

Garden and “Wilderness”

An Ecocritical Exploration of Gen. 2:4b–3:24

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Abstract

In this study, I adapt a methodology from the field of ecocriticism to explore the physical world depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24. I challenge traditional dualistic interpretations of the text in Christian theological tradition and wider Western culture which have heavily influenced ecocritical thinking and have typically characterized the garden of YHWH as a bounteous paradise and the land outside the garden as a barren wilderness latterly corrupted by sin. I argue that the “wilderness” of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 is ultimately just as capable of supporting life as the garden of YHWH. I also suggest that the garden of YHWH is significantly different in appearance to the sumptuous royal gardens of Western Asian tradition to which it has previously been compared, and propose that a vegetal border delineates the garden of YHWH from the surrounding land. Finally, I find that natural resources play a significant role in the narrative; indeed Gen. 2:4b–3:24 pivots around the consumption of a natural resource, the produce of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Through the application of an ecocritical reading methodology, I offer original insight into the physical world depicted in this well-known and highly influential text. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate both the value of dialogue between the fields of biblical studies and ecocriticism, and the potential for further ecocritical studies of biblical texts to follow.

Key words

Genesis 2–3; ecocriticism; Eden; garden; wilderness; natural resources

Introduction

Ecocriticism, a contraction of ecological literary criticism, emerged in North America in the 1980s with the purpose of studying the relationship between literature and the environment (Glotfelty 1996, xvii-xviii). Informed by theory from the science of ecology and motivated by environmentalist praxis, the field has exhibited innovation and interdisciplinarity since its establishment. Today, ecocriticism is a major critical movement practiced globally, and ecocritical theory is highly sophisticated, engaging with thinkers including Stacey Alaimo, Karen Barad, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Ursula Heise, Bruno Latour, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Val Plumwood. It also incorporates a range of contemporary analytical approaches, such as postcolonialism, posthumanism,

ecofeminism, and new materialism (Glotfelty 2014, ix-xi; see also Alaimo 2010; Vakoch 2012; Iovino and Opperman 2014).

Since its emergence, ecocriticism has offered a selection of diverse theories and methodologies developed specifically for the purposes of analysing texts from an ecological perspective. However, biblical scholarship has devoted little attention to this field and biblical scholars have developed their own methods for exploring biblical texts within an ecological context. Horrell (2014) and Nilsen and Solevåg (2016, 665-70) offer summaries of this scholarship. Notable examples of these studies include Barr (1972) and Wilkinson (1980), who interpret biblical texts with the assumption that they exhibited a consistent message of environmental stewardship, the Earth Bible project, which conversely proposes that the Bible is a predominantly anthropocentric text that should be interpreted in a cautious and critical manner (The Earth Bible Team 2000), and Horrell (2010, 8-9), who proposes a centre ground between these two positions that contributes to contemporary Christian theology. Crucially, while the reading methods proposed in the studies mentioned above are largely consistent with ecocritical theory, none of these works identify themselves as ecocritical studies or locate themselves within the field of ecocriticism. And neither have these studies been discussed within the wider corpus of ecocritical scholarship.

Similarly, while there has been some discussion of biblical texts and their cultural influence within the wider corpus of ecocritical scholarship, this discussion has not involved any substantial engagement with the field of biblical studies. The interpretation of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 in ecocritical scholarship exemplifies this point. This well-known pericopé has largely been understood by ecocritics in light of its interpretations within Christian theology and the wider Western cultural tradition, which draw on theological concepts such as original sin, the lost paradise of Eden, and the notion of a hierarchical universe in which the natural world is subject to the rule of humanity, rather than engaging directly with the physical world depicted in the text itself. Indeed, examples of readings exhibiting this approach may be found in some of the seminal texts of the field. In Glotfelty and Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader*, Lynn White Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (1967; 1996, 9) and Paula Gunn Allen's "The Sacred Hoop" (1986; 1996, 244-5) exemplify this interpretive approach, as does Greg Garrard's engagement with the text in *Ecocriticism* (2012, 42).¹ The exception to this observation is Laurence Coupe's "Genesis and the Nature of Myth" (2009) which contributes insights from biblical scholarship to the field of ecocriticism by presenting the interpretation of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 by Christian theologian Anne Primavesi. Coupe does not acknowledge that Primavesi's conclusions contrast with earlier ecocritical interpretations of the text and neither does he use Primavesi's scholarship to inform his own ecocritical reading of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 (9, 15-17). He does, however, conclude that it is necessary for ecocritics to revisit the text of the Bible, dismissing centuries of interpretation in the Christian theological tradition and reading it from an ecological perspective, with the understanding that humanity is connected to, not separate from, the natural world (21-22).

¹ Both White's and Allen's works have precipitated much debate within the academy and in wider society; see Whitney (2015) and Van Dyke (2008) for overviews of the impacts of these studies.

In this study, I offer a logical progression from Coupe's thesis, presenting an ecocritical analysis of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 refined by insight from the field of biblical scholarship. By doing so, I seek to contribute to the task of bringing the fields of biblical scholarship and ecocriticism into greater dialogue with each other. My aim is to adapt an early ecocritical reading methodology to examine the two distinct environments presented in Gen. 2:4b–3:24; the garden of YHWH and the land that surrounds it. I demonstrate that the "wilderness" outside the garden of YHWH comprises partially of fertile arable land. While this land is cursed as a result of the actions of the humans, the curse has no explicitly negative effects upon the land, only negative consequences for the humans. I argue that the garden of YHWH is significantly different in physical appearance to the gardens of ancient Western Asia to which it has been compared. I propose that the garden of YHWH and the land surrounding it are separated by a fluid vegetal border. I also acknowledge the prominent role of plants and water as natural resources in the narrative. Indeed, I argue that the narrative pivots around the consumption of a natural resource, the produce of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

My conclusions therefore challenge the notion perpetuated in Christian theological tradition, Western cultural tradition, and in ecocritical discourse that the physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 is a dualistic realm comprising the paradisiacal garden of YHWH and the surrounding wilderness that becomes corrupted by sin. It is important to question this widely-accepted dualistic understanding of the text because it is at odds with the explicit description of the physical world evident within the text itself. The findings of this study carry implications for the (eco)theological interpretation of the text, challenging the traditional notion perpetuated in Christian theology that the physical world has been cursed as a result of human actions (Leoni 2002, 197). It is also important to draw attention to the role of natural resources in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, given that this aspect of the text has been overlooked by previous ecological analyses of the text undertaken in both biblical studies and ecocriticism. This study therefore demonstrates how dialogue between the fields of biblical studies and ecocriticism can contribute to a fuller understanding of a biblical text, specifically the narrative of Gen. 2:4b–3:24.

Before proceeding, let me address the terminology that I employ throughout this article. First, as Kate Soper acknowledges, "nature" is an ambiguous term that requires clarification (1995, 1-2, 21). For the purposes of this study, I shall use the term "physical world" rather than "nature" to refer to the entirety of the environment depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24. The designation "physical world" is more compatible with the ecocritical notion of an intrinsic interconnection and interdependence between human and non-human (Opperman 2011, 25), whereas "nature" suggests a dualistic (human/non-human) worldview that is arguably at odds with ecocritical theory. Indeed, I shall use the terms "nature" and "natural world" only on occasions where it is necessary to delineate non-human elements of Gen. 2:4b–3:24. Related to this point is the term "natural resource," which I define as "an element of nature ... directly useful to people" (Hackett 2011, 79). Within the context of the current global environmental crisis, the term "natural resource" carries all manner of connotations including the commoditisation and exploitation of the natural world. I use the term "natural resource(s)" here not in relation to

contemporary environmental issues, but in order to highlight that in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, elements of nature are frequently utilised by humans.

Finally, let me address the issue of naming the two spaces within the physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24: the garden of YHWH and the surrounding “wilderness.” In the wider corpus of the Hebrew Bible, the garden of YHWH is juxtaposed against wilderness landscapes in the context of agricultural fertility (e.g. Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 36:35; Joel 2:3). However, these verses do not specifically refer to the land outside the garden of YHWH depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24; this region is actually unnamed in the text and, as I shall demonstrate below, it consists, at least in part, of land that is agriculturally fertile. In respect to the garden of YHWH, this space only became associated with the Grecian concept of paradise through the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew word *gān* (“garden”; Gen. 2:8, 10) into the Greek word *paradeison* (“garden”, “park”, or “paradise”); nothing in the Hebrew text of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 describes this space as a paradise (Stordalen 2000, 84). This later interpretation of the text has endured throughout centuries of Christian and Islamic theological tradition, but also in wider Western culture (Delumeau 1995, 3; Merchant 2013a, 1; Carroll 2003, 126; Clark 1996, 11, 24). In this study, then, I shall avoid the terms “paradise” and “wilderness”; they are absent from the Hebrew text, and their use in translations and discussions of this text reinforces a dualistic understanding of the physical world it depicts that I intend to challenge. Instead, I refer to the garden of YHWH and the land outside it.

Methodology

I will begin by providing a brief introduction to the central theoretical premises underpinning the field of ecocriticism. This is especially helpful given the little attention paid to the field within previous biblical scholarship. More comprehensive introductions to ecocriticism can be found elsewhere (e.g. Glotfelty and Fromm 1996; Garrard 2012; Glotfelty 2014); here I aim to provide an introduction that is adequate within the context of this study.

In North America in the 1980s, a small group of scholars began examining the depictions of nature in North American nature writing; their work would come to be acknowledged as the initial stage of ecocriticism (Glotfelty 1996, xvii–xviii). Laurence Buell’s seminal work, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), represents the culmination of scholarship from this period. In this monograph, Buell uses Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) as a starting point to explore the conception of nature in the history of Western thought. While Buell’s study is primarily a literary analysis, a substantial portion of his study engages with the socio-historical contexts from which writings in the Western tradition developed various understandings of nature (1995, 31–142). This observation is important here, as the methodology I apply in this study also incorporates a similar socio-historical element.

In 1996, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s edited volume, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, was instrumental in establishing the field of ecocriticism. This anthology explored ecocritical theory and expanded its scope beyond North American nature writing in a variety of interdisciplinary directions, including medieval history, ecology, landscape theory, and Native American studies

(Glotfelty 1996, xxv-xxxii). Glotfelty's introduction to the volume proposes a definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). While this definition is very broad, it nonetheless facilitates the inclusion of a diverse range of typically interdisciplinary studies identifying themselves with the field today (see, for example Goodbody and Rigby 2011). Glotfelty then proceeds to acknowledge the centrality of the concept of interconnectedness to ecocritical theory, declaring that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix). This notion is inspired by the early environmentalist Barry Commoner's first principle of ecology: "Everything is connected to everything else" (1971, 33). It proposes that our globe functions as an interconnected system where the actions of one element have implications upon others, whether this be the commercial deforestation of the Amazonian rainforest to create palm plantations, a deer eating the bark of a tree, or oceanic waves impinging upon coastal farmland. Like Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism, this principle of interconnectedness remains central to ecocritical theory today; since the publication of the *Ecocriticism Reader*, ecocritical theory and methodology have continued to develop around these original principles in numerous and diverse directions.

As early as 1999, Buell described ecocriticism as a "concourse of interlocking but semi-autonomous projects" (1999, 706); later, Ursula Heise proposed that only book-length introductions to the field could capture its diversity and complexities (2006, 506). In its current state, it is perhaps most accurate to think of "ecocriticism" as an umbrella term that incorporates a variety of sub-fields concerned with particular periods of writing, authors, or critical approaches. Examples of these include early modern ecocriticism, (Hallock, Kamps and Raber 2008), Shakespearean ecocriticism (Estok 2011a), and postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin 2010). While each sub-field has developed its own particular theory and methodologies, dialogue has largely been maintained across the field as a whole, as exemplified by the regular publication of diverse ecocritical anthologies (see, for example Oppermann 2015; Barry and Welstead 2017). Crucially, however, the earliest theoretical principles of ecocriticism remain common throughout the field, which, as Glotfelty illustrates, may still be described as the exploration of the relationship between text and environment in light of the ecological concept of interconnectedness, through engagement with a variety of thinkers, modes of thought, and disciplines (2014, ix-xii).

In addition to these theoretical principles, it is also important to acknowledge that ecocriticism has been founded upon, and has developed in light of, a commitment to environmentalist praxis (Buell 1995, 430). Ecocritics have discussed both the definition of environmentalist praxis in this context and the extent to which environmentalist concerns should, and do, motivate the field (Phillips 2003, 160-2; Estok 2011b, 240-2). Notably, there has not yet been any specific discussion regarding how environmentalist praxis should relate to the ecocritical analysis of biblical texts. In this study, my primary focus will be to examine the physical world depicted in Gen. 2:4b-3:24, rather than to explore how this text might be read in light of, or speak into, any particular contemporary environmental issue.

The focus of early ecocritical scholarship was to examine the manner in which texts depicted the physical world. The significance and originality of this approach in respect to Gen. 2:4b–3:24 is highlighted by examining how biblical scholars have explored this text. While Carol Newsom (2000), Mark Brett (2000), Arthur Walker-Jones (2008), and Norman Habel (2011) each offer ecological readings of Gen. 2:4b–3:24, these studies devote little attention to the field of ecocriticism or to exploring the manner in which the physical world is depicted in this text. Indeed, only Walker-Jones’ “Eden for Cyborgs” explicitly engages with ecocritical scholarship, though in this article, he cites the influence of just one ecocritical study (2008, 264). As a whole, these four studies are more concerned with discussing the relationship between humanity and the natural depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, rather than examining the depiction of the physical world in text per se (see, for example, Newsom 2000, 69-70; Brett 2000, 80-6; Walker-Jones 2008, 280, 287-8). This observation is especially notable in the case of Habel’s reading. Habel sets out with the specific aim of focussing on the physical world depicted in the text (2011, 17), but because his study takes the form of a commentary, its focus is diverted towards the events in the narrative. Consequently, only a small space is devoted to addressing elements of the physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24; the barrenness of the primal Earth, the “forest of Eden” and the air (50, 51, 56). Overall, then, while Newsom, Brett, Walker-Jones, and Habel offer ecological readings of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 these studies devote little attention to ecocritical theory and methodology, and focus more upon the relationship between humanity and nature. To date, then, no ecological reading of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 has devoted significant attention to the depiction of the two distinct physical locations in the text, the garden of YHWH and the surrounding land; consequently, there is sufficient latitude for these to be explored below.

The ecocritical methodology that I propose here is primarily literary in its focus. The purpose of this methodology is to facilitate an exploration of the physical world depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 in order to challenge the notion that the text depicts a dualistic world where the “paradisiacal” garden of YHWH and the surrounding “wilderness” represent contrasting spaces. The ecocritical methodology that I apply in this study is based upon the fundamental question of early ecocritical discourse: how is the natural world depicted in a given text? (Glotfelty 1996, xviii-xix). My methodology is as follows. I read Gen. 2:4b–3:24 as a discrete literary unit, examining each word or verse that suggests a description of the physical world. I consider these descriptors individually, in relation to each other, and alongside pertinent texts from the Hebrew Bible. I pay particular attention to the manner in which elements within the physical world of the text interact with and affect each other, as this is central to the ecocritical (and ecological) principle of interconnectedness.

This approach raises the question of anachronism in respect to applying ecocriticism, a contemporary critical theory informed by ecological theory, to an ancient text. In the words of Schliephake (2016a, 3): “there is the risk of approaching the distant worlds of antiquity anachronistically and to impose our own standards and concepts all too freely on societies with different technological, religious, and social backgrounds.” The theory and methodology accompanying the application of ecocritical reading methods to ancient texts is still in its early stages and there is

still much work to be done in developing this area of scholarship (Schliephake 2016a, 4).² In the context of this study, my focus is to discuss the depiction of the physical world in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 with the aim of exploring the manner in which its two distinct spaces, the garden of YHWH and the surrounding wilderness, are portrayed. While I also explore the interconnectedness of things within the physical world of this text, and this concept is founded in contemporary ecological thinking, I consider this interconnection in a manner that reflects the details within the narrative rather than attempting to reconcile the narrative with contemporary ecological or biological thinking. For example, based on textual data in Gen. 2:4b–9, it is reasonable to suggest that the soil into which the garden of YHWH is planted is fertile as it facilitates the growth and sustenance of its varied tree population, whereas it would be anachronistic to impose a contemporary environmental scientific understanding upon the text and propose that the introduction of these trees may change the electrochemical composition of the soil in the garden.

With the purpose of understanding the physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 as fully as possible, I have included a historical-critical dimension to my analysis. I explore the meanings and etymologies of relevant words in the original Hebrew versions of the text, along with the socio-cultural context from which the text originated. Thus, gathering textual information about the physical world depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 and supplementing it with insights from relevant historical-critical scholarship, I construct a coherent picture of the garden and the surrounding land depicted. This method enables me to challenge the dualistic understanding of the physical world of this text perpetuated by Western cultural tradition, Christian theological tradition, and ecocritical discourse, demonstrating that this interpretation is at odds with the explicit depiction of the physical world in the text. The method also reveals the important role of natural resources in the text; a narrative feature overlooked by previous ecological readings of the text in the fields of biblical studies and ecocriticism. I present the analysis that follows in a manner that is consistent with the progression of events in the narrative, starting with the arid “soil plain,” then examining irrigation, the region of Eden, the garden of YHWH, the flora of this garden, and finally, the land outside the garden.

Arid “soil plain” and sky

Gen. 2:4b–3:24 opens by introducing the temporal setting of the narrative; the time at which the creator-god YHWH made “the earth and the heavens” (Gen. 2:4b).³ The Hebrew word *yôm* (“day”; Gen. 2:4) should not be understood as a single calendar day here because, as Walter Moberly notes, the word may be used to represent temporal periods of varying length (2000, 5). Furthermore, in contradistinction to Gen. 1:1–2:4a, which employs *yôm* in a diurnal context, nothing in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 suggests that its events unfold over one single day. The use of the verb *‘āsāh* (“made”) to describe the creation process (Gen. 2:4) is significant because, as Robert Alter observes, it conveys the sense of YHWH as a craftsman shaping the world into being (1996, 7). Both the image of YHWH as a human

² This is especially true in the case of ecocritical readings of biblical texts; Schliephake’s recent edited volume on ecocritical readings of ancient texts (2016b) does not include any biblical texts.

³ Unless stated otherwise, all biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

interacting with the physical world and the theme of manual labour, particularly in an agricultural context, are developed further in the text; *’āsāh* subtly indicates the direction our narrative will follow. YHWH’s creation is described as two distinct realms: “the earth and the heavens” (Gen. 2:4b). John Pilch (2012, 24) asserts that this phrase demonstrates a belief in a bipartite division of the universe, though this position is not developed further in the text. Alternatively, the phrase seems to distinguish the narrative of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 from the preceding narrative of Gen. 1:1–2:4a, which employs the contrasting phrase “the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1; 2:1, 4a).

Gen. 2:5 depicts the spatial setting of our narrative; an arid “soil plain” devoid of life. There are no plants in the earth (v. 5a), YHWH has not initiated any rain (v. 5b), and there is no human to cultivate the soil (v. 5c). Brown (2010, 79), Habel (2011, 50), and Merchant (2013b, 32) view this primal landscape as “barren.” However, this is not true. Barrenness in agriculture refers to the inability of land to support life, and while the land is bare, its soil must be fertile if it is to accommodate the lush garden later planted by YHWH. This point is underscored by Ellen Davis who translates *’ādāmāh* as “fertile soil” in her agrarian analysis of the Hebrew Bible (2009, 29-32).⁴ In recognition of the ability of this soil to sustain life, then, the land of Gen. 2:5-6 can be understood as a vast expanse of fertile soil awaiting irrigation.

Numerous interpretations of Gen. 2:5 have been proposed due to differing translations of the two Hebrew plant nouns employed in the first phrase, *śiyah* and *’ēšeb*, and different understandings of the remainder of this verse, which further describes the emptiness of the ground. David Tsumura observes that scholars have understood *śiyah* and *’ēšeb* respectively as either wild and cultivated plants or inedible and edible plants, though Tsumura himself rejects both of these hypotheses and believes that the two words both represent wild plants (2005, 78-80). Each of these three positions imply differing attitudes towards the natural world. Distinguishing between wild and cultivated plants suggests an agrarian perspective, while differentiating between inedible and edible plants infers that plants are understood primarily as a source of food. For Tsumura, *śiyah* and *’ēšeb* represent plants of the wilderness, thus reinforcing the emptiness of the landscape. Ziony Zevit’s study of *śiyah* and *’ēšeb* resolves this matter. Zevit demonstrates that, excepting Gen. 2:4b–3:24, *śiyah* is found in the Hebrew Bible only in Gen. 21:15 and Job 30:4-7, where the noun describes plant life generally (2013, 91). In contrast, he cites Gen. 1:29, 9:3, Exod. 9:13-35, Ps. 104:14, and Zech. 10:1 to argue that *’ēšeb* delineates any plant edible to humans or animals (2013, 90-1). In Gen. 2:5a, then, *śiyah* and *’ēšeb* appear to distinguish between inedible and edible plants and underscore the role of plants as a source of food.⁵ This position is reinforced, given that the central theme of vv. 4b–7 is the emergence of life; the emptiness of the primordial land is illustrated in v. 5a by showing, first, that it is devoid of all kinds of plant life, and second, that it is also incapable of sustaining human and animal

⁴ Cf. the theological interpretations of Iranaeus, who likened the virgin soil from which Adam was created to Mary, the virgin from whom Jesus was born, and Rashi who proposed that plants lay below the surface of the ground awaiting irrigation (Watson 2010, 136-7; Rashi 1929, 9).

⁵ Note that while *’ēšeb* suggests that plants provide food for animals, this is not addressed explicitly in the text; cf. the role of plants in providing food for humans (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:6, 11-13, 18-19).

life due to the absence of edible plants. The text therefore depicts plants as a natural resource, essential to support life.

Scholars have tended to agree that Gen. 2:5b–c attributes the cause of the empty earth to the lack of rain and the absence of anyone to till the soil. This interpretation is explicitly evident in a number of biblical translations (see the text in *The Message*, *New International Version*, *New Living Translation*, *The Living Bible*, and *The Voice*),⁶ though Alter (1996, 7), Gordon Wenham (1987, 58), and Abraham Kuruvilla (2014, 56) demonstrate the extent to which differing translations of *śiyah* and *ʿēšeb* can influence the interpretation of Gen. 2:5b–c. Again, in contrast to popular scholarly opinion, Tsumura (2005, 80) proposes that structurally, Gen. 2:5–6 is better understood as two discrete sections relating to two spatial settings: *śiyah* refers to wild open fields devoid of plant life owing to the absence of rain, while *ʿādamāh* denotes ground suitable for supporting agricultural crops devoid of plant life because there is no *ʿādām* to till it.⁷ I dispute interpretations of Gen. 2:5 such as those offered by Wenham, Kuruvilla, and Tsumura because they fail to interpret Gen. 2:5 within the wider context of Gen. 2:4b–3:24; when plant life first appears, it is neither because of rain falling nor because the ground has been tilled by human hands. It is because plants are introduced to the earth by YHWH, performing the duties of an agriculturalist (Gen. 2:8). Rather than understanding Gen. 2:5 as presenting the two conditions necessary for the emergence of plant life in the narrative, it is more accurate to conclude that this verse acknowledges two conditions conducive to *stimulating* plant life, thus reminding readers that neither are occurring at this narrative juncture. The purpose of Gen. 2:5, then, is not to provide a biological explanation of the absence and emergence of plant life but rather to introduce the physical setting for the narrative; an arid “soil plain” devoid of all kinds of plant life and, with no edible plants present, incapable of sustaining life.

Applied to Gen. 2:4b–5, then, my ecocritical reading methodology shows that the physical world of this text can be understood as a vast expanse of fertile soil awaiting irrigation. This interpretation challenges the traditional dualistic view of the text that the land outside the garden of YHWH is barren and inhospitable. Furthermore, my ecocritical reading reveals that plants are categorised as either edible or non-edible in Gen. 2:5; this suggests that plants are depicted in terms of their usefulness as a natural resource providing food. This distinction between edible and non-edible plants also hints towards a significant plot point: the edibility of produce from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

⁶ “Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground” (Gen. 2:5, *New International Version*).

⁷ The linguistic connection between *ʿādām* (“Adam”, or “human”) and *ʿādamāh* (“ground”) underscores an intrinsic bond between humanity and nature and has received much attention (e.g. Alter 1996, 8; Newsom 2000, 63; Habel 2011, 50; Zevit 2013, 82–3). I do not explore this connection here as the focus of this study is the depiction of the physical world in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 rather than the relationship between humanity and nature.

Irrigation

Gen. 2:5b acknowledges the role of rain in the emergence of plant life and v. 6 develops this connection, announcing the irrigation of the whole of the earth's arid surface. The Hebrew word representing water in this verse, *'ēd*, has been translated as "mist," "spring," "stream(s)," and "rain."⁸ Tsumura (2005, 86, 106) and Zevit (2013, 79-80) attest that scholars presently tend to favour "stream" for both etymological and contextual reasons and, while they disagree with each other on the etymology of *'ēd* and avoid committing to a translation of the word, they concur that Gen. 2:6 depicts an extraordinarily large upwelling of water saturating the surface of the earth.⁹

Notably, neither the purpose nor the consequence(s) of irrigation in Gen. 2:6 are explained in Gen. 2:4b–3:24. Mark Futato (1998, 10) and Kuruvilla (2014, 56) believe that plants will emerge from the ground as a direct consequence of this irrigation. This is not the case though; trees are introduced to this primordial landscape by YHWH (Gen. 2:8-9). Given the connection between irrigation and the growth of plants in Lev. 26:4 and Deut. 11:14, one might propose that the irrigation in v. 6 hydrates the bare soil of the land sufficiently to support the trees later introduced by YHWH, though this is not stated in the text. In short, there are difficulties with trying to understand Gen. 2:4b-9 as a literal account outlining the biological processes precipitating the emergence of life.

Alternatively, Gen. 2:6 serves to reinforce an important theme in Gen. 2:4b–3:24; the presence of water upon the ground acting as a precursor to the creation and sustenance of life. We saw the first instance of this theme in Gen. 2:5, which acknowledges the link between rain on the ground and the emergence of life. In v. 6, water covers the earth before the first human is formed and the first garden is planted, which becomes home to diverse tree and animal species (vv. 7-8, 18-19). Verse 10 also features the theme; a river flows out of Eden where it irrigates the garden of YHWH, sustaining its flora (and subsequently its fauna), before splitting into four tributaries that serve four distinct geographical locations. Zevit (2013, 98) explains that in central and northern Mesopotamian art, the image of four diverging rivers evoked arable fecundity. That is to say, from a socio-historical perspective there was an established understanding in ancient Western Asian culture that abundant water supply was intimately connected to agricultural fertility. Hence, thematically and in accordance with established contemporary images of agricultural fertility, rather than in a literal biological sense, the depiction of irrigation in Gen. 2:6 represents the transformation from arid soil plain to fertile land. Indeed, it is upon *some* of this fertile land that the garden of YHWH is planted. Again, then, the ecocritical reading method applied here results in an understanding of the physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 that is at odds with the traditional dualistic interpretation of the text. Furthermore, this reading approach demonstrates that in

⁸ *'ēd* in Gen. 2:6 is translated as "mist" in the Amplified Version, King James Version, and New King James version, as "springs" in The Message, as "stream" in the NRSV, and "streams" in the New International Version; cf. "rain" (Futato 1998, 6).

⁹ Zevit believes that *'ēd* has Akkadian origins. Tsumura engages in a more extensive study and concludes that *'ēd* is best understood as a Sumerian loanword.

Gen. 2:4b–3:24, water, in addition to plant life, is depicted as a life-giving and life-sustaining natural resource.

The region of Eden

Tsumura's structural reading of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 proposes that the garden of YHWH is located in the region of Eden (2005, 82). This is a compelling suggestion for the ecocritical reader, raising many questions about how the region may be described from a geographical or ecological perspective. Where in the physical world of the text is this region? What geographical features does the land exhibit? What is its climate like? What species of plants and animals are indigenous to the land? It is not possible to answer questions such as these definitively, as Gen. 2:4b–3:24 describes the region of Eden only as the source of the river serving the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates (Gen. 2:10–14). The Tigris and Euphrates are recognisable today and consequently some scholars have postulated geographical locations of Eden (Scolnic 2005, 16-18, 27-32; Zevit 2013, 96-113). Such endeavours are disputable, however, given that these rivers seem to have a symbolic, rather than locative, role in the text. I therefore accord with T. Stordalen (2000, 284-6) and Tryggve Mettinger (2007, 15-16) who are more cautious in situating Eden within a real-world geographical context.

An engagement with the socio-historical aspect of the text elucidates its narrative depiction of the region of Eden. As the Tigris and Euphrates were known to ancient Israel as large rivers delivering plentiful quantities of fresh water (Zevit 2013, 98-101), they are employed in Gen. 2:14 not for the purposes of precise geographical orientation, but symbolically, to reinforce the motif of abundant fertile land. The availability of fresh water was of paramount importance to ancient Israel due to its partial dependence upon rain for water supply (Dando 2012, 316, 319; Chatham 2006, 11); this is reflected in Gen. 2:4b–10 where the theme of water initiating and sustaining life recurs. I therefore suggest that Gen. 2:10–14 employs the Tigris and Euphrates because these two rivers were synonymous with plentiful quantities of life-giving water, and when juxtaposed with the two further rivers of unconfirmed location, they evoke well-established contemporary imagery to portray a large fertile plain prime for agriculture.

The type of land that Eden might represent may be postulated from its name. A. R. Millard (1984, 103-5) summarizes the two prevailing scholarly theories regarding the etymology and meaning of *'ēden*. On the one hand, it may be a rare Akkadian word equivalent to the Sumerian word for “steppe” or “plain.” On the other hand, it could be equivalent to the root *'dn* in the Western Semitic languages of Syriac, Arabic, Ugaritic, Assyrian, and Aramaic, connoting “pleasure” and “abundance.” Millard (1984, 104) and Tsumura (2005, 124) both demonstrate that the latter position is more probable owing to the rarity of the equivalent Akkadian word and because there is no equivalent phoneme of *'dn* in the Akkadian language. Tsumura's study culminates by proposing that *'ēden* means “place where there is abundant water supply” (2005, 124). Considering the thematic link between water and life already established in the narrative, the depiction of the garden of YHWH within a region whose name connotes abundant water supply, and therefore tremendous potential to support life, seems most appropriate. Applied to the region

of Eden depicted in Gen. 2:10-14, my ecocritical reading approach again challenges the notion of the dualistic world in Gen. 2:4b–3:24; the garden of YHWH is located within a wider region containing abundant water supply, which suggests arable fecundity rather than barrenness. Furthermore, alongside abundant water supply, the presence of gold, bdellium and onyx in this region (Gen. 2:11-12), underscores the intrinsic value of this region’s natural resources.

The garden of YHWH

The primary purpose of the garden planted by YHWH is seemingly to provide a dwelling place suitable for the first human (Gen. 2:8-9). The garden features abundant food and visually stunning flora and is therefore well-equipped to nurture and sustain human life. While it is clear that the garden is planted in the region of Eden (v. 8), the meaning of the descriptor *miqedem*, translated as “in the east” (NRSV), is ambiguous. On the basis of the use of this word elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, I agree with Stordalen (2000, 267-70) that *miqedem* seems to function here as a temporal descriptor that sets the narrative in the distant past, rather than a locative descriptor that suggests an easterly geographical location for the garden. There are no other explicit indicators of the location of the garden of YHWH in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, though Ezek. 28:14, 16 states that the garden is located on a mountain. One might propose that the four streams originating from the garden suggest that it is located at a higher elevation than the destinations downstream, but with no other textual data supporting this there is not conclusive evidence to confirm that the garden as it is depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 is located upon a mountain.¹⁰ There is further ambiguity in the depiction of the planting of the garden in v. 9. Neither the origin nor the maturity of the trees introduced to the garden is stated; hence, the timescale of planting, and possibly cultivating, the trees is therefore unclear. The verse could represent YHWH’s introduction of fully grown trees into the soil, or the passage of years as YHWH nurtures the trees from seedlings.

Throughout the Hebrew text of Gen. 2:4b–3:24, the noun *gān* (“garden”) is used to refer to the garden of YHWH. This word is crucial to understanding the text from an ecocritical perspective because in respect to Gen. 2:4b–3:24 it has become conflated with the notion of the royal garden of ancient Western Asian tradition. My ecocritical reading challenges this conflation. Francesca Stavropoulou (2011, 43) explains that gardens, particularly royal gardens, were ascribed a special mythic status in ancient Western Asia because they not only exhibited fertility, but represented a cultivated fertility. The royal garden required planning, irrigation, and management, and incorporated diverse plant species from game parks and vegetable plots from around the known world; this kind of garden therefore demonstrated the consummate mastery of a king over the natural world (Stavropoulou 2011, 114-18). However, there are major differences between the physical attributes of the garden of YHWH depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 and the royal gardens of this tradition, and these differences are crucial to understanding the garden of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 from an ecocritical perspective. It is therefore helpful to discuss the socio-historical context of the narrative here.

¹⁰ Cf. William Dumbrell (2002, 20), who argues that the narratives of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 and Ezek. 28:11-19 can be reconciled and consequently advocates a mountainous location for the garden of YHWH.

First, the royal gardens of ancient Western Asian tradition were enclosed by walls and this may not be true of the garden of YHWH. Some scholars have argued that the Hebrew term *gān* should be understood as a walled garden, either owing to its origins from the linguistic root *g(n)n*, which is used to generate words relating to protecting and enclosing, or because motifs within Gen. 2:4b–3:24—such as sacred trees, guardians, and attendants—evoke a connection with the Old Iranian concept of the royal walled garden (Dumbrell 2002, 19; Lanfer 2012, 133). A. Murtonen demonstrates that *gān* undoubtedly has a linguistic connection to “protecting” and “enclosing” (1988, 64), but I am not convinced that each of the numerous occurrences of this word in the Hebrew Bible represents a *walled* garden specifically. It is reasonable to infer that the royal gardens of 2 Kgs 25:4, Neh. 3:15, Jer. 39:4, and 52:7 are walled, given the depiction of adjacent walls in these verses. There are, however, no textual indicators to suggest that the gardens of Deut. 11:10, 1 Kgs 21:1, or Isa. 58:11 are enclosed by a wall. The connection of the Hebrew word *gān* to “protecting” and “enclosing” therefore seems to relate to the wider process of cultivation, connoting the role of the agriculturalist in insulating plants from the elements and protecting them from predation, which does not necessarily include the provision of a wall. While it is true that literary motifs featuring in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, such as sacred trees, guardians, and attendants, are consistent with the Old Iranian concept of the royal garden, Peter Lanfer (2012, 133) explains that it is the Persian loanword *pardēs*, employed in Song 4:13, whose origins can be linked to this tradition and not the word *gān* which features throughout Gen. 2:4b–3:24; indeed, the word *pardēs* is absent from Gen. 2:4b–3:24. William McClung (1983, 3) supports this position, demonstrating that *pardēs* refers specifically to a walled garden, while Zevit (2013, 89) illustrates that *gān* refers to numerous types of gardens, including plantations of fruit-bearing, aromatic, or decorative trees, plantations that combine these types of trees, or vegetable gardens. Furthermore, there is nothing explicit in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 that suggests the garden of YHWH is enclosed by a wall. The guarding of the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24) seemingly refers to a specific point of entry into the garden, implying that the garden is impenetrable to humans elsewhere around its perimeter. With no textual indicators pointing to the presence of a fabricated wall, it seems more probable that the garden is impenetrable due to dense vegetation at its border. A vegetal border to the garden would permit a greater integration into the wider physical world than a solid wall, allowing small animals and airborne seeds and pollen to pass between the garden and surrounding land more freely.¹¹ This border therefore marks a spatial boundary between the garden of YHWH and the land outside it; the garden occupies a distinct area within the region of Eden.

Second, the royal gardens of ancient Western Asian tradition boasted a tremendous diversity of plant species and, consequently, such gardens featured distinct areas such as vegetable plots, ornamental displays of plants and trees, vineyards, and beds of spices (Stavrakopoulou 2011, 44; Zevit 2013, 114–15). In contradistinction, the range of plant species in the garden of YHWH appears to be

¹¹ I discuss flora and fauna in the environment of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 below. The passage of seeds and pollen would complicate Adam’s role of tiller and keeper of the garden, increasing the number of “weeds” requiring eradication in order to maintain the selection of tree species prescribed by YHWH (Gen 2:9, 15).

restricted to trees (Gen. 2:9), or at least according to the description of this space in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, there is no mention of any other plant species present. Habel (2011, 53) likens the garden to a rainforest, dense with trees and teeming with all kinds of animal species. According to the explicit textual data in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, however, the garden of YHWH consists exclusively of moist fertile soil out of which a variety of food-producing trees grow; it is more accurate to describe this space as a managed tree plantation.

Third, the royal gardens of ancient Western Asian tradition were noted for their range of animal species, sometimes featuring game parks that functioned as zoos or hunting reserves (Zevit 2013, 115). In the garden of YHWH, an exhaustive range of land-dwelling animals and birds are introduced to Adam (Gen. 2:19). Given the presence of the snake in Gen. 3:1, it appears that these animals remain in the garden after their introduction to Adam. Here the animals seemingly live peacefully alongside the human inhabitants who have no need to hunt them for food, and no desire to hunt them for sport, or to enclose or restrict them in any way.

Finally, Zevit (2013, 118) attests that the royal gardens of ancient Western Asian tradition featured carefully arranged layouts with pathways and irrigation channels providing a clear frame. There are only two indicators of the layout in the garden of YHWH. The first occurs in Gen. 2:9 which situates the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life somewhere “in the midst” of the garden.¹² The second occurs in Gen. 3:24, which suggests that a path runs from the outside of the garden to the tree of life. The layout of the garden of YHWH is therefore ambiguous and nothing in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 suggests that it is analogous to the carefully-planned and ordered contemporary gardens of Western Asia.

Narrative motifs in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 invite comparison between the garden of YHWH and the royal gardens of ancient Western Asian tradition. However, my ecocritical reading reveals that the garden of YHWH as it is explicitly depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 is clearly different to the gardens of ancient Western Asian tradition in respect to its vegetal perimeter, its exclusive presence of trees, its unrestricted animals, and its ambiguous layout. While the garden of YHWH is clearly capable of sustaining life, the same is true of the land outside the garden.

Flora in the garden of YHWH

¹² In Gen. 2:9, the Hebrew word *btōwk* describes the location of these two trees. Whybray (2012, 44) believes that *btōwk* connotes a central location within the garden and this understanding is evident in the Message and New International Version translations of this verse. Zevit (2013, 93-94) discusses the ambiguity of *btōwk* and demonstrates that it is best understood as “in the midst.” This translation is supported by the Amplified Version, Jewish Publication Society Version, (New) King James Version, and the NRSV. Mettinger (2007, 7) observes that the Hebrew grammar of Gen. 2:9 is unusual as it places *btōwk* between the two trees of the text, presenting the possibility that the tree of life is situated in the midst of the garden while the location of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is undisclosed. However, Gen. 3:3 confirms that the tree of knowledge of good and evil also lies within the midst of the garden..

Relatively little space is devoted to describing the flora in the garden of Gen. 2:4b–3:24; hence, even scholars undertaking ecological readings of the text have not dwelt on this topic (e.g. Newsom 2000; Brett 2000; Habel 2011). Gen. 2:9 is pivotal in elucidating the flora in the garden, divulging the exclusive presence of a diverse range of trees and the selection criteria for trees employed by YHWH: their aesthetic value and edibility. This depiction of flora at first appears to be anthropocentric, describing trees in terms of their usefulness to humanity. However, it is possible that these selection criteria also extend to the animal inhabitants of the garden (Gen. 2:19), who may likewise be sustained by its food-bearing trees and capable of appreciating their beauty, though this is not explicitly stated in the text. It is therefore uncertain if the trees mentioned in v. 9 are depicted in predominantly anthropocentric terms, but it is true that trees, like water, are depicted as a natural resource in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, providing life-sustaining food and bringing aesthetic beauty to the garden.

Three distinct kinds of tree are identified in the garden, though, unlike the animals (Gen. 2:19), the process by which they are named is not detailed. The first two kinds of tree—the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:9)—are unrecognisable to contemporary botany and, as Mettinger (2007, 5) observes, reflect divine prerogatives, immortality and wisdom. The third tree is the fig tree, which is sufficiently established to produce a number of adequately sized leaves to clothe the two humans (Gen. 3:7). In Gen. 2:16-17, YHWH prohibits the consumption of produce from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This prohibition is a significant plot point; the entirety of Gen. 3:1-24, the latter half of the narrative, is based upon the humans eating from this tree and the consequences that follow this action.

This prohibition raises the question of why no equivalent prohibition applies to produce from the tree of life, despite its human consumption being undesirable to YHWH (Gen. 3:22-3). This may be answered by considering the tree of life in botanical terms. Perhaps the height of the tree, the density of its leaves, or the spikiness of its foliage renders its produce difficult, but not impossible, for the humans to access. If this were the case, the humans might be dissuaded from eating from this tree given that there are many other trees in the garden that offer more readily accessible food. Alternatively, the produce of the tree itself may have emitted an unpleasant aroma strong enough to dissuade the humans from eating it, or have been encased by a tough or spiky outer shell. Any of these botanical features serve as possible solutions, provided that they do not compromise the criteria for the selection of trees in the garden (all trees are “pleasant to the sight and good for food,” Gen. 2:9), though it should be acknowledged that these interpretive possibilities are based upon textual omission; they can only be inferred from “gaps” in the narrative.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil does not appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The tree of life features only in Prov. 3:18, 11:30, 13:12, and 15:4, where it performs a figurative function in each verse and no further information is provided about its botanical attributes or ecological role. Ezek. 31:8–9 refers to the garden and divulges a further three tree species present: cedar, fir, and plane (according to the NRSV translation). These species of tree are inedible to humans, so may support the thesis that the selection criteria prescribed by YHWH in Gen.

2:9 (all trees in the garden are “pleasant to the sight and good for food”) extends to the culinary and/or aesthetic needs of the animals. On account of the disparate historical origins of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 and Ezek. 31:1-18,¹³ however, the intention of the author/redactor to connect the two narratives in this way cannot be proven; we can equally deduce that these two narratives provide differing accounts of the flora in the garden.

While there is scant textual information concerning the specific flora in the garden of YHWH, the ecocritical reading methodology applied above elucidates the depiction of the garden of YHWH and underscores the importance of plants as natural resources in the narrative, providing visual beauty and food within the garden. Furthermore, the edibility of one specific plant, the produce of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, is pivotal to the events depicted in the narrative as a whole (Gen. 2:16-17); the act of eating from this tree precipitates a series of consequences that irreversibly change the physical world of the text. I shall discuss these changes below.

Leaving the garden, entering the “wilderness”

When the two humans ignore the prohibition issued by YHWH and eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6), the first action they take is to clothe themselves in loincloths sewn from fig leaves in order to cover their naked bodies (v. 7). Plants therefore serve as a natural resource once more, though it is unclear how many leaves are harvested from the fig tree and whether this causes the tree any damage. YHWH responds by issuing a curse that changes the physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24, clothing the humans in animal skins, and expelling Adam from his garden home into the land outside it (Gen 3:14-24).¹⁴ Like fig leaves, then, animal skins are a natural resource used for clothing and again, there are ambiguities; it is uncertain whether animals are slaughtered specifically to clothe the humans, or if the skins are necessary to somehow protect the humans in their new habitat.¹⁵ The land outside the garden of YHWH is not explicitly described following these events. To understand this environment, it is necessary to explore the consequences of the curse in Gen. 3:14-19 within the context of the earlier depiction of the land in Gen. 2:4b-14.

The prohibition of YHWH (Gen. 2:16-17) restricts the consumption of a natural resource, the produce of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.¹⁶ In the words of YHWH, however, the prohibition is issued to protect humanity from death

¹³ Contemporary scholarship tends to date Gen. 2:4b–3:24 in post-exilic times, even to the Persian period (Mettinger 2007, 11), while Ezek. 31:1-18 is dated to the June of 587 BCE (Galambush 2012, 554).

¹⁴ Gen. 4:1 shows that Adam is apparently accompanied by his wife, despite Gen. 3:24 not specifying that she was with him.

¹⁵ Cf. Lev. 7:1–8; Augustine and other Church Fathers argued that animals were slaughtered in order to atone for the sin of the humans (Augustine 2006, 134).

¹⁶ Wagner-Tsukamoto (2009, 154), approaching the text from an economic perspective, comes closest to identifying the produce of the tree of knowledge as a natural resource, describing it as a scarce form of capital owned exclusively by YHWH.

rather than to conserve the consumption of this natural resource.¹⁷ The prohibition is therefore seemingly decreed in the interests of humanity and, according to the curse of Gen. 3:14-19, it is primarily humanity, in distinction to the wider natural world, who suffer the negative consequences of eating from this tree. The curse that YHWH utters (Gen. 3:14-19) changes the physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24, although there is considerable ambiguity surrounding these changes and their effect upon this world. First, the mobility of the snake is restricted, its diet is limited to dust, and its relationship with humanity becomes adversarial (Gen. 3:14-15). The repercussions of these changes for the wider physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 are not explicitly discussed; the habitat of the snake may now be more limited and whatever plants (or animals) the snake previously preyed upon may now thrive without this threat. Second, the woman is told she will now endure pain during childbirth and be subject to the rule of her husband (v. 16). It is possible that this may affect the rate at which the human population grows and consumes the natural resources of the world depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, though this is not certain. Third, the curse spoken by YHWH to the man is directed towards the ground (vv. 17-19) and seemingly applies to the land into which he is exiled though it is unclear whether this curse also extends to the garden of YHWH. The consequences of the curse are fourfold: humanity will now have to eat plants of the field for food; to procure this food will require prolonged agricultural labour; thorns and thistles will emerge from the ground, hampering agricultural endeavours; and some food will now require domestic processing.

Habel (2011, 62) believes that the cursing of the earth as a result of the actions of the man is an unfair punishment, but nothing in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 suggests that any of the consequences of the curse affect the earth in a negative manner; only humanity is explicitly impacted negatively. It is unclear whether thorns and thistles are new species introduced as a result of the curse or whether they will become more prevalent once human agricultural activities commence. Either way, there is no textual indication that the presence of these plants carries negative implications for the natural world, only for the human farmer. Similarly, it is not certain if the “plants of the field” are introduced to the land outside the garden at this juncture, given that only trees are explicitly named as being present in the physical world up to this point. Equally, it is unstated if animals already inhabit this space; considering the possibility of a vegetal border around the garden and the previously unguarded point of entry to the tree of life, it may be that some animal species have ventured outside the garden and are sustained by edible flora; this is certainly an interpretive possibility, albeit one based upon omissions in the narrative.

The advent of farming will carry implications for the physical world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 as portions of land untouched by humans will now be used for agriculture, but nothing in the text suggests that this early agricultural practice will be environmentally deleterious. In light of Christian theological tradition, Byrne (2010, 89) argues that the curse of YHWH brings humanity and nature into conflict with each other, but my ecocritical reading of the text leads me to disagree with this view. The curse promotes enmity between humanity and the snake (Gen. 3:15), but this

¹⁷ The motives of YHWH and the precise meaning of the prohibition have received much attention (Barr 2006; Zevit 2013, 123-6).

degree of conflict does not apply to the wider natural world of Gen. 2:4b–3:24; it is simply more difficult for humanity to procure food from the ground. This difficulty is not insurmountable though; it is evident from Gen. 4:2–4 that within the lifetime of the first two humans some of this land is successfully harnessed as productive agricultural space with fields planted for vegetables and the sustenance of livestock. In contrast to traditional interpretations of Gen. 2:4b–3:24, then, my ecocritical analysis shows that the land outside the garden of YHWH is not barren and nor is it corrupted by sin; it is, in part, productive arable land capable of supporting human life.

Conclusion

Adapting an ecocritical reading methodology to explore the physical environment depicted in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, I have challenged traditional theological and cultural interpretations of the text that have informed ecocritical thinking and typically interpreted the garden of YHWH as a bounteous paradise, while the land outside remains a barren wilderness latterly corrupted by sin. My ecocritical reading methodology has also underscored the prominence of plants and water as natural resources in Gen. 2:4b–3:24; this detail has been overlooked by previous ecological readings of the text undertaken in the fields of both ecocriticism and biblical studies.

I have argued that the land outside the garden of YHWH in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 is neither barren nor desolate. Indeed, the garden of YHWH, whose primary purpose is to sustain human life, is planted within this space. While it is unclear to what extent the land outside the garden is initially populated with flora and fauna, the region of Eden consists, at least in part, of well-irrigated fertile arable land.

The garden of YHWH, as explicitly portrayed in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, consists of fertile soil from which only tree species grow. While this portrayal emerged from an ancient Western Asian socio-historical context, the garden of YHWH is significantly different to the royal gardens of this tradition in respect to its vegetal perimeter, flora, and layout, following no discernible order, and not restricting or enclosing animals.

I identified the importance of natural resources in Gen. 2:4b–3:24: plants and water represent life-giving and life-sustaining resources that are central to this narrative. Furthermore, the narrative of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 pivots around the consumption of a natural resource, the produce of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eating from this tree profoundly changes the relationship between humanity and the natural resource of plant-based food. Instead of blissfully grazing from the abundant trees in the garden of YHWH, humans must obtain food from labour-intensive agricultural and domestic processes in the wilderness.

It is my hope that this study has illustrated the potential for further ecocritical analyses to be undertaken within the field of biblical studies. While I did not engage with contemporary environmental issues in this study, I anticipate that future ecocritical readings of biblical texts may be influenced by, or speak into, such issues. In addition, I can see possibilities for the reading method that I have employed here to be adapted and applied elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, examining, for example, the contrast between urban Egypt, the Sinai desert, and the land of the promise in

Exodus–Deuteronomy, or the destruction and restoration of the natural world in the flood narrative of Gen. 6:9–10:32.

My identification of plants and water as natural resources in Gen. 2:4b–3:24 elucidated the depiction of garden and “wilderness” in the text. I anticipate, therefore, that an ecocritical reading method based upon exploring the depiction and function of natural resources in biblical texts has much potential to contribute new knowledge to biblical scholarship. The Joseph cycle, the story of the exile from Egypt, and the book of Ruth, where vulnerability of food supplies create narrative tension, are all possible starting points for this approach.

The study also raises (eco)theological questions concerning the motives of YHWH within the pericopé. For example, did YHWH anticipate that the humans would eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? If so, what was the purpose of first placing the humans in the garden? And, given that the land outside the garden suffers no explicitly negative consequences following the curse of YHWH and holds the potential for agricultural development, it seems that YHWH prepared the land outside the garden with the humans in mind from the start of the narrative. This is a stark contrast to traditional interpretations of the text which perceive that the humans are punished by YHWH by being banished into a world corrupted by sin.

Ultimately, by showing that the application of an ecocritical reading methodology to a well-known biblical text such as Gen. 2:4b–3:24 can challenge long-standing traditional interpretations of the text and offer original insight into it, I hope to have demonstrated both the value of dialogue between the fields of biblical studies and ecocriticism, and the potential for further ecocritical studies of biblical texts to follow.

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