

Lesson 5 – Where is the Garden of Eden?

Background

Genesis 2:10–14 (ESV)

¹⁰ A **river flowed out of Eden** to water the garden, and there it divided and **became four rivers**. ¹¹ The name of the **first is the Pishon**. It is the one that flowed around the whole **land of Havilah**, where there is gold. ¹² And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³ The name of the **second river is the Gihon**. It is the one that flowed around the whole **land of Cush**. ¹⁴ And the name of the **third river is the Tigris**, which flows **east of Assyria**. And the **fourth river is the Euphrates**.

Why is this unsolved?

The Bible includes only sparse geographic data in its descriptions of the pre-Flood world. This has led to widely divergent theories on the relationship between pre-Flood and post-Flood topography. No modern candidate for the location of Eden fulfils the clear biblical conditions for the location such as one river splitting into four.

The Flood of Noah’s day would have destroyed the surface of the earth. If most of the sedimentary strata over the earth’s surface (many thousands of feet thick in places) is the result of this global catastrophe as creationists believe, then we would have no idea where the Garden of Eden was originally located—the earth’s surface totally changed as a result of the Flood.

The Rivers

The Pishon river and the land of Havilah

The Pishon flowed “around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold.” The name of the river does not occur again in Scripture. There are places called ‘Havilah’ both before and after the Flood (Gen 25:18; 1Sam 15:7), as well as two descendants of Noah with that name (Gen 10:7, 29). The word means ‘land of sand’ or ‘sandy’. It is most likely that the post-Flood locations known as Havilah were named after Noah’s descendants.

The Gihon river and the land of Cush

The Gihon river flowed “around the whole land of Cush”. Elsewhere in Scripture, there is a Gihon spring which supplied Jerusalem with water (2Chr 32:30; 1Kin 1:38, 45). The word means ‘to bubble’ or ‘to burst forth.’ Because the Gihon is connected to Cush, some Medieval commentators tried to place Eden in Africa, with the Nile as the Gihon. However, this does not allow for the four rivers to split off from one river, and there is no way the Nile can be connected to the Tigris and Euphrates.

The Hiddekel river and the land of Asshur

The third river is the Hiddekel, which means ‘arrow’, ‘dart’, or ‘swiftness.’ The only other place this river is mentioned in scripture is in Daniel 10:4 where it is applied to the modern Tigris river. In Genesis 2, the river is said to flow “east of Asshur,” but which one? The pre-Flood region named Asshur or the post-Flood city that was named after Asshur, the second son of Shem (Gen 10:22)? Also, the Tigris runs through the center of the ancient kingdom of Assyria.

The P’rath river

The fourth river, P’rath, is named with no other geographical data. Elsewhere in Scripture, P’rath refers to the Euphrates (Gen 15:18; 31:21; 36:37; Ex 23:31; Deut 1:7; 11:24; etc).

Conclusions

Option 1: Pre-Flood and post-Flood designations are identical

The first option is that the Havilah, Cush, Assyria, Tigris, and Euphrates in Genesis 2 are the same as their post-Flood designations. This option fails to appreciate the devastation the Flood would have had on the continents, literally reshaping the surface of the planet as miles of sediment were eroded and laid down. Furthermore, it is impossible to match the Bible’s geographical description with the names in Genesis 2.

Option 2: Post-Flood places are re-named from pre-Flood places

The most common modern creationist explanation is that early post-Flood people renamed landmarks after places they remembered from the pre-Flood world. While this is probably the case for the Hiddekel and P’rath, we know for instance that post-Flood Cush was named after a descendant of Ham, and there were multiple Havilahs, and so on. These post-Flood places were demonstrably named after post-Flood people.

Option 3: Pre-and post-Flood places share certain popular, generic names

The third option is to acknowledge that in the ancient world, many places were named with such generic descriptors that they could appropriately describe more than one place. If people’s names could be reused, then surely it is not a stretch to imagine that generic names could also be reapplied to places. So post-Flood Havilah (the place) was named after post-Flood Havilah (a person), who happens to share the name with pre-Flood Havilah (the place).

What Really Matters

Genesis 3:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Background

Genesis 2:8–14 (ESV)

⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰ A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. ¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹² And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

Genesis 3:24 (ESV)

²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Pishon / Havilah

Genesis 10:7 (ESV)

⁷ The sons of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteca. The sons of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan.

Genesis 10:29 (ESV)

²⁹ Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab; all these were the sons of Joktan.

Genesis 25:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ They settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria. He settled over against all his kinsmen.

1 Samuel 15:7 (ESV)

⁷ And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.

Gihon / Cush

2 Chronicles 32:30 (ESV)

³⁰ This same Hezekiah closed the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed them down to the west side of the city of David. And Hezekiah prospered in all his works.

1 Kings 1:38 (ESV)

³⁸ So Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites and the Pelethites went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule and brought him to Gihon.

1 Kings 1:45 (ESV)

⁴⁵ And Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet have anointed him king at Gihon, and they have gone up from there rejoicing, so that the city is in an uproar. This is the noise that you have heard.

Hiddekel / Asshur

Genesis 10:22 (ESV)

²² The sons of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad, Lud, and Aram.

Daniel 10:4 (ESV)

⁴ On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris)

P'rath

Genesis 15:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

Genesis 31:21 (ESV)

²¹ He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

Genesis 36:37 (ESV)

³⁷ Samlah died, and Shaul of Rehoboth on the Euphrates reigned in his place.

Exodus 23:31 (ESV)

³¹ And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.

Deuteronomy 1:7 (ESV)

⁷ Turn and take your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, in the hill country and in the lowland and in the Negeb and by the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates.

Deuteronomy 11:24 (ESV)

²⁴ Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours. Your territory shall be from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the western sea.



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Where was Eden? Part 1—examining pre-Flood geographical details in the biblical record

by [Lita Cosner](#) and [Robert Carter](#)

The Bible includes only sparse geographic data in its descriptions of the pre-Flood world. This has led to widely divergent theories on the relationship between antediluvian and postdiluvian topography. The majority of place names that are repeated on both sides of the Flood are simple generic words describing common features of the pre- and post-Flood world. No modern candidate for the location of Eden fulfils the clear biblical conditions for the location such as one river splitting into four. This is because Eden is not placed in reference to modern geographical landmarks, but to pre-Flood topography. The goal of this study is to provide a thorough analysis and refutation of popular modern locations for Eden in order to better establish the idea that Eden was utterly destroyed by the Flood and that attempts to place Eden in a modern geographical context are misguided.

The geography of [Genesis 2](#) is difficult to interpret. As far back as Josephus we find attempts to locate the setting of the Garden in Eden.¹ Augustine affirmed that Eden was an actual place, though he allowed for allegorical meanings.² He also tried to explain the four rivers of Eden by positing that some might have flowed underground.³ Martin Luther believed that the global Flood changed the appearance and perhaps the sources of the rivers and greatly changed the face of the earth, but he located Eden in Mesopotamia anyway.⁴ John Calvin believed that the modern Tigris and Euphrates were the Hiddekel and P'rath of [Genesis 2](#). He imagined a place where the two formerly joined to each other was the 'one river', and where they split upstream and downstream were the 'four headwaters' (figure 1). He expressly rejected the idea that the Flood changed the landscape:

... still, I assert, it was the same earth which had been created in the beginning. Add to this, that Moses (in my judgment) accommodated his topography to the capacity of his age.⁵

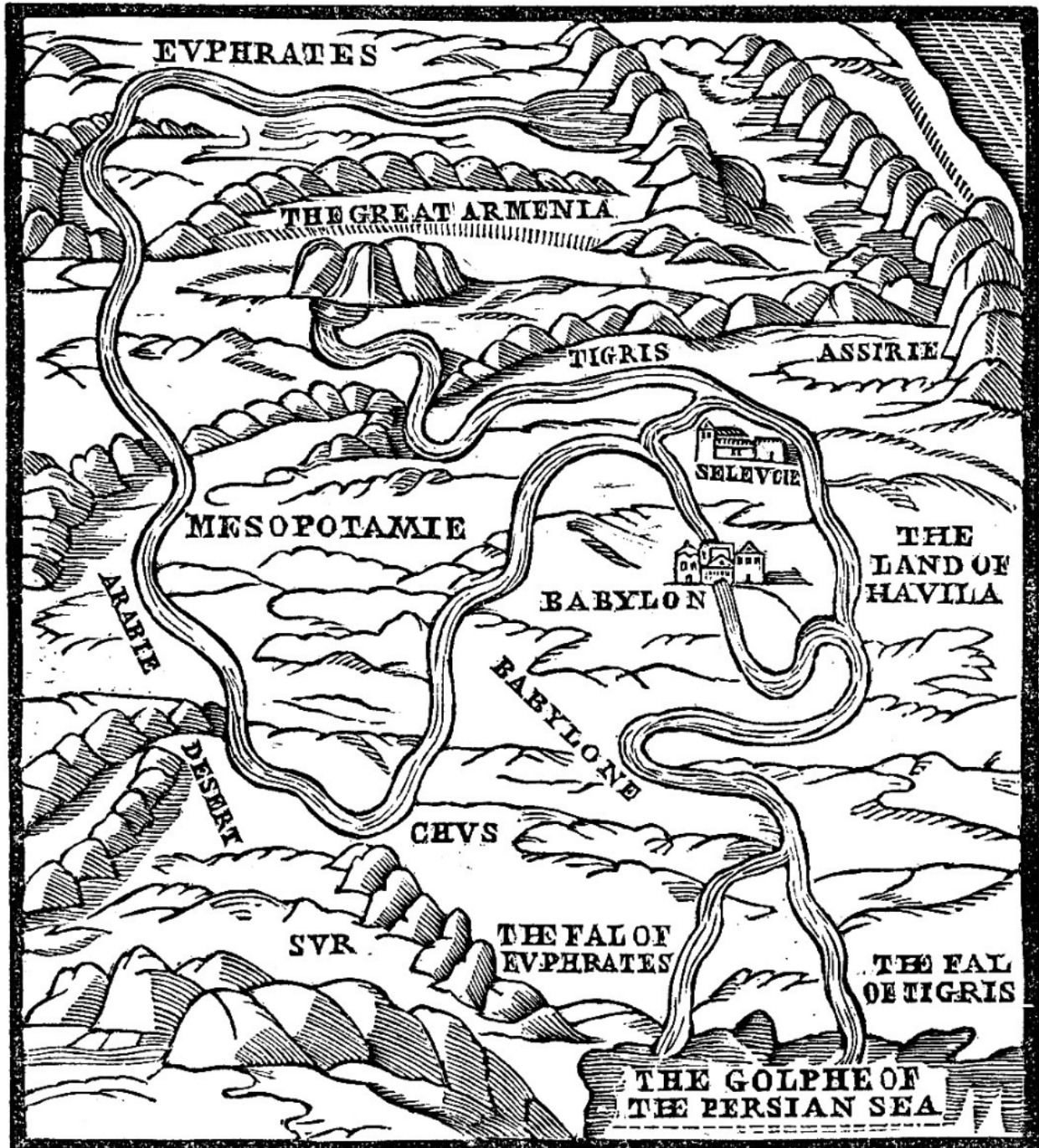


Figure 1. A map from Calvin's Genesis commentary (Calvin⁵)

Examples of this sort of interpretation could be multiplied, but the above is sufficient to establish that scholars have been putting forward problematic and mutually inconsistent explanations for the location of Eden for millennia.

However, the view that Eden and the rivers of [Genesis 2](#) are located in Mesopotamia accidentally opened the door for long-age interpretations because it minimized the geological effects of the Flood. Modern biblical creationists attribute the geological record to the global

Flood, and so generally accept that the geography described in [Genesis 2](#) would have been destroyed. They explain the reoccurrence of certain post-Flood place names as re-naming after pre-Flood landmarks.^{6,7} However, this study will show that, while on the right track, this explanation is incomplete and fails to account for all the data.

[James R. Hughes](#) has written perhaps the most comprehensive study on the geography of Eden in his 1997 paper for the CRSQ,⁸ which was a response to a *Westminster Theological Journal* article attacking biblical creationist interpretations of Eden's geography.⁹ However, it seems useful to publish a survey in this journal with a slightly different emphasis, while giving due credit to those who have preceded us.

The goal of this study is to bring clarity to the text while refuting attempts to locate Eden in the post-Flood world. We intend to show: 1) The geographical landmarks in [Genesis 1–11](#) are intended to be read as real-world places; 2) This geography does not exist anywhere on the present-day earth; and 3) The explanation for similar place names in the post-Flood landscape in most cases is more complex than re-naming after antediluvian landmarks.

Biblical evidence of pre-Flood geography

Most of the geographical data from the pre-Flood world comes from the [Genesis 2](#) creation narrative:

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates ([Genesis 2:8, 10–14](#)).

It is worth noting that the garden is *in* Eden ([Genesis 2:8](#)), so Eden was a larger area than the spot occupied by the garden. "In the east" probably indicates that the garden was in the eastern part of the region. The name 'Eden' may be related to a Hebrew word meaning luxury or delight.¹⁰

The rivers are a key identifying feature of the geography surrounding Eden. As Currid states:

After feeding the garden, the river leaves it and then divides into four 'headstreams'. That term in Hebrew is related to the first word in the Bible, 'beginning'; thus, when the river separates it breaks up into four 'beginning streams' or 'headwaters'. These headwaters are the sources of four great rivers, and these will be identified in the next verses.¹¹

scholars have been putting forward problematic and mutually inconsistent explanations for the location of Eden for millennia.

The feature of one river splitting into four rivers would require interesting topography seen nowhere in the modern, post-Flood world (see [part 2](#) of this paper¹²).

The Pishon river and the land of Havilah

The Pishon (פִּישׁוֹן) flowed “around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold”. Havilah must have been adjacent to Eden, or nearly so, and the course of the river must have twisted so that it could be said to water or flow around the whole land. The name of the river does not occur again in Scripture. Hughes comments:

When one reads the account in [Genesis 2:8–14](#), he gets the impression that the Pishon was a significant river equal in importance to the other rivers mentioned. It seems to be incredible that a major river such as the Pishon could disappear from the historic and geographic records so that it left effectively no historic trace of its location. Much of the geography of Moses’ day is still identifiable. If the Pishon was a major river in Moses’ day, then we would expect to find other historical references to it, or at least be able to identify its location more easily. The fact that Munday has to appeal to a dry wadi as a potential location for the Pishon, seems to indicate that the Pishon did not exist after the Flood.⁸

There are places called ‘Havilah’ both before and after the Flood, as well as two descendants of Noah (the second son of Cush and the twelfth son of Joktan; [Genesis 10:7, 29](#)) with that name. Etymologically the word means ‘land of sand’ or ‘sandy’.⁸ The post-Flood area by that name was probably named after the Semitic/Joktanite Havilah, and it was part of the area where the Ishmaelites (also Semites) settled ([Genesis 25:18](#)). Amalekites (another Semitic tribe) lived there until Saul defeated them ([1 Samuel 15:7](#)).

The Gihon river and the land of Cush

The Gihon (גִּיחוֹן) river flowed “around the whole land of Cush”. Elsewhere in Scripture, there is a Gihon spring which supplied Jerusalem with water ([2 Chronicles 32:30](#); [1 Kings 1:38, 45](#)). The word means ‘to bubble’⁸ or ‘to burst forth’ and is thus a generic name. The location of the river associated with the Garden in Eden, however, is a mystery. As Hughes notes:

The location of the Gihon cannot be identified in contemporary geographic terms, and appears rarely in the historical records. As with the Pishon it is hard to believe that the location of a second major river in Moses’ day would no longer be identifiable.⁸

Because the Gihon is connected to Cush, some Medieval commentators tried to place Eden in Africa, with the Nile as the Gihon.¹³ However, this does not allow for the four rivers to split off from one river; there is no way the Nile can be connected to the Tigris and Euphrates. As Hughes said:

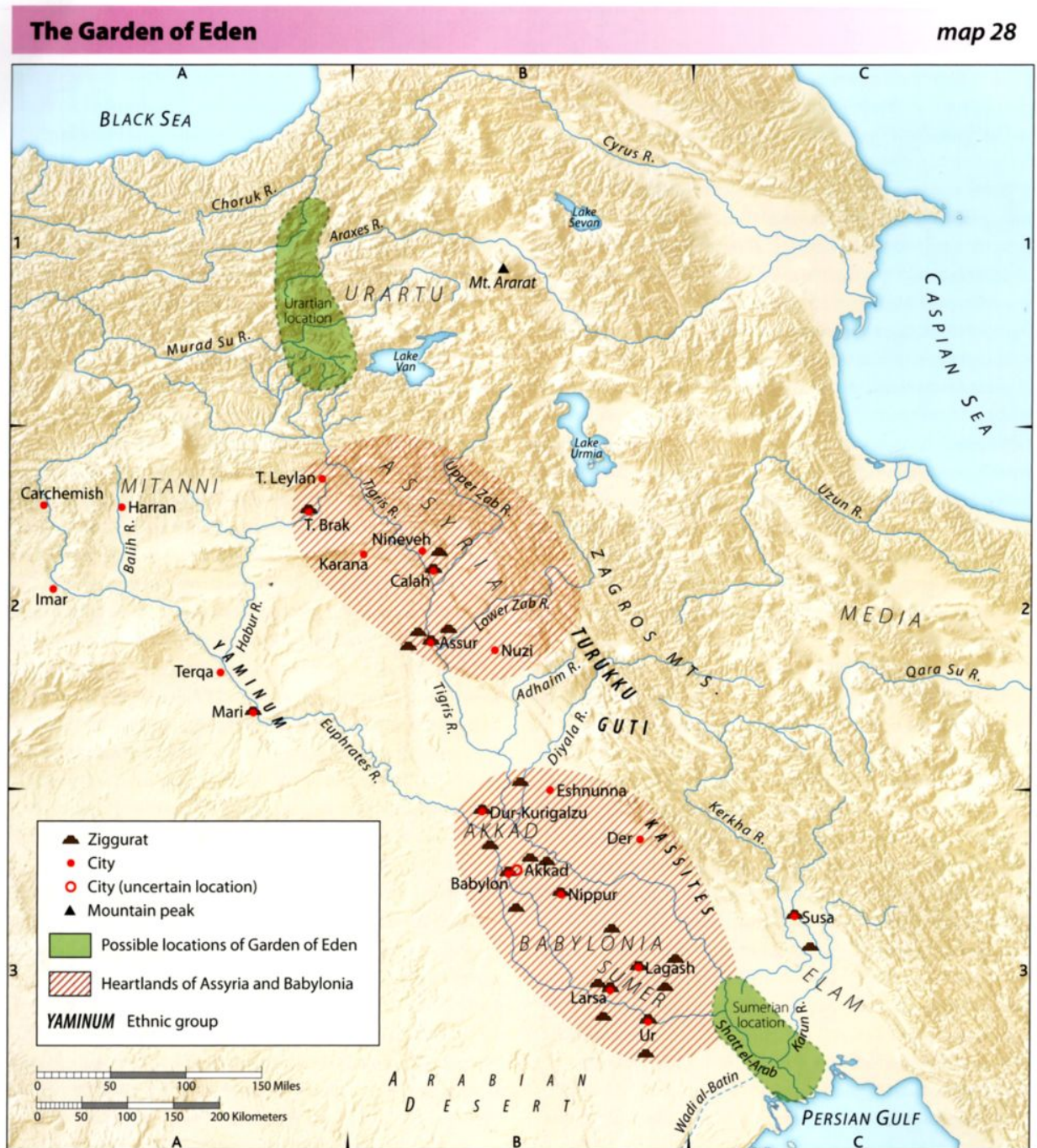


Figure 2. A modern Bible atlas’s designations for the location of Eden (from Beitzel¹⁷)

The fact that Cush in the remainder of the OT is not used to refer to a southern Mesopotamian location, and instead is found in a very distant geographic location ... supports the view that the author is describing a pre-Flood geography, not a post-Flood geography.⁸

Elsewhere in Scripture, Cush is consistently associated with an area south of Egypt, not an area in Mesopotamia. But there is another candidate for this identification:

Because Nuzi tablets contain the word *Kussu* for the Kassite people who inhabited the plains and hills east of Babylonia during the second millennium BC, Speiser identified the Cush of [Genesis 2](#) as Kassite country.⁹

Since it is named after a son of Ham, the African Cush is a post-Flood location. But the Kassites were also a post-Flood people. Either way, 'Cush' in [Genesis 2](#) is almost certainly not one of these geographic locations. Also, the Kassites lived in southern Mesopotamia, and there is no candidate for the Gihon river in this area (see figure 2).

The Hiddekel river and the land of Asshur

The third river is the Hiddekel (חַדְקֵל), which means 'arrow', 'dart', or 'swiftness'.⁸ In [Genesis 2](#), the Hiddekel is simply said to flow "east of Asshur". The only other place it is mentioned in Scripture is in [Daniel 10:4](#) where it is applied to the modern Tigris river.

The Hiddekel is said to flow "east of Asshur", but to which 'Asshur' is this referring? The antediluvian region named Asshur (note that all the other localities in this passage are regions) or the post-Flood city that was named after Asshur, the second son of Shem ([Genesis 10:22](#))? Also, the Tigris runs through the *centre* of the ancient kingdom of Assyria, so this is no help.

The P'rath river

The fourth river, P'rath (פַּרְתַּי), is named with no other geographical data. Elsewhere in Scripture, P'rath refers to the Euphrates, and it is significant because it forms the eastern border of the land promised to Abraham's descendants as well as a major geographical landmark ([Genesis 15:18](#); [31:21](#); [36:37](#); [Exodus 23:31](#); [Deuteronomy 1:7](#); [11:24](#); and many more outside the Pentateuch). If the P'rath of [Genesis 2](#) really was the modern river, it's surprising that it is dismissed so quickly with no other descriptors. Some might argue that the sheer familiarity of this major regional river meant that no other description was necessary, but this assumes the river is the same one mentioned in [Genesis 2](#).

Other geographic references

There are only a few other verses that give references to geography or place names before the Flood:

He [God] drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life ([Genesis 3:24](#)).

Because the cherubim were placed to the east of the garden, one might assume there was only one possible entrance to the garden, and that it was at the east. One might also assume that Adam and Eve would have gone to the east of Eden. While it is always precarious to assume what the text does not explicitly state, their son certainly went east:

Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch ([Genesis 4:16–17](#)).

This passage also establishes that pre-Flood places were named after both significant historical events ('Nod' means wandering, a reference to God's curse of Cain) and people (Enoch, Cain's son).¹⁴

The place names in [Genesis 2](#) are generic words that deal mostly with easy-to-understand traits. These words are also easily reused, and we suggest they were, explaining how multiple people and places could have the same names. There is a strong tendency to repeat this pattern in modern societies. How many places exist that are named after simple and common terms? And how many places in the New World are named after places from England, France, Germany, or Spain?

The point is that the post-Flood people would naturally have recycled some names, named people after pre-Flood people (who then had post-Flood places named after them), or simply used names that were common before and after the Flood. They would have been as freely inventive as people are today. Thus, we would *expect* a few words to be found on both sides of the Flood, but the appearance of such words is no more proof that Eden was located in these areas than that the Eiffel Tower is actually located in Paris, Texas.

Directionality

There is but one cardinal direction referenced in [Genesis 2–4](#): east. The garden was in the east of Eden, the cherubim were placed to the east of the garden, and Cain settled to the east of that. This has caused many to look at ‘east’ in a metaphorical sense, as if ‘east’ was the direction of heaven or paradise. As Wenham’s Genesis commentary puts it:

For in the East the sun rises, and light is a favorite biblical metaphor for divine revelation ([Isa 2:2–4](#); [Ps 36:10](#)). So it seems likely that this description of ‘the garden in Eden in the east’ is symbolic of a place where God dwells.¹⁵

But if Adam and Eve were removed from the garden toward the east, Eden would have been to their *west*, and east would then be associated with bad things. Significantly, when Israel and Judah went into exile, they also travelled east, and when the Israelites initially entered the Promised Land, they were travelling west.

Natural resources

The natural resources named in [Genesis 2](#) must be found in any area put forward as a location for Eden (table 1). These are fairly common materials that can be found in scattered pockets across the globe. Bdelium refers either to a type of gemstone or to a plant resin of the kind found only in arid regions today. Onyx is a common mineral found across the world, but is noticeably lacking in the Middle East, as is tin. While it may seem natural to associate ‘pitch’ with the oil-rich Middle East, in fact, pitch historically has been derived from pine trees.¹⁶

Proper Names	Place Names	Rivers	Natural Resources	Cardinal Directions
Adam, Eve	<i>Eden</i>	The garden river	<i>Gold</i>	East
Cain's line: Cain,	The Garden	Pishon	<i>Bdelium</i>	
Enoch (1), Irad, Mehujael,	<i>Havilah</i>	Gihon	<i>Onyx</i>	
Methushael, Lamech (1), Adah,	<i>Cush</i>	<i>Hiddekel/Tigris</i>	<i>Iron</i>	
Zillah, Jabal, Jubal, Tubal-cain,	<i>Assyria</i>	<i>P'rath/Euphrates</i>	<i>Copper</i>	
Naamah	Enoch (1)		<i>Tin (Cu+Sn=bronze)</i>	
Abel's line: Abel, Seth, Enosh,	Nod		<i>Wood</i>	
Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch			<i>Pitch</i>	
(2), Methuselah, Lamech (2),				
Noah, Shem, Ham, Japheth				

Table 1. Geographic and name references in the pre-Flood world. Words in italics appear both before and after the Flood.

Difficulties in finding Eden

Even *if* the pre-Flood Eden were findable, placing it in the Middle East would mean that Noah landed close to Eden's original location. If we reject the 'local flood' hypothesis, and if we assume the majority of the sedimentary rocks in the region are from the Flood, and if we believe the Ark floated for five *months*, why would we ever think Eden was located in Mesopotamia? The few correlations in place names are easily discounted and the majority of place names in [Genesis 2](#) have no geographic attestation in the region. In fact, the only way to conclude Eden must be a Mesopotamian locale is to first adopt a low view of Scripture!

Difficulties in finding the four rivers

If one assumes the rivers of Eden can be located on modern maps, one has to start with the Tigris and Euphrates. This generally leads to one of two conclusions: Eden was in Armenia (close to the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates) or Lower Mesopotamia (close to where the two rivers come together). Beitzel in his influential Bible atlas proposes both as possibilities (figure 2).¹⁷ There are two chief problems with the Armenian interpretation: 1) While the Tigris and Euphrates have sources that are fairly close to each other, they do not come from the same source, much less split off from the same river; and 2) there is no trace of any candidate for Pishon and Gihon in the near vicinity. There are also two main difficulties with the Southern Mesopotamian location: the rivers are flowing the wrong direction (coming together, not separating). Not only that, but Pliny claimed the two rivers emptied into a common lake during the time of Alexander,¹⁸ and they may have had separate mouths earlier in the historical period.

Some suggest that the Persian Gulf could fit the description of Pishon. However, even Munday in his attempt to refute biblical creationists recognizes this view "requires a Hebrew disregard for any distinction between a sea and a river. Such a view has no biblical precedent, and appears impossible given the [Genesis 2:10–14](#) enumeration of *four rivers*, two of which are obviously *not* seas."⁹ Hill argues that the Pishon is a river in Saudi Arabia that existed in Moses' day, but which has since dried up:

It is worth noting that the garden is in Eden ([Genesis 2:8](#)), so Eden was a larger area than the spot occupied by the garden.

But where is the Pishon river within the land of Havilah? There is no river flowing from the western mountains of Saudi Arabia down to the head of the Persian Gulf. There is no perennial river flowing across Saudi Arabia today, but there is evidence that such a river did flow there sometime in the past. Only four inches of rain a year now fall in Saudi Arabia, but during the periods from about 30,000 to 20,000 years BP (before present) and from about 10,000 to 6,000 years BP, the climate was much wetter than it is today. Even as late as 3500 BC (before Christ), ancient lakes are known to have existed in the 'Empty Quarter' of Saudi Arabia, which is today the largest sand desert in the world.¹⁹

However, it is difficult to believe that if Moses was describing an ancient river of some prominence *in his day*, all references to that river would be lost to history.

Does Genesis intend to place Eden in the real world?

Some people acknowledge the evidence against placing Eden in Mesopotamia and thus conclude that Genesis never intended to give an actual geographic location for Eden in the first place. Ryle gives a classic expression of this view:

The account which follows (11–14) is irreconcilable with scientific geography. But the locality of the garden planted by the Lord God, containing two wonder-working trees, is evidently not to be looked for on maps. In the description of the four rivers, we must remember that the Israelites possessed only a very vague knowledge of distant lands. They depended upon the reports of travellers who possessed no means of accurate survey. Mediaeval maps often present the most fantastic and arbitrary arrangement of rivers and seas to meet the conjectures of the cartographer. We need not be surprised, if the early traditions of the Hebrews claimed that the four greatest rivers of the world had branched off from the parent stream, which, rising in Eden, had passed through the garden of the Lord God.²⁰

Similarly, Tremper Longman hypothesizes:

Perhaps Eden is not a real place, but rather contributes to a figurative description of the origin of humanity. If so, we still need to ask what the imagery points to. The best answer is that Eden, whose very name means abundance or luxury, indicates that God provides all of humanity's needs and more when they were first created.²¹

However, this sort of 'unearthly geography' would be unprecedented in Scripture. As Kidner points out in his commentary, "verses 10–14 go to some lengths to present it as an actual, not an allegorical or mythical spot."²² And [Genesis 2](#) has the hallmarks of a genuine geographical description from an eyewitness. While the exact nature of the *toledoth* in Genesis has been debated in creationist circles, most would agree that they bear witness to eyewitness information.²³

[Genesis 2](#) has the hallmarks of a genuine geographical description from an eyewitness.

Of course, there is nothing in the Bible itself to support Ryle's assertion that these people were ignorant of the lands around them. In fact, the Israelites were of Mesopotamian extraction (Terah, Abraham, Sarah, Rachel, Leah, and the 12 tribal patriarchs were born there, and Jacob lived there for many years), used a legal code similar to those in use in Mesopotamia,²⁴ built houses in a Mesopotamian style,²⁵ and spoke a Semitic dialect similar to those in north-west Mesopotamia, and all this was true after hundreds of years in Egyptian bondage. And it is hardly fair to compare Medieval maps with the knowledge of people in 2000 BC or earlier, especially since somewhere in between people invented complex astronomical predictors like the Antikythera mechanism²⁶ and had calculated the circumference of the earth with amazing accuracy.²⁷

Was the description of Eden intended to be intelligible to a post-Flood audience?

One assumption some interpreters make is that the geographical details in Genesis must have been intelligible to readers *at the time of authorship*. While true, if Moses was acting as the editor of some sort of written tradition (not out of the question), accurate geographical details about the pre-Flood world could have carried over from those documents to Genesis.

Wikimedia Commons



Figure 3. ‘The Garden of Eden’ by Thomas Cole (1801–1848)

Where would Moses get these pre-Flood documents? While many have pointed out that there was substantial overlap in the long lifespans of the patriarchs both pre- and post-flood, there is no indication in Scripture that this is how a record was passed down. In fact, Noah and his sons disappear from the narrative before the Babel narrative, even though they all were alive at that time.²⁸ By the time Abram comes on the scene, he is an idolater and there is very little evidence of established worship of Yahweh anywhere (other than the presence of Melchizedek later in the Abrahamic narrative).

Hughes communicates this option well, despite holding to the less popular theory that the *toledoth* of Genesis are colophons.⁸ He argues that “a major portion of the book of Genesis was not in fact composed by Moses, but by others, including Adam (whether written or handed down orally).” In his paper he notes the generic nature of names of pre-Flood places:

Of the eight geographic locations mentioned in [Genesis 2](#), only three (Tigris, Asshur, Euphrates) are easy to locate in modern geographic terms, and then only if interpreted in a particular way (e.g. reading Asshur as a city rather than as a territory), and only if it is assumed that Moses wrote [Genesis 2](#) for a contemporary audience. ... Rather than being a straightforward matter of mapping the references in [Genesis 2](#) to modern geography, it appears from the evidence that it

may not be possible to identify Eden's location, even in general terms. The evidence in fact points more clearly to a unique pre-Flood geography and the reuse of general terms for geographic terms in a post-Flood context.⁸

Even Munday concedes:

Moses may have relied on earlier records (both oral and written), and interpolations were probably made after him by copyists.⁹

Conclusions

If one assumes biblical inerrancy and that [Genesis 2](#) gives us an actual geographical description of a real place, the text gives three options for interpretation. Each of these views has been held by biblical creationists who were inerrantists, so it is important to understand that scholars struggle with these concepts. Let us then look at each view to see which best fits the biblical and geographical evidence.

Option 1: Pre-Flood and post-Flood designations are identical

The first option is that the Havilah, Cush, Assyria, Tigris, and Euphrates in [Genesis 2](#) are the same as their post-Flood designations.

As we noted, this option fails to appreciate the devastation the Flood would have had on the continents, literally reshaping the surface of the planet as miles of sediment were eroded and laid down. Furthermore, as we have shown, it is impossible to match the Bible's geographical description with the names in [Genesis 2](#). So while biblical creationists such as Luther, Calvin, and many others held this view historically, it is no longer a viable biblical creationist option in light of current geological knowledge.

Option 2: Post-Flood places are re-named from pre-Flood places

The most common modern creationist explanation is that early post-Flood people renamed landmarks after places they remembered from the pre-Flood world. While this is probably the case for the Hiddekel and P'rath, we know for instance that post-Flood Cush was named after a descendant of Ham, and there were multiple Havilahs, and so on. These post-Flood places were demonstrably named after post-Flood people, meaning that in these cases simple renaming is not the full explanation (though it is certainly closer to the mark than option 1).

Option 3: Pre-and post-Flood places share certain popular, generic names

The third and best option, in our view, is to acknowledge that in the ancient world, many places were named with such generic descriptors that they could appropriately describe more than one place. The biblical record establishes that there was more than one Enoch and more than one Havilah, and the name data we have in Scripture for that time period is sparse! If *people's* names could be reused on such a scale, then surely it is not a stretch to imagine that generic names could also be reapplied to places. So post-Flood Havilah (the place) was named after post-Flood Havilah (a person), who happens to share the name with pre-Flood Havilah (the place, but possibly also an unnamed pre-Flood person).

Thus, we conclude there are no textual, geographic, linguistic, or even probabilistic reasons to hold to a near-Mesopotamian Eden. The few words used in parallel before and after the Flood

are easily explained and the specific geography given in Scripture does not match anything in the region, nor indeed anywhere on the earth today. In part 2 of this paper we will discuss additional physical and textual considerations that argue even more strongly against a Mesopotamian Eden.

Related Media



[What about the Garden of Eden?](#)

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Where was Eden? part 2: geological considerations—examining pre-Flood geographical details in the biblical record

Creation in-depth: Where was Eden?

by [Robert Carter](#) and [Lita Cosner](#)

[Part 1](#) of this article discussed the textual and geographic evidence that one must use to attempt to locate Eden, the garden, and the associated rivers described in [Genesis 2](#). We concluded that there is no textual reason to assume it can be located on any modern landscape and that no geographical candidates exist that fit the given data. In the second part of this article we will analyze several critical geological features of heavily eroded surfaces that further confirm the idea that Eden cannot be placed on the contemporary surface of the earth.

Munday, while attempting to build a case against the biblical, global Flood, correctly argues that young-earth creationists who claim that Noah's Flood wiped out the antediluvian landscape attribute much more destructive force to the Flood than other interpreters (like Calvin) throughout church history.¹ However, geology was not a science during Calvin's time, and since then we have found that there are multiple kilometres of sedimentary strata beneath the most commonly proposed location of Eden. Carol Hill expresses the problem well:

We cannot know how much Eden moved during the Flood or even if the location still exists, as it may have been subducted.

But modern geological study has shown (by oil drilling) that the landscape of southern Iraq is underlain by six miles [10 km] of sedimentary rock. Thus the question can be asked: How could the Garden of Eden, which existed on a pre-flood landscape existing *before* the flood, have been located *over* six miles of sedimentary rock created *during* the flood?²

This is a serious consideration, and anyone who attempts to search for Eden on a modern map must take this into account. Would the topographic features described in [Genesis 2](#) be visible after potential scouring at the onset of the Flood, massive deposition of sediments in the early stages of the Flood, and further massive erosion of sediments during the recessional stage of the Flood? When thinking about what would be required to find Eden after all this potential geological change, the *Princess and the Pea* fairy tale comes into mind: each layer of geological change creates one more barrier to the detection of the original land surface. Add to this the creationist model of Catastrophic Plate Tectonics³ and we cannot know how much Eden moved during the Flood or even if the location still exists, as it may have been subducted.

Secular plate tectonic theory claims the Persian Gulf is a former rift zone that reversed at some point in the past. According to this theory, the Arabian Plate is currently colliding with the Eurasian Plate, creating the Iranian mountains.⁴ The tectonic setting of this region is complex, but if we accept the relative order of the events given to us by secular geologists, we might be forced to conclude that the Persian Gulf did not exist prior to the Flood. This would cause us to

further question the Mesopotamian Eden hypothesis. Where did the antediluvian Tigris and Euphrates flow to if there was no Persian Gulf?

GoogleEarth®

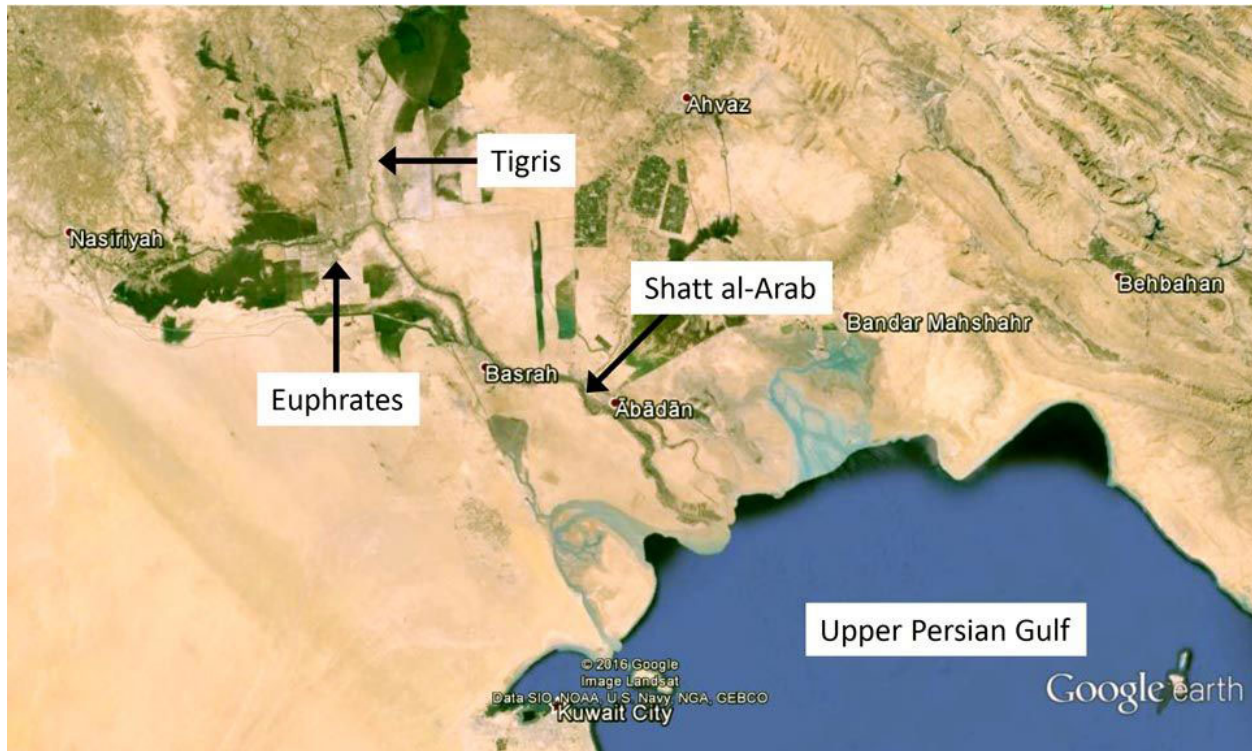


Figure 1. GoogleEarth® image showing the modern confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers above Basrah, Iraq. The two rivers join to become the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Also seen in the image is an older Euphrates river outlet along the shoreline to the south-west and extensive shallow marshes to the north-east that include three defunct outlets for the Karun river, which flows in from Iran (to north and east) and joins the Tigris above the Shatt al-Arab. Siltation over thousands of years has continuously changed the shoreline in this region. Image view is approximately 450 × 250 km.

Clearly there are major geological considerations that impinge upon the search for Eden. But there are historical changes to the landscape that must also be taken into consideration. Pliny claimed the two main rivers in the area (the Tigris and Euphrates) emptied into a common lake during the time of Alexander the Great (who died in 323 BC),⁵ and they may have had separate mouths on the Persian Gulf shore earlier in the historical period (figure 1). Cooke also points out that a town Alexander founded 2.4 km from the shore (c. 320 BC) was approximately 193 km inland by the time of Pliny (c. AD 70).⁶ This town, Charax, was located near the confluence of the Tigris and Karun rivers, yet the shoreline penetrated further inland at that time (see figure 5 in Cooke⁶), eclipsing nearly all the region designated by Beitzel⁷ as the possible southern location for Eden (Beitzel's map is presented in [part 1](#) of this paper). There are multiple references in ancient history to Ur being on the *shore*,^{8,9} which would put the most ancient references to the extent of the Persian Gulf several hundred kilometres inland of the current shoreline and well above the modern confluence of the two rivers. Cooke argues that

the early civilizations at Sumer and Susa, both located well inland of the modern shore, were separated by water, because the shoreline at that time was far inland. All this reveals a topological trap for modern people, one into which many professional and amateur historians and theologians have fallen: one cannot simply put their finger on the modern shoreline and then extrapolate history into the ancient past, for the shoreline in many places in the world will move considerably over the historical period.

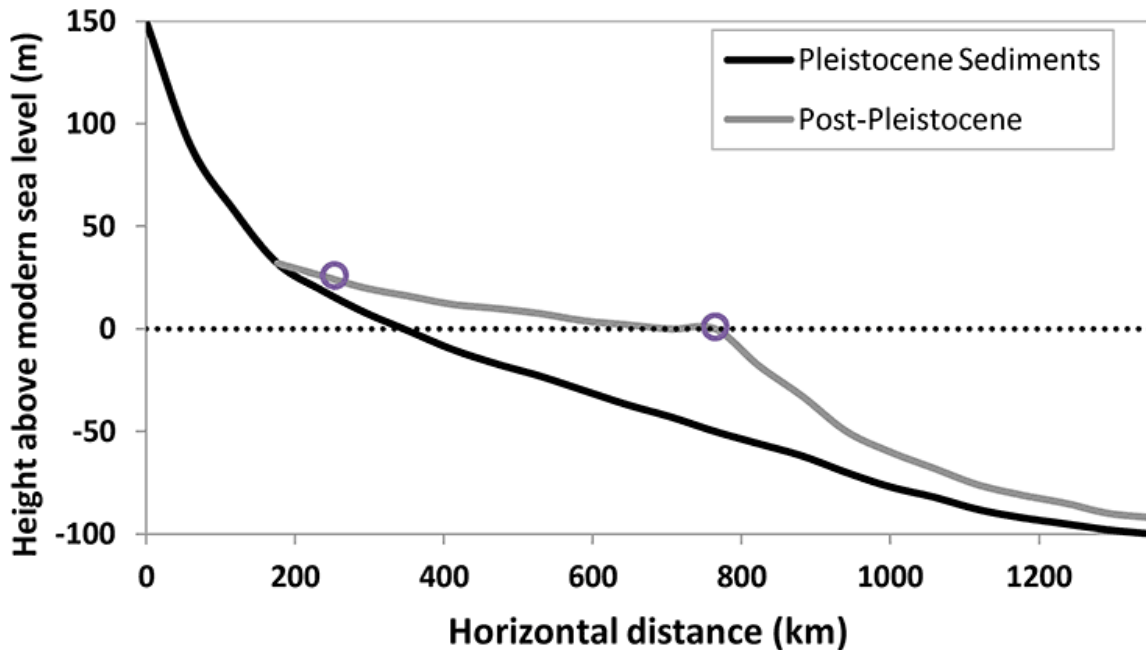


Figure 2. Topography of the Persian Gulf region from about 220 km north-west of Bagdad to about 600 km out into the Gulf (after Cooke⁶). The two circles represent the locations of Bagdad (left) and Fao (right), which sits at sea level. A massive wedge of erosional sediments has built up during the post-Flood, historical period, contributing to significant changes in the shoreline.

Because of its low-lying topography, most of Mesopotamia would have been underwater right after the Flood. Initially, ocean levels would have been perhaps 60 m higher than present.¹⁰ Sea level was approximately 120 m below present during the height of the Ice Age,¹¹ then rebounded to current levels early in the historical period. Deposition of sediment would have occurred the whole time, meaning the ingressive and regressive shoreline would have happened over different underwater topography and the changes could have been rapid. There currently exists a deep wedge of erosional sediments trending out into the Gulf and sitting on top of Pleistocene-age sedimentary rocks (figure 2). Even for those creationists who hold a 'high' Flood/post-Flood boundary, placing it in the 'late Cenozoic',¹² all parties should agree that this material is post-Flood. Clearly, sediments have continually been deposited throughout the historical period and have made significant changes to the shoreline. Archaeologists are currently using satellite and sediment core data to better understand the complex shoreline history of this region. If the rivers were not connected when [Genesis 2](#) was written, one of the

major assumptions behind the majority of work on this subject (that Eden was in lower Mesopotamia) is nullified.

Erosion vs creation

GoogleEarth®



Figure 3. GoogleEarth® image showing classic erosional patterns on the Appalachian Plateau between Stonecoal and Wilsondale, West Virginia (USA). In many places on Earth, multiple kilometres of erosion or deposition have occurred. The entire modern surface of the earth has been shaped in some fashion by erosional processes. This was not true of the antediluvian world. View is approximately 23 × 13 km.

First and foremost, the antediluvian world was not shaped by erosion. True, the land emerged from the ocean on the third day of creation ([Gen 1:9–10](#)), but then God immediately created plants ([Gen 1:11–13](#)), thus stabilizing the ground and preventing the massive wasting erosion that would have ensued along any significant soil slopes upon exposure to water (subterranean or otherwise). When Genesis describes the land, we should not forget that the original creation is expected to be different from the modern world. The primary shaping force on the post-Flood world, however, *is* erosion (figure 3). Thus, due to the physical constraints placed upon us by biblical history it might be a fool’s errand to attempt to match the geographic references to the Garden of Eden and its environs with modern topography.

The implications of the modern erosional surface are profound. The most direct implication is that the modern and antediluvian landforms are simply not comparable. For example, in today’s world there are no examples of even two major rivers originating at the same lake or spring, but [Genesis 2](#) has *four* major rivers originating from the same source. Multiple identical

river sources is a physical requirement from the text, but is also impossible to generate from erosional surfaces. Even if it were possible to set up such a system, the lowermost or fastest eroding outlet of any drainage area will always dominate and eventually take over.

Tigris and Euphrates not connected at either end

When people attempt to correlate the modern Tigris and Euphrates to the situation in [Genesis 2](#), they generally make one of two possible errors. It is true that the source of the Tigris (Lake Hazar in south-east Turkey) is separated from the Euphrates only by a low saddle of land (figure 4). From a mapping perspective, with a view high above the earth, it appears that the two are quite close to one another. Yet, the *source* of the Tigris and the *source* of the Euphrates are not at all close. In fact, the two river basins represent a simple fact of topography: water does not flow uphill and any two river basins will have close contact with other river basins all along their respective edges.

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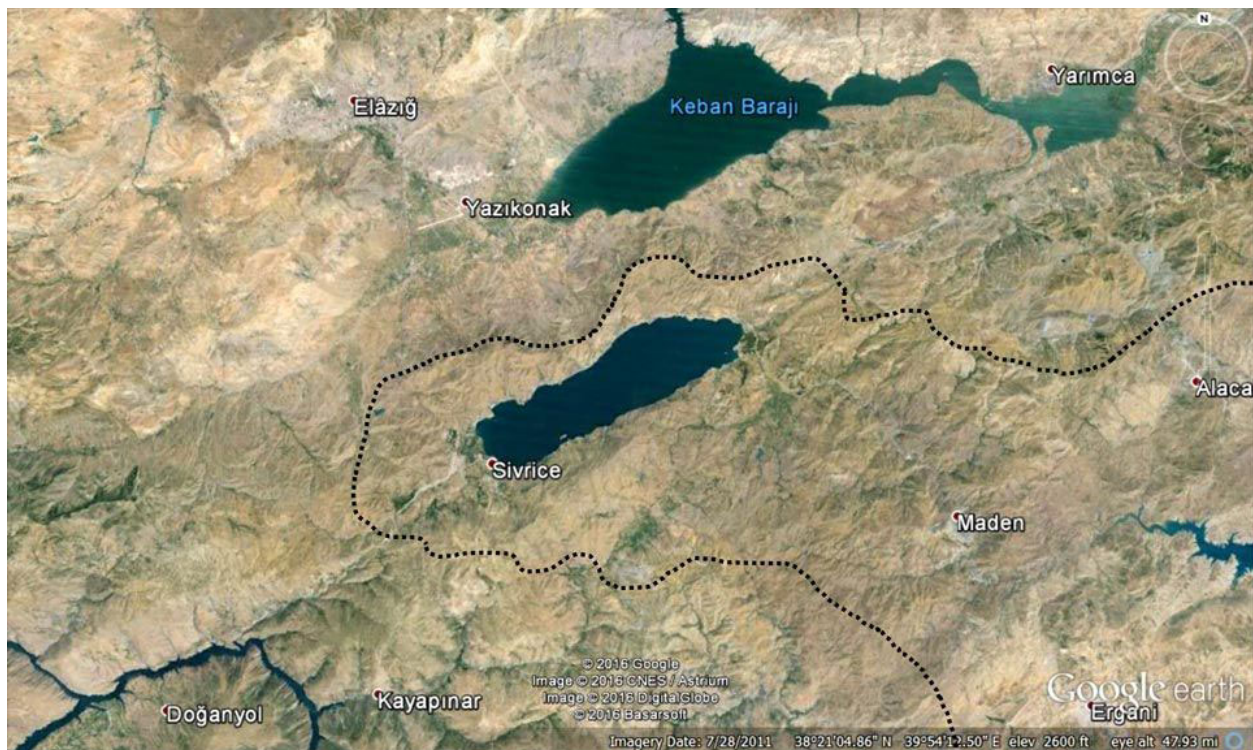


Figure 4. GoogleEarth® image showing the upper Tigris drainage basin (approximately within the black dotted line). The modern Tigris river starts in Lake Hazar (centre) in south-east Turkey. It drains to the east. To the north, west, and south is the Euphrates drainage basin, including the lake at top and the river to the south-west. While the two rivers do get close to one another, note that the sources of the two rivers are not near one another. In fact, the source(s) of the Euphrates are to the north of the area represented in the image. View is approximately 80 × 40 km.

Not only do the Tigris and Euphrates not connect at the source, no other major rivers do either. The source of the Araxes river lies between the two main arms of the upper Euphrates, and

other rivers in the area form and flow downhill into the Black Sea or Caspian Sea, but they all follow the same general rules for erosional surfaces described above. Thus, and despite much speculation on the subject by multiple authors, an Armenian location for Eden is precluded by the geography of the area.

Note that Genesis also says that the four rivers *start* in the same place, whereas the Tigris and Euphrates merge just before they reach the Persian Gulf. But, as we explained above, in ancient times they each had their own mouth, meaning they merged after people started living in the land and the appearance of connectivity is modern. The two rivers were historically not connected at *either* end.

Rhine and Danube drainage basins are an almost-exact match

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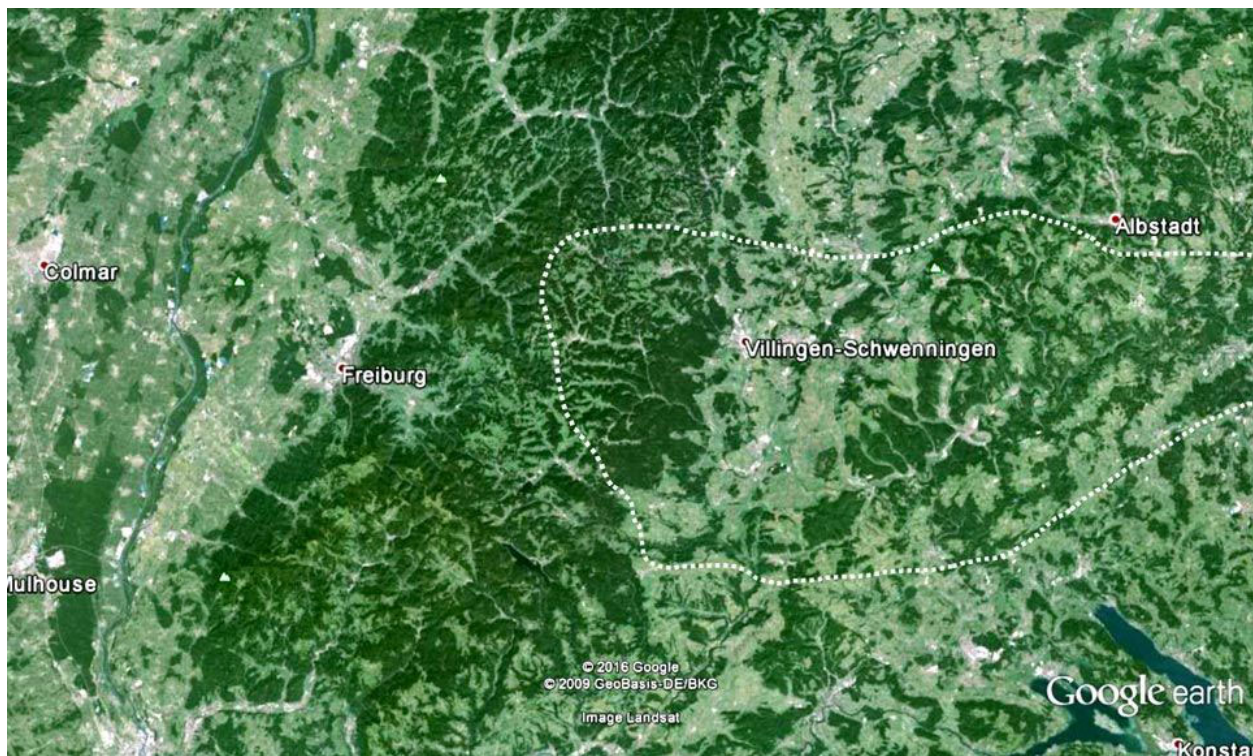


Figure 5. GoogleEarth® image showing the upper Danube drainage basin (approximately within the white dotted line) in Germany's Black Forest. To the north, west, and south is the drainage basin for the Rhine. These two rivers drain a large portion of central Europe. The Danube flows to the east, eventually reaching the Black Sea. The Rhine drains to the north and west, reaching the Atlantic at Rotterdam. These two rivers directly parallel the Tigris and Euphrates situation. View is approximately 80 × 40 km.

The situation with the source of the Tigris and Euphrates is not unusual, for every major river drainage basin is separated from others by a simple change in slope. For example, even though they are connected underground through the porous limestone basement rocks (and later via a canal), the source of the Danube in Germany's Black Forest and the Rhine present an amazingly similar picture to that of the Tigris and Euphrates (figure 5). The headwaters of the Danube are

basically surrounded by the Rhine drainage basin. Yet, nobody would ever claim they have the same source. The only reason people muddle these claims for the Tigris and Euphrates is that they are desperately searching for a correlation between ancient writing and modern topography, and this correlation does not exist.

Extra-biblical evidence

While of course the biblical evidence has primacy, there are a few extra-biblical references one can examine. Specifically, references to a mountain in or near the Garden of Eden can also be found outside the Bible. For example, several scholars have made the case that the most ancient form of Chinese writing contains pictographs that hearken back to the biblical accounts of the Creation and the Fall,¹³ Noah's Ark and the Flood,¹⁴ and the "lamb of God".¹⁵ Consider the series of symbols from Nelson and Broadberry's *Genesis and the Mystery Confucius Couldn't Solve* and see how they combine to produce the symbol for 'garden' (figure 6).¹⁶ Note the 'God' figure standing on a 'mountain' overlooking two people within a bordered enclosure, and note that the mountain stands out prominently.

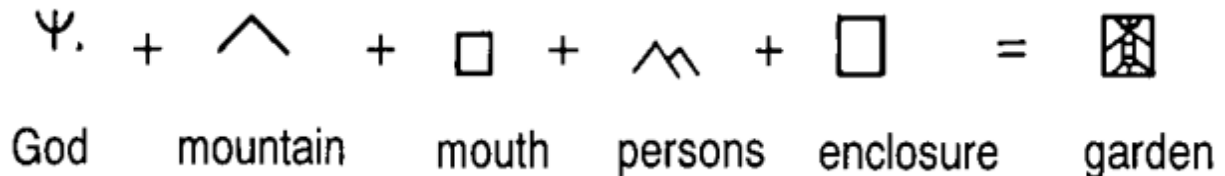


Figure 6. Of the several pictograms that mean 'garden' in the most ancient Chinese script, this one has a mountain standing prominently within it (after Nelson and Broadberry¹⁶).

We must also consider the ubiquitous shape of early religious buildings, from Mesopotamian ziggurats to Egyptian and Mesoamerican pyramids. The idea that a 'god' was associated with a high mountain is almost ubiquitous among ancient peoples, to the point where they built artificial mountains far from any heights as places of worship. Real mountains are also traditional 'holy' places. This is quite conjectural, but still worth discussing. Why did so many early cultures associate mountain heights with the presence of their god(s)?

Biblical evidence

Since the single river coming out of Eden breaks up into *four* rivers, we know that Eden must be higher than the surrounding region, perhaps much higher. There is etymological evidence for this. As we demonstrated in part 1 of this paper, the name of the river Pishon (פִּישׁוֹן) means 'bubbling' and Gihon (גִּיחוֹן) means 'bursting forth, gushing'.¹⁷ Thus the river names themselves may reveal that some significant drop in elevation occurs from the source to the outlet of the rivers. They are certainly not 'lazy' rivers.

Interestingly, a mountain is associated with Eden in several biblical references. These are not definitive, but they are worth studying. In the middle of a lament over the king of Tyre, which is also full of references to Eden and allusions to Satan, [Ezekiel 28:14–16](#) says:

Multiple identical river sources is a physical requirement from the text, but is also impossible to generate from erosional surfaces.

You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked ... I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed [or banished] you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire.

Putting aside a discussion of the 'stones of fire', the Edenic imagery that surrounds this passage is clear, and so is the mention of the mountain.

Revelation also talks about a mountain in an Edenic context. Right before the Genesis themes of the "curse" (22:3) and "the tree of life" (22:2, 19) appear, John says:

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (21:10).

Like the extra-biblical references to a mountain in Eden, this biblical reference is speculative, one might even say weak; however we decided to include it for the sake of completeness. Here again is a mountain associated with Eden-like themes with the New Jerusalem coming down next to that mountain.

Does all this mean there actually was a mountain in the Garden of Eden? No, and it is admittedly speculative, but it does *support* the idea that a mountain was in Eden, within or near the garden. Either way, combining the references to rushing or bubbling water in two of the four rivers, the fact that rivers must flow downhill, and the tangential references to a mountain in an Edenic context indicates that the garden was at some elevation. Why do we reference all of this circumstantial material? Because it almost certainly precludes a Mesopotamian location for the garden. Lower Mesopotamia, especially, is nothing more than a flat, alluvial plain.

A model of Eden

There are many possible layouts that include the necessary elements of 1) a garden in a larger area called 'Eden'; 2) a relative elevation for the source of the river, which flows through Eden before splitting into four rivers; and 3) an eastward progression of features (which is an assumption based on the overall implications from [Genesis 2–4](#)).

Any proponents of modern locations of Eden have to ignore elements of the text which describe elements not present on the modern globe.

What is clear, however, is that no modern-day candidate for the location of Eden possesses characteristics resembling this rough schematic. Thus any proponents of modern locations of Eden have to ignore elements of the text which describe elements not present on the modern globe. Not only that, but such proponents are forced to downplay the plain meaning of the Genesis text, to the point where the geographic data given in the text become nearly meaningless. Focusing on just a few of the terms used is insufficient when one must jettison the remaining terms. This is especially important after one realizes that most of the geographic terms are either very common words (and are thus so generic as to be irrelevant in the search for Eden) or are named after *post-Flood* people (and thus cannot legitimately be used in the search for Eden).¹⁷

Conclusions

[Part 1](#) of this paper established that there are no textual or geographical reasons to expect Eden can be located on a modern-day map. Here we establish multiple geological reasons to also conclude that Eden should not be able to be located in the modern world. The modern landscape is shaped by Flood erosion and post-Flood geological activity, which would have obliterated Eden if it were on or near the surface. Also the majority of the continental surfaces have kilometres of sedimentary rock deposited by the Flood. If the sediments can be attributed to Flood deposition, the original Eden is buried deep. One must also examine the fact that sediments are always deposited in slack-flow areas, and that these are almost always in basins (as opposed to topographical high points). Thus, the majority of the modern continental surfaces were either low points prior to the Flood, were dropped below the ocean crust during the Flood, or the oceanic crust was almost totally resurfaced late in the Flood to remove the Flood-deposited sediments. Why would anyone expect Eden to be near the surface in *any* of these scenarios?

Related Media



[What about the Garden of Eden?](#)

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