and commentaries.

Through our research, we have discovered and formulated two new translations of biblical expressions that have yet to be used in current ecumenical Bible translations. A major strength of our research lies in the interpretation of the original biblical texts. Future research could continue by considering the oldest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. Regarding the Qumran discoveries, even though short fragments of the Book of Genesis have been found, few of them pertain to the biblical prehistory we are investigating, mostly touching upon biblical history from chapter 12 onward [30]. Regrettably, even the apocryphal *Life of Adam and Eve* does not shed light on our issue as it discusses the life of our ancestors only after their Fall [31].

8.1. Environment and ecological stewardship - a biblical perspective

An interpretation of the Bible that has largely been overlooked, but has profound implications for our world today, centres around the biblical story of Eden as a paradigm for ecological stewardship. This interpretation, which posits humans as responsible stewards of the Earth, is rooted in several key sources and provides a vital and timely critique of our relationship with the natural world.

Alistair R. Anderson posits the story of Eden as a call to humans to be custodians of the Earth, placing an onus on humanity to care for the environment [32]. This interpretation requires critical consideration of our relationship with the natural world and a reconsideration of how we can live more sustainably. This viewpoint is reinforced by Norman C. Habel who delves into various perspectives of the Eden narrative, including theological, environmental and ethical, suggesting that Eden serves as a mandate for environmental stewardship [33]. The narrative, they argue, serves as a foundation for environmental ethics, inviting interpretations that influence our understanding of the environment today [33]. Echoing this view, albeit through a different lens, is Theresa G. Barkasy. She positions the Eden story as an emblem of the oppression of women and Nature, contesting patriarchal and anthropocentric worldviews. She advocates for a reinterpretation of Eden that aspires towards a just, sustainable world where women and Nature are respected and valued [34]. Walter Wink provides further biblical foundations for ecojustice. Wink makes the compelling argument that the Bible imparts a responsibility to humans to care for the Earth, promoting ways of living that are both sustainable and just [35]. Finally, Norman C. Habel in ‘An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?’, explores ecological themes within the Bible [36]. Habel contends that the Bible presents a rich tradition of ecological thought that can inform our contemporary understanding of the environment. He suggests that the Bible challenges our anthropocentric perspective of the world, advocating for a more sustainable lifestyle.

Collectively, these interpretations position the Eden narrative as a compelling paradigm for ecological stewardship. At the heart of this interpretation lies the conviction that humans, as part of Nature, not separate from it, are called to be responsible stewards of the Earth. The narrative compels us to live in balance with Nature, respecting the Earth and all its resources. Moreover, the Eden narrative underscores the importance of collective effort in environmental protection. The task of ecological stewardship is not the responsibility of a single individual, community, or nation; it is a shared, global responsibility. This interpretation offers a vision of a world in which humans and Nature exist in harmony - a vision that is achievable but requires a significant change in our behaviours and attitudes toward sustainable living [36, p. 40].

The Eden narrative is a poignant reminder of our responsibility to care for the Earth. It serves as a powerful call to action in a world grappling with significant environmental challenges. It underscores the urgent need for us to protect our world and prompts us to imagine and strive for a future where humans and Nature coexist sustainably. As we face an escalating environmental crisis, the Eden narrative’s message of ecological stewardship and sustainable living becomes ever more vital. Therefore, in the context of current environmental challenges, the Eden narrative should not merely be regarded as an ancient story; it should be perceived as a paradigm of ecological stewardship and a blueprint for a sustainable future.

9. Conclusions - findings and environmental implications

Every Bible translation serves as a bridge allowing readers to transcend language, temporal, and cultural barriers. Following our textual, exegetical, and theological analysis, coupled with an ecological perspective, we have gained fresh insights into the significance of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2.17, NRSV).

The Tree, we suggest, is not merely a literal archaic term but should be translated for the contemporary reader as the Tree of Fortune and Misfortune. This interpretation resonates more profoundly with the spirit of the translation than its literal meaning. It is being and living with God that equates to fortune for humans, symbolizing Paradise and goodness - a real, fully balanced physical and spiritual life led for the glory of God. This can be interpreted as a practical theocracy or true democracy when God rules in a person's life, and we depend on Him daily. It teaches us humility and respect, not only towards the Creator but also towards people and the natural world entrusted to us.

On the contrary, not being and not living near God signifies misfortune, represented biblically as hell, evil, and death. This life is a mere existence, akin to an animalistic, non-spiritual survival where a spiritual and psychological vacuum is replaced by physical, sensual, and excessively hedonistic pursuits. This is a state of practical demonocracy and technocracy, where a fallen angel or technology and Science are worshipped as Almighty God. The freedom offered by the devil is essential to not be dependent on anyone (Matthew 4.8-10, NRSV).

Our ecological interpretations have imbued the Genesis story with fresh relevance, revealing the narrative as a call to environmental stewardship. The narrative enjoins us to live in balance with nature, urging respect for the earth and all its resources. It underscores the importance of collective effort in environmental protection, emphasizing our shared global responsibility. As we face significant environmental challenges, this interpretation reminds us of our duty to protect our world, emphasizing the need for sustainable living.

Although the original expression in Old Hebrew or Old Greek (LXX) original or the Masoretic sacred text - i.e., 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' - should be mentioned in a footnote, it is our view that bringing the Bible closer to a 21st-century reader necessitates a more accessible translation. As such, we propose that the translation we have suggested earlier is more appropriate. This is our humble theologumena, which could assist in better understanding the challenging text of the Holy Scriptures, specific verses in particular. However, this view must be approved by the translators of the new ecumenical translations of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament.

Through this new lens, the story of Eden emerges as a powerful reminder of our shared duty to care for the earth and our fellow humans. It is a timely call to action for our modern age, reminding us of our responsibility towards the natural world and emphasizing the urgency of ecological stewardship.

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