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THE ETYMOLOGY OF EDEN

Current scholarship offers two explanations for "Eden" denoting the place where God planted the garden in which the first man lived. One seeks the origin of the name in an Akkadian word borrowed from Sumerian, the other in the Semitic stem 'dn, 'abundant, lush'. A reconsideration of the arguments and some newly available evidence are presented here, strongly favouring the latter explanation over the former.

1. Eden an Akkadian word

The derivation of Eden from a Babylonian source arose after the recovery of part of a cuneiform tablet from Nineveh.1 This tablet contains a list of Sumerian word-signs in its central column, phonetic renderings in the left hand column, and Akkadian equivalents in the right column. The list, known to-day as Syllabary b, was apparently compiled late in the second millennium B.C., or early in the first.² One entry (line 104) reads e-di-in: edin : e-di-nu, the next e-di-in : edin : se-e-ru. There is abundant evidence to show that edin was the normal Sumerian word for "steppe, plain", and for the second Akkadian equivalent, sēru, in the same meaning. Friedrich Delitzsch, who knew of the text before its official publication, claimed the first Akkadian equivalent was identical with the Hebrew name. In his Wo lag das Paradies? Leipzig, 1881), pp. 4, 6, 79 f., he asserted that Hebrew 'eden was not connected with words for "delight" from the base dn, nor with the Aramean place-name Bīt-Adini, but with this Sumero-Akkadian term. With heightened interest in finding Babylonian influences in Genesis following George Smith's The Chaldean Accounts of Genesis (London, 1876), this example was widely accepted and took its place beside others in the literature. For example, A. H. Sayce wrote "The cuneiform inscriptions have, however, cleared up the geography of the garden of Eden. The Sumerian name of the 'plain' of Babylonia was Edin, which was adopted by the Semites under the form of Edinu."3 While some authorities were cautious about the relationship, the F. Brown-S. R. Driver-C. A. Briggs Lexicon qualified it with "perhaps", the endorsement Heinrich Zimmern gave in his Akkadische Fremdwörter* was sufficient authority for the L. Koehler-W. Baumgartner Lexicon to accept it. Among the

commentators H. Gunkel, J. Skinner, S. R. Driver, R. de Vaux have all noted the equation, some with slight hesitancy. In more recent years E. A. Speiser wrote "Eden. Heb. 'ēden, Akk. edinu, based on Sum. eden 'plain, steppe'... this word is rare in Akk. but exceedingly common in Sum. thus certifying the ultimate source as very ancient indeed" (Genesis [Garden City, 1964], pp. 16, 19).

Attractive as this derivation seems, it faces major objections. One, restated recently by Claus Westermann, deserves attention.⁵ The Sumerian word begins with a simple /e/. That language has no /c/, and there is no ground for supposing one stood as the initial of the word in Akkadian, as it does in Hebrew. One may compare Hebrew ³ēd and its generally supposed ancestor, the Sumerian e₄-de, "flood-storm", Akkadian edû where the initial vowel is carried by /³/ in Hebrew.

The second objection arises from the history of the word in Babylonia. Speiser rightly observes that it is "exceedingly common" in Sumerian. In Akkadian, on the other hand, its occurrence is limited to the single entry in Syllabary b cited above. 6 Wherever "steppe" is to be expressed in Akkadian, and wherever there are Akkadian renderings of Sumerian compositions using edin the word normally found is sēru, edinu never appears. This could be an accident, Akkadian texts containing edinu having escaped recovery. Yet given that sēru so often translates edin, and that there are several known synonyms of sēru in Akkadian, it seems safe to conclude that edinu was not a word current in Akkadian, but simply a learned scribal transcription of the Sumerian word-sign in the Syllabary. Again, a learned Hebrew scribe might have borrowed an extremely rare word from Babylonian because it could allow a popular etymology, but it can hardly be considered very likely, and is not the case with other Akkadian loan-words in Biblical Hebrew. The number of ancient readers who could have understood such ingenuity would not have been large.

Both the problem of the initial phoneme and the absence of edinu from any Akkadian text except one lexical list militate against the derivation of Hebrew ceden from an East Semitic and ultimately Sumerian word.

2. Eden a West Semitic word

Biblical Hebrew knows several words with ^cdn as their base and the common idea of "pleasure, luxury". Traditionally, Eden is

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linked with them, the Septuagint already representing gan-ceden by paradeisos tes truphes at Gen. ii 15 and elsewhere. Many scholars have continued to uphold this link. Those who prefer the Babylonian explanation assume with Speiser that the foreign word "came to be associated, naturally enough, with the homonymous but unrelated Hebrew noun for 'enjoyment'", while Skinner affirmed "There is no probability that the proper name was actually coined in this sense". Hitherto only Biblical Hebrew among the ancient West Semitic languages preserved indubitable examples of the base ch in use, Syriac showing it at a later time. The base is known in Arabic and could be an integral part of that language. Neither of the occurrences claimed in Ugaritic by C. H. Gordon is sustained by recent studies, although another passage is now widely held to exhibit a form from cdn. 10

With the recovery of the life-size statue of Had-yis^cī, king of Guzan, from Tell Fekheriyeh in northern Syria, a new example of a word apparently cognate with ceden has become available.11 In the first part of the parallel Assyrian and Aramaic texts stands a series of epithets of Hadad as god of life-giving water. He is styled "water-controller of heaven and earth, who rains down plenty, who gives pasture and watering-places to all lands, who gives prosperity (?) and offerings to all the gods his brothers, watercontroller of all rivers, who makes all lands abound." The last phrase in the Aramaic is m^cdn mt kln for which the Assyrian has muțațhidu kibrāti. There is no doubt the Assyrian verb means "to enrich, make abundant", nor that the Aramaic parallel should have a similar sense (although the two texts are not absolutely identical in every phrase). Here, then, is 'dn in a verbal form, "who enriches, gives abundance", in an Aramaic inscription which we assign to the mid-ninth century B.C. Clearly Old Aramaic gave a sense to ^cdn which was very similar to its value in Biblical Hebrew.

Neither explanation of Eden can be finally established as the

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right one; this new example of the cognate verb in Old Aramaic, with its context, reinforces the earlier interpretation. While that might still be claimed as secondary, or as a popular etymology, the objections to the Babylonian etymology make it much weaker than its champions have allowed. We may prefer to treat Eden, therefore, as conveying from the first all that was contained in the "blissful Paradise of God", in the tradition of the Septuagint and the poet John Milton.

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¹ T. G. Pinches in Sir Henry Rawlinson, Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia V (London, 1884), pl. 38, no. 2, with a duplicate, pl. 38, no. 4; re-published by F. Delitzsch, Assyrische Lesestücke, 3rd edn. (Leipzig, 1885), pp. 65, 66, 4th edn. (1900), pp. 103-5, 5th edn. (1912), p. 107; and by R. Campbell Thomson, Cuneiform Texts ... in the British Museum 11 (London, 1900), pls. 24, 26.

² The whole text is available in B. Landsberger (ed.), Materialen zum Sumerischen Lexicon 3 (Rome, 1955), pp. 89 ff. For characteristics of the lexical material in cuneiform see M. Civil in S. J. Lieberman (ed.), Sumerological Studies in Honor of Thorkild Jacobsen (Chicago, 1974), pp. 123-57.

³ J. Hastings (ed.), Dictionary of the Bible 1 (London, 1898), s.v.

- 4 (2nd edn, Leipzig, 1917), p. 43; cf. F. Buhl (ed.), Wilhelm Gesenius' ... Handwörterbuch (17th edn, Leipzig, 1915), p. 567.
 - ⁵ Genesis I (Neukirchen, 1974), p. 286, citing U. Cassuto and T. C. Vriezen.
- ⁶ Two cases in Old Assyrian texts entered by W. von Soden under edinu in Akkadisches Handwörterbuch I (Wiesbaden, 1965), p. 187b, are obscure and probably not the same word, see K. Hecker, Grammatik der Kültepe Texte (Rome, 1968), p. 182, n. 1, and The Assyrian Dictionary I/J (Chicago, 1960), p. 297b, itinnu B.

⁷ See The Assyrian Dictionary S (chicago, 1962), pp. 138 ff.

- 8 Speiser, p. 16, in line with Zimmern and Delitzsch; J. Skinner, Genesis (2nd edn, Edinburgh, 1930), p. 57.
- ⁹ C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome, 1965), Glossary, no. 1824, 51 (CTA 4) II: 17; ^cnt (CTA 3): III: 30, following C. Virolleaud, Syria 13 (1932), p. 124; 16 (1935), p. 264; La déesse Anat (Paris, 1938), p. 46; now rendered "Behind" by A. Caquot, M. Sznycer, A. Herdner, Textes Ougaritiques I (Paris, 1974), pp. 167, 198, following H. L. Ginsberg, U. Cassuto, G. R. Driver.
- ¹⁰ For the text BH ii 53,54 b'dn 'dnm (Gordon, UT75; CTA 12), Caquot, Sznycer, and Herdner adduce the Hebrew, p. 349, n. u, with Driver, Canaanite Myths and Legends (Edinburgh, 1956), pp. 73, 141, cf. C. Virolleaud, Syria 13 (1932), pp. 133, 140. E. Lipiński, Ugarit-Forschungen 5 (1973), pp. 193 f., sees the meaning "time, moment" here which others accept elsewhere (e.g. Baal II v 6, 7, Gordon, UT 51, CTA 4) although Virolleaud translated "bienfait" in Syria 13.

¹¹ A. Abou Assaf, P. Bordreuil, A. R. Millard, La Statue de Tell Fekherye (Paris, 1982).