

## In the Beginning . . . Paradise on the Earth

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed an earth-creature [*adam*] from the dust of the ground [*adamah*], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the earth-creature became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden of delight [*gan-eden*], in the east, and there he put the earth-creature he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden of delight, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river flows out of the place of delight [*eden*] to water the garden and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows 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 Gihon; it is one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The Lord God took the earth-creature and put him in the

garden of delight to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the earth-creature. “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

GENESIS 2:4–17

The four rivers were the visual clue that told us we were in paradise. In the apse mosaic of St. Giovanni in Rome, water poured from the dove, flowed down behind the cross, and became the four streams that fed the meadows of paradise. Seeing images such as this sent us to the library to discover what early Christian sources said about paradise. We knew that this image in St. Giovanni drew on the ancient Genesis text to picture the world blessed by the Spirit, and we discovered that the Genesis story drew on even older sources. Those ancient sources went all the way back to one of the first written languages in West Asia, Sumerian. Sumerian stories of paradise placed it on the earth and described how life was at its most fertile, just, enjoyable, and beautiful. In this chapter, we explore the ancient wellsprings of the Bible’s stories and images of the garden of delight as they emerge in Genesis and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Just as in Genesis, however, Sumerian stories of paradise are accompanied by stories of what can go wrong: violence, competition, greed, and environmental catastrophes. The Sumerian paradise, called Dilmun, existed to the east somewhere nearby, as did Eden in Genesis. Because it could not be clearly located, it could not be conquered or destroyed. Instead, it was always there so that humanity would remember the ethical requirements of living in paradise and so that those requirements would hold accountable those who threatened it. Hence paradise functioned not only to describe life on earth, but also to provide the ethical measure of life. In this long multicultural genealogy of paradise, we trace various streams of its meanings. Most important, we show how stories of paradise place it on the earth and how they raise ethical implications about how humanity should live.

BETWEEN THE RIVERS

The genealogy of paradise begins in Mesopotamia (literally, “between the rivers”). The Tigris and the Euphrates originate within fifty miles of each other from the far western edge of the Himalayas in eastern Turkey. The two rivers diverge and wander a thousand miles southeast until they meet again in the Persian Gulf. This landscape generated a literature of paradise associated with mountains, rivers, and gardens, beginning with that of the Sumerians.

The Sumerians, a people of mysterious origins, migrated south from the mountains in Turkey in prehistoric times and settled in the hot, flat, fertile delta between the rivers. Around the fifth millennium BCE they began to master flood control and irrigation and built walled settlements. Their stories, first passed on in oral traditions, come to us as texts pressed on clay tablets that date to around 2100 BCE, near the end of their history. They recorded their myths in a phonetic script they invented, called *cuneiform* (“wedge-shaped”). One of the oldest written languages on earth, Sumerian became the scientific, sacred, ceremonial, and literary language for the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and many other surrounding cultures for centuries, despite the fact that it was related to no other language in the region and that, to become fluent, one had to master its separate dialects for men and women.<sup>2</sup>

For subsequent cultures, Sumerian, the language and the culture, was the equivalent of Greek in Roman society or Latin in medieval Europe: the much admired classical language and culture of antiquity. Sumerians encouraged this view with stories of the glories of their rulers and gods. Their conquerors borrowed Sumer’s stories in creating their own myths and used its script to write their very different languages just as, today, English is written with Latin script.<sup>3</sup> The Bible itself indicates the importance of Sumer; Abram and Sarai (renamed Abraham and Sarah) trace their lineage back to Ur, the last capital of Sumer, from which they migrated westward to Canaan (Gen. 11:26–13:12).<sup>4</sup>

It is easy to see the traces of Sumerian stories in Genesis. Long be-

fore Genesis 1:2 came to speak of God's Spirit hovering over the deep waters, the Sumerians began their stories of creation with Nammu, the goddess of the watery abyss or primordial sea and mother of all the gods. Out of her depths, she created the god An, heavens, and the goddess Ki, earth. *An-ki* meant universe or cosmos. A great cosmic mountain united An and Ki in one solid block. The base of the mountain Anki was in the bottom of the earth with the underworld of the dead and its top was in the heavens with the gods. This cosmic mountain held a three-tiered universe: the heavens of the gods, the earth of all living things, and the underworld of the dead. An and Ki had a son, Enlil, god of air, who separated the lapis lazuli dome of the heavens from the flat disk of the earth and created the world in the space between them. As we find later in Genesis, life on earth in Sumerian myths began with breath, wind, spirit—all translations of the Hebrew *ruah*, "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). Enlil mated with his wife, Ninlil, goddess of air, to give birth to the celestial gods such as the moon and sun.<sup>5</sup>

Dilmun, the Sumerians' paradise, was without conflict, blessed with abundant fresh water, thick forests, and gardens. There Nammu's son Enki, god of sweet water, mated with her daughter Ninhursag, another name for Ki (earth), goddess of the sacred mountain, to create the deities of earth and healing.<sup>6</sup>

*The land Dilmun is a pure place,  
The place, after Enki had laid himself by his wife.  
That place is clean, that place is bright.  
In Dilmun the raven uttered no cries,  
The lion killed not,  
The wolf snatched not the lamb,  
Unknown was the kid-killing dog,  
Unknown was the grain-devouring boar.  
The singer utters no wail,  
By the side of the city he utters no lament.<sup>7</sup>*

Also unknown were disease, hunger, war, death, and sorrow. The exact location of Dilmun was a bit mysterious. It was not Sumer itself, but was located just east of it on a sacred mountain. This combination of specificity of description and vagueness of location gave it both a sense of reality and of inaccessibility—a place true and real but belonging to no ruler, city, or civilization. Dilmun continued to be a synonym for paradise long after Sumer ceased to exist.<sup>8</sup>

The Sumerians built ziggurats to replicate their cosmic mountain, complete with paradise: they united An and Ki (heavens and earth) linking the gods, humanity, and paradise. Rising from the river delta, ziggurats were rectangular towers, stepped to look like a mountain, with trees and shrines at every level. At the peak, one or more temples were constructed with a main sanctuary and multiple side rooms with altars for making sacrifices. The temples were lavishly decorated, with vividly colored mosaics and frescoes showing the whole range of life-giving community activities, such as planting, harvesting, herding, and processions to the temples. Beautiful flowers, guardian animals such as leopards and bulls, and mythical beasts such as eagles with lion heads and bulls with human faces adorned porticoes and sanctuaries. These centers of ritual, towering above the deltas, grew to contain housing for the community's priests, artists, engineers, scribes, and other tradespeople.<sup>9</sup>

Sumer's stories and art celebrated the goodness of ordinary life in ways we can still understand, depicted as activities of paradise. Their myths tell of gods enjoying sexual pleasure, making music, dancing, traveling about and having adventures, and encouraging the fertility of the land. They also waged wars in defense of the land against its enemies and mourned the deaths of those they loved. Inanna, a goddess who lost her shepherd husband, Dumuzi, to the underworld, played the greatest role in Sumer's epics of all the gods and behaved like any powerful deity.<sup>10</sup> On many cylinder seals, she and other deities are shown riding in flat reed boats or striding up stepped mountains. All wear wide-brimmed hats with tall conical crowns—even Utu, the sun, wears a hat. Enki—the god who separated the sweet and salty waters—can be

identified by the waves of water cascading from his hands or shoulders, which often contain fish.

A creative, resourceful, and practical people who figured out how to flourish on a hot, flat river delta, the Sumerians tell stories of gods who take pride in such inventions as the pickaxes they used to build canals that protected them from spring floods. Remains of their cities show they cultivated carefully planned gardens and created public architecture. Tablets found in temples give evidence that they held the resources essential to survival, what we might call public utilities—water, fields, orchards, flocks, and herds—as a community trust. Through their temple systems, which replicated the great cosmic mountain and its earthly paradise, they managed these resources by keeping written records of things held in trust and tracking how they were distributed.<sup>11</sup>

The Sumerians told their stories of creation and paradise as a preface to their stories of the many gods. The prefaces were a literary formula such as “once upon a time when . . .” or “in the beginning when God created . . .” These recitations established the way the world was at its best, as a contrast to the stories they told of disasters, conflicts, violence, and war. The Sumerians loved their rivers, but a rare deluge could deposit as much as fifteen feet of silt in one spring season, so they had a story about a great flood with only one human survivor, Ziusudra, who gained “life like a god . . . breath eternal.” Ziusudra subsequently dwelt on a mountain in the land of Dilmun, the Sumerian paradise, somewhere east of the Tigris.<sup>12</sup> Later biblical traditions pictured Noah landing his ark on Mount Ararat—the highest peak in the mountains at the headwaters of the Tigris and the Euphrates.

The Sumerians pondered the problems that accompanied centralized city-states and the rise of empires. Their stories spoke of inequality in the distribution of resources and the exploitation of forced labor, and they even suggested some of the problems of male dominance over women. Humanity was created, they said, because the gods were tired of all the work involved in farming the fields and digging canals. At a drunken banquet of the gods, Enki and Ninhursag, using clay, created

six flawed humans to do the work. Enki created one human so feeble that Ninhursag was the only one capable of feeding it. Ninhursag cursed Enki and indicted him as a remote god who did not understand life on the land. She accused him of abandoning her when her city was attacked, her temple was destroyed, her son the king was taken captive, and she was made a refugee. Instead of helping her, she said, he tried to dominate her. Though the full contents of this curse are not entirely clear, Enki seemed to accept it as his due.<sup>13</sup>

Early in the third millennium BCE, rulers rose up from the most powerful Sumerian city-states, centralized their control, and expanded their territories. Nippur became the center of the Sumerian temple system. Its patron deity, Enlil, the god of air, superceded older city-state deities, such as An, Ki, and Nammu, and his temple in Nippur collected tributes from them. Eventually, a king system existed alongside of or, in some cases, instead of priests to rule the city-states. Cylinder seals began to show kings approaching deities without being accompanied by priests, and the kings began to be seen as divine themselves.<sup>14</sup>

By the time Sumer's myths were recorded, the Sumerians had experienced the rise and fall of several kings, who had consolidated power by unifying some of the city-states into a monarchy and conquered territories as far east as Syria. The last empire fell within a century or two of the time of the recording of the myths. The stories reflect on the costs and dangers of empires and the talents and liabilities of various kings. Arguments among the patron gods symbolize wars among city-states. The Sumerian hymns extolled their ideal king as like the shepherd Dumuzi, consort of Inanna, and they may have been sung by way of contrast with the real thing. The ideal king filled the granaries, protected the city, and was distinguished-looking, intelligent, daring, eloquent, learned, astute, courageous, just, kind, and pious.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to the centralized power associated with Sumer's actual empires and the glorification of its kings, the stories of Dilmun suggested that the deities of old held council meetings, and women and men held relatively equal power. The powers of the gods were limited to their spheres of influence, and they governed their spheres for the good and

security of the whole. Dilmun's peace required the interactive functioning of all the powers, not the independent actions of heroic gods or one god lording it over all the others. The gods were capable of both good and evil, and the council managed the will to power of any one deity with humor, cajoling, negotiation, trickery, seduction, competition, scolding, and distraction. The council, when effective, maintained life at its best, and the stories of the gods of Dilmun contrast with life in the city-states. Dilmun depicts an image of Sumerian life as a confederacy of interdependent city-states or as a distant land no longer so easily accessed, even by the gods.

The Sumerians lived in Mesopotamia for several thousand years before a Semitic tongue began to supplant their language. During their later history, they saw a number of centralized kingdoms come and go, and powerful empires formed at their borders. The Babylonians conquered them for the last time around 2050 BCE, adapted their myths, and re-created their ziggurats. Babylonia transformed Sumer's myths into more aggressive tales of war, conquest, and male dominance. Nammu's creation of the heavens and earth became a deadly contest between the Babylonian dragon Tiamat, the sea, and her son Marduk, the warrior and chief hero of the gods who had been one of the minor sons of Enki in Sumer. Marduk slew Tiamat in fury. From this matricide, he took the two halves of his mother's body to create the heavens and the earth.<sup>16</sup>

Sumer became the lost primordial culture of West Asia. By the time Genesis was written, the Sumerians' myths had been adapted and edited through more than a millennium of history in Canaan, where the legendary immigrants from Sumer, Abram and Sarai, had migrated. The kingdom of Israel emerged in Canaan under Saul (1029–1000 BCE) and David (1000–961 BCE). The Davidic dynasty collapsed with the death of David's son Solomon (961–922 BCE). The one nation Israel, composed of twelve tribes, became two kingdoms in 921. The Assyrians conquered and annexed the northern nation of ten tribes, called Israel, in 722 (2 Kings 17:5–6). The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar defeated the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BCE and kidnapped its



leaders, initiating five decades of exile for Judah's people. The term "Jews" was later derived from its name.

The Persians and Jews had a long period of contact beginning with King Cyrus the Great (ca. 576–529 BCE), who conquered Babylonia in 539, ending its domination of Mesopotamia. Persia, today's Iran, was a blend of ancient peoples that Cyrus consolidated into a vast empire with territory from the Aegean and North Africa to India. He created the first empire of many languages and cultures ruled by one administration and one language, Persian, a modern form of which is now called Farsi and which remained a common language of the diverse peoples of India for many centuries. The word "paradise" comes into Persian through Median, *paridaeza*, *pari* (around), and *daeza* (wall), meaning a garden surrounded by a wall. Persian, an Indo-European language like Sanskrit and Greek, uses *paridaida* to refer to vineyards, orchards, forests, tree nurseries, and stables. Greek borrowed it as *paradeisos*, and Latin as *paradisus*. *Paridaeza* also appears as a loan word in the Semitic languages of Babylonian, as *pardēsu*, and Hebrew, as *pardēs*.<sup>17</sup>

The Persian kings constructed huge *paridaida*, walled gardens with trees, streams, vegetation, and animals for hunting. One ancient tribute paid to kings by client countries were rare, exotic animals, which Persian kings kept in their paradises as something like private zoos. By hunting in their paradises, they practiced the arts of war.<sup>18</sup> Cyrus the Great was known for his vast *paridaida*. The Persians prized the trees in their *paridaida* and cultivated them carefully. Lysander, a Spartan guest of King Cyrus the Younger, described "the grandeur of the trees, the uniform distances at which they were planted, the straightness of the rows of the trees, the beautiful regularity of all the angles and the number and sweetness of the odours that accompanied them as they walked around." Persian paradises would become a model for grand gardens across their empire.<sup>19</sup>

Cyrus the Great was somewhat unusual for his time. Although he was a great military strategist who amassed a powerful army and waged brutal wars, he preferred to keep the loyalty of subjugated people by offering religious tolerance and rebuilding what his predecessors had de-

stroyed. He freed the Jews from their captivity by the Babylonian Empire and assisted them in the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2–11, 6:3–5). With such benevolence, he elicited cooperation and support from conquered peoples. The post-exilic prophet, third Isaiah (the book of Isaiah has three separate authors: the pre-exilic first Isaiah, second Isaiah of the exile, and the post-exilic third Isaiah), enthusiastically referred to Cyrus, a gentile, as God's Messiah, an anointed one, translated in Greek as Christ (Isa. 44:28–45:1–8). Sometimes he was more popular with peoples he conquered than their own rulers were.

Cyrus was likely a Zoroastrian, practicing a Persian religion founded by the prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek), who lived around the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Scholars of the history of Zoroastrianism link its early roots to Hindu ideas, but it became more monotheistic. Zoroaster preached a form of monotheism with lesser spirits and demons. He also developed a postmortem dimension of paradise tied to a strong dualism of good and evil. Upon death, human beings would be judged for their deeds by Ahura Mazda, Lord Wisdom, and enter a heavenly paradise or fall into hell. The arrival of three saviors and a final battle to annihilate evil would bring the new perfect age and would defeat Angra Mainyu, evil spirit. Humans could save the world by defending Wisdom with reason and insight. The new age, purified by holy fire, would be similar to the one in the distant past that preceded the current age of evil. While Cyrus's religious ideas are harder to determine, his son Darius left inscriptions naming Ahura Mazda as creator of the universe.<sup>20</sup>

Today, it may be tempting to read this apocalyptic vision of paradise as kin to the hope that motivates suicide bombers or that leads Christian Zionists to pray for an intensification of war in Israel to hasten Armageddon. However, Zoroaster lived at a time when empires were relatively new in human history. Their wars of expansion had devastated human societies and the environment, and the idea of capricious gods or the hand of fate encouraged humans to see themselves as pawns of greater powers. They also often saw their kings as divinities. Zoroaster offered a vision of good and evil that affirmed human free will and

called for human ethical responsibility. Only those who were ethical belonged in paradise. The responsibility of humanity was not to serve the exploitive, capricious gods or fate, but to take the side of good and to be ethical. He challenged the ideas that those with extraordinary power had the right to decide right and wrong and that kings were divine. He said, instead, that the carnage and injustices of earthly empires would not go unnoticed or unpunished by a greater power that ruled from heaven. The self-defeating contradiction in this vision was the suggestion that a cosmic war would put an end to human wars. Violence can beget fear, stalemate, annihilation, dominance, or more violence, but it cannot beget love, justice, abundant life, community, or peace.

Zoroastrian apocalyptic ideas probably entered Jewish thinking in the post-exilic time of contact with Persia, since they do not appear in Jewish literature until after this time—for example, in the book of Daniel. The Hebrew Bible generally follows Sumerian traditions in imagining life after death as an underworld that is mysterious, cold, and dark. It depicts the cosmos as a three-tiered universe: heavens, earth with paradise, and the underworld, united by the cosmic sacred mountain. Zoroastrian apocalypticism assuredly influenced Christianity, which we discuss in chapter 3, but a divide of the afterlife into heaven and hell is absent from Christianity's visual world until the medieval period.

#### PARADISE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Genesis reflects the long history of Israelite and Jewish contact with Sumer and Persia. It pictures paradise with Sumer's geography of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and it echoes Sumer's stories. Like them, it tells the story of Creation first, beginning with the chaos of the watery, deep abyss. God, or Elohim—who speaks in the plural—bears some resemblance to Enlil and Ninlil, the god and goddess of air. Like Enlil and Ninlil, God created with wind and made breathing space for earthly life between the heavens and the primordial waters.<sup>21</sup> The orderly progression moved from cosmic to geologic to vegetative and an-

imal forms and, finally, to humanity, male and female in the image of Elohim, a plural noun. The formulaic endings of divine delight after each day lend themselves to oral recitation. Alternate translations for “it was good” include it was delightful, it was blessed, and it was beautiful—Creation is all these things: joy, blessings, and beauty.

Though biblical scholars have shown how the account of Creation in Genesis 1 is separate from that in chapter 2, most interpretations have read them in relation to each other, just as stories of Dilmun can be read as a second stage of the story of the creation of the cosmic mountain. In Genesis 2, God—called Yahweh—shaped the muddy earth into a human creature. Yahweh breathed air into its nostrils to give it life. This story was often interpreted as an elaboration on Genesis 1:26–30:

Then God [Elohim] said, “Let us make humankind [*adam*] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

And God created humankind [*ha-adam*] in-his-image,  
in-the-image-of God created-he him;  
male-and-female [*zakar un qeba*] created-he them.<sup>22</sup>

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it. . . . See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. . . .” God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

In Genesis 1, humanity, male and female, shared in the divine image. They were not the flawed grunt labor for the gods in the Sumerian stories—not slaves, but gods. Instead of being impaired by exploitation, humanity was empowered and given agency to act ethically. Jewish tradition has understood “be fruitful and multiply” as the first commandment given to humanity. As in the Sumerian stories, the productivity of agriculture and animal husbandry were greatly valued in the Genesis account. Modern technologies of mass destruction make the command-

ment to subdue the earth sound sinister, and the command for humanity to assume godlike responsibilities has been taken as license to abuse the earth for the gratification of human consumption. But four thousand years or more ago, creating a garden and cities of abundance, safety, beauty, and peace were monumental achievements. In Genesis, humanity was instructed to be vegetarian, as were the animals, rather than rapacious or predatory.

God said, “See I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. (Gen. 1:29–30)

Humanity, like God, was responsible for making life flourish, so that joy and beauty might bless the world. Immediately upon finishing the whole Creation, God rested and hallowed Sabbath rest as holy. As an image of divine life, this conclusion, on the seventh day, suggests that taking delight in Creation and stopping work regularly to restore the energies of life are also human values.<sup>23</sup>

In Genesis 2, we arrive in the beautiful garden of delight. Like Dilmun, this garden is hard to locate, but it is on the earth. It has one great river, which later tradition identified with the Jordan. Because great rivers originate in mountains, early biblical commentators often suggested a mountaintop as the location of the garden—perhaps the legendary mountain on which Noah docked his ark, the seventeen thousand-foot-high Mt. Ararat. This one river divides into four: two unknown rivers and two identifiable rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, the boundaries of Sumer. The jewels and precious metals found in the lands of the Gihon and Pishon were just those elements that the river delta of Sumer lacked but that the culture highly prized.

In Genesis, the tone of God’s care for humanity contrasts with the cavalier attitude of the Sumerian gods, who create indifferently as a contest of power. Yahweh worried that the earth-creature, unique in the

garden, was lonely. “It is not good that the *adam* should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). God creates the animals to keep it company, but they are not adequate friends. The creature is therefore compelled to sleep and is separated into two parts, male and female, bone of bone, flesh of flesh, partners and friends. In human life in paradise, gender diversity provided the blessing of companionship—it was not a source of strife, and the dreams of sleep accessed divine touch and creativity.

Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible notes that in Genesis 2, God made a creature from clay. The Hebrew word, *adam* (earthling), is not a proper name for a male individual, but a generic noun that designates a being made of *ha-<sup>a</sup>dama* (earth). As in Genesis 1, *adam* was a generic human being, encompassing male and female. Trible notes that this reading is necessary if the woman is to be held accountable for knowing God’s warning to avoid eating of the tree of knowledge. If the earthling contained both male and female, she would have known the commandment. If the earthling was male, then God created the female only after God gave the commandment. Either *adam* meant all humanity, and therefore, the woman was accountable to the command, or *adam* meant male, and the female did not receive the command to avoid the tree of knowledge. The Christian tradition has repeatedly tried to make Eve responsible for humanity’s sin while claiming Adam was made first and Eve was made later (a bit like wanting to eat your apple and have it, too).<sup>24</sup> When God explained to the earthling that not all the trees were safe to eat, the story suggested that Creation had boundaries that should not be crossed and that acquiring knowledge carried risks.

Like the Sumerian stories, the book of Genesis set the stage with “at the beginning of Creation,” and then told of things going wrong. Humanity failed the requirements of life in paradise. Disasters followed. God exiled the woman and man from the garden. Childbirth became arduous. Men dominated women. Brothers murdered and deceived one another, wrangling over their inheritance and fighting over blessings. Fathers raped their daughters. Tribes invaded and colonized lands, killing or oppressing their inhabitants. Somewhere, paradise remained in the world, haunting every tale of folly, injustice, or greed.

PARADISE RENEWED

The actual Hebrew word *pardès* rarely occurs in the Bible. One place it is used is in the Song of Solomon (also called the Song of Songs), which was compiled from earlier sources, probably in the fourth century BCE. It uses *pardès* to capture the eros of a beautiful garden:

*A garden locked is my sister, my bride,  
a garden locked, a fountain sealed.  
Your channel is an orchard [pardès] of pomegranates  
with all choicest fruits,  
henna with nard,  
nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,  
with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes,  
with all chief spices—  
a garden fountain, a well of living water,  
and flowing streams from Lebanon. (Song of Sol. 4:12–14)*

Phyllis Tribble suggests that these references to a paradise garden harken back to Genesis and recapture the delight in the earth and human life in paradise. This celebration of love and joy provides the antidote to the banishment of Adam and Eve. This return to the garden nullified the curse of male dominance, hard work, and shame about vulnerability and sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

Passages from the Song of Songs commonly appeared in early Christian liturgies. Images of vines, fountains, and abundant fruits and flowers adorned churches. Prayers and songs repeated:

*The flowers appear on the earth,  
the time of singing has come,  
And the voice of the turtledove,  
is heard in our land.  
The fig tree puts forth its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance. (Song of Sol. 2:12–13)*

Though the word *pardès* appears only in the Song of Songs and two other places, the Hebrew Bible refers frequently to pastures, gardens, vineyards, orchards, and holy mountains. These references became synonyms for paradise because of the spread of the Greek language. Alexander the Great conquered Persia in the late fourth century BCE, after which the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek, called the Septuagint. Wherever the Hebrew word for garden, *gan* or *gan-Eden*, appeared, the Septuagint substituted *paradeisos*, including in Genesis 2. This importation of the word “paradise” heightened its importance for both Jewish and Christian interpreters, since many used the Septuagint. The intermingling of Persian, North African, and West Asian cultures and ideas with Greek culture and language began in this period of Hellenization. In addition, texts written originally in Greek, found in the apocryphal literature from the third century BCE through the third century CE made much greater use of *paradeisos*. Discussion and speculation about paradise increased, as apocryphal texts such as I Enoch described journeys to paradise and heaven.

#### PARADISE IN CRISIS

Just as the Sumerians told stories of paradise to remind themselves of life at its best and in contrast to the devastations of empires, the prophets of Israel evoked images of paradise in times of crisis. Amos, the earliest written prophet, warned the northern kingdom of Israel in the middle of the eighth century BCE that its habits of violence and greed were unjust and unsustainable. He called upon the leaders of Israel to change their ways, prefacing his demand with an invocation to the God of Creation, “the one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning . . . who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth” (Amos 5:8). God as Creator and judge against injustice formed the context for Amos’s outcry against the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy. Repeatedly, in vivid images of horror, he cited the devastating consequences of injustice that would be visited upon cities, kings, and nature. “You trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built



houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them, you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine” (Amos 5:11). He promised that the gifts of paradise could be restored to them if they would “establish justice” and “seek good and not evil.”

*Let justice roll down like waters  
And righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:24)*

The book concludes with Edenic images of an abundant mountain and fruitful gardens, and a final promise: “I shall plant them on their own soil, they shall never again be uprooted from the soil I have given them.”<sup>26</sup> The poetry of Amos captures something of the gestalt of paradise in upholding the struggle for justice, mercy, and peace by anchoring them in the life-giving waters of earth. This image of justice as the cascading streams that renew paradise was invoked by Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous speech “I Have a Dream” and memorialized in the Civil Rights Monument in Montgomery, Alabama, designed by Maya Lin. There water flows over a sheet of black granite. On its polished surface are carved the important moments of the Civil Rights Movement and the names of forty people who died in the struggle.<sup>27</sup>

The book of Isaiah contains many references to paradise. First Isaiah was written between 742 and 687 BCE, when the Assyrian Empire threatened Judah. It expressed hope by describing a world where animals lived in harmony, as they did with Adam and Eve in Eden. Echoing descriptions of Dilmun, Isaiah pictured peace: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. . . . They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:6, 9). During the Exile, after King Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem in 586 and deported its leaders to Babylonia, second Isaiah used images of paradise to promise divine deliverance:

*For the Lord will comfort Zion;  
he will comfort all her waste places,  
and will make her wilderness like Eden,  
her desert like the garden of the Lord. (Isa. 51:3)*

The Exile haunted the prophets. If God was mightier than all kings and foreign gods, were the devastation of the land, the slaughter of the people, and the kidnapping of their leaders recompense for Israel's sin? Did God indiscriminately use an empire more evil than God's own to punish Israel by harming even the poor and innocent? Why keep covenant with such a God as this? Or were other gods more powerful? Different Judean factions had their own answers. Some exiles, sent to Egypt, believed the hard, exclusivist monotheism of King Josiah caused Judah to fall (Jer. 44:15–19). Isaiah, writing on the eve of the Exile's end, said the time of anguish was over. He chose not to lay blame and rejected devastation as divine punishment. He said that the people's suffering far surpassed any sin they might have committed.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless .  
Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.  
Do not fear, for I am with you  
I will strengthen you, I will help you  
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.  
(Isa. 40:28–41:13, excerpts)*

Though Isaiah asserted a form of monotheism, it was grounded in justice, rather than in favoritism or nationalism. God cared for the suffering and oppressed, and faithful people who were committed to the welfare of all would restore and sustain paradise.

*Loose the bonds of injustice,  
Undo the thongs of the yoke,*

*Let the oppressed go free,  
bring the homeless poor into your house,  
offer your food to the hungry,  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the dawn,  
you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail. (Isa. 58:6–11, excerpts)*

Luke 4:18–21 later used Isaiah's vision of paradise to define the mission of Jesus:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.  
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations. (Isa. 61:1, 11)*

These prophetic texts are not, however, unambiguous. While they proclaimed peace, they often imagined God as a warrior who would defeat the foes of Israel and slaughter the unrighteous. They sometimes hoped for the restoration of their monarchy, built on justice. Then, all nations would pay tribute to their nation. Such sentiments about restoration lent themselves to a nostalgic view of the conquest and colonization of Canaan and the establishment of Israel. That kingdom had established itself like other empires, was no more virtuous than those empires, and ended in civil war. Nostalgia about the fallen kingdom carried the dangers of an arrogant and naïve sense of national exceptionalism, the idea that one group of people or one nation was special to God. In addition, the prophets depicted religious apostasy as harlotry and adultery, using images of marriage between a dominant male God and a subordinate people. This metaphor of female sexuality inscribed

misogyny and gender inequality in holy terms. Biblical scholar Renita Weems reveals how this metaphor of love, sex, and marriage sanctioned domestic violence by depicting God as an angry, abusive husband.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to prophets who often pictured God as a dominant male requiring obedience and using violence to punish, the Genesis paradise story presented these characteristics as a curse that accompanied the loss of paradise. The Song of Songs proclaimed that the end of such dominance brought the return of joy, delights, and unshakeable love as strong as death.

Readers of the Bible must carefully weigh the prophetic texts against each other, not as infallible commands but as a range of human responses to crisis. Listening to the Bible requires testing various texts in light of moral questions that the Bible itself raises about its own traditions. The Bible described no form of governance or divine favor that absolved human beings from responsibility for the right use of power. I Samuel 8 warned against the establishment of a kingdom. Isaiah said all rulers must answer to the ethics of justice—neither kings nor nations possessed divine rights; they were accountable to the standards of righteousness that were the will of God. God did not will disasters, but justice; the horrors visited upon the land and its people were the consequences of injustice and misused power. The gift of freedom required moral responsibility. Only ethical uses of power, not domination, coercion, and war, could sustain and renew paradise.

Ezekiel, the sixth-century BCE prophet, wrote in Babylon during the Exile and reflected on the conflicts among the empires that dominated his time. His highly symbolic book begins with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BCE and ends with a plan for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. The first chapter opens with a theophany, an appearance of God. In this theophany, Ezekiel, among his fellow exiles along a river, looks up to see a thunderstorm. Four living creatures emerge from the clouds and lightning, each with human form but four faces: a human, lion, ox, and eagle. Each has four wings, and hooves that shine as though bronzed. Wheels spin beside them in the midst of a rainbow. This vision likely reflected the impressive stone

carvings of totem animals that decorated Babylonian palaces.<sup>29</sup> Elements of Ezekiel's theophany—the rainbow, clouds, and four creatures—appear in early Christian art to show the presence of God. The elements often hover in a golden sky, just above the risen Christ and the meadows of paradise to indicate divine blessing on the world. Instead of four faces, the four winged creatures in the art came to have one face each: human, lion, ox, and eagle. These creatures eventually became the symbols of the four Gospel writers, with each holding a book.<sup>30</sup>

In chapter 28, describing the fall of the king of Tyre to Babylon in 606 BCE, Ezekiel alluded to Eden to explain the rise and fall of his kingdom:

You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God. . . . You were on the holy mountain of God . . . until iniquity was found in you. . . . You were filled with violence. . . . so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God. . . . I turned you to ashes on the earth. (Ezek. 28:12–16)

Similarly, Ezekiel likened the growth of the great empire of Egypt to a flowering tree in Eden that was nourished by abundant water. The tree became too proud and God razed it (Ezek. 31). Ezekiel contrasted the blessed garden of God with the political ambitions, environmental devastations, and carnage of kings, and he promised a renewal of paradise for the nation that repents:

On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. . . . And they will say, "This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified." (Ezek. 36:33–35)

In his oracles of comfort and hope to the exiles, Ezekiel pictured the restoration of paradise as abundant pasturelands tended by a shepherd.

In chapter 34, he described the traits of a good shepherd that would inform early Christian images of Jesus and, later, models of leadership in the church. Ezekiel said the shepherd sought out missing sheep and rescued them from danger. He fed them on mountains and led them to good water and grazing land. He cared for the sick and injured and gave strength to the weak. Then, the prophet linked the work of the shepherd to God's care for the people. He said the good shepherd fed people with justice, made a covenant of peace, helped them flourish, and protected them. "I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil . . . when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hand of those who enslaved them" (Ezek. 34:25-27).

Near the end of the book, Ezekiel detailed his vision of the rebuilt temple on Mt. Zion (Ezek. 40-47). He described being transported to the eastern gate, the direction of paradise: "The glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters, and the earth shone with his glory" (43:2). A great river welled up from below the threshold of the temple, flowing east and south. "And where the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be very many fish . . . everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing . . . on the banks of both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees . . . their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing" (Ezek. 47:9-12).<sup>31</sup> Ezekiel said Jerusalem must be called "The Lord is there" (48:35). For Ezekiel, the temple on the mountain renewed paradise. It was an earthly place where God drew near to human beings, and from which waters of life cascaded down to bring life to all the earth. It was not a place created after the apocalyptic destruction of this world, but it could be threatened by war and imperial domination.<sup>32</sup> From his dwelling place in the temple, God announced, "Enough, O princes of Israel. Put away violence and oppression, and do what is just and right" (Ezek. 45:9).

Some exiles, liberated by the Persian king Cyrus the Great, returned to Jerusalem and eventually built the second temple in Jerusalem under

his son King Darius. They completed it in 516 BCE. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the controversies with local inhabitants and difficulties that accompanied this time of restoration, as well as the modest proportions of this new temple. Some leaders began to identify the second temple and Mt. Zion as the actual location of paradise.<sup>33</sup> The determination of a precise spot for paradise, however, risked narrowing it to the territory of one kingdom, to the exclusion of all others. This specificity made paradise more vulnerable to cooptation by imperial dynasties and corrupt priests. Other books such as Leviticus, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, I Enoch, and Jubilees, maintained the mysterious location of paradise, suggesting that it suffused the entire land of Israel or even the whole Creation.<sup>34</sup>

One of the mysteries of Dilmun and Eden was their precise location. Whether in the direction of the rising sun or between four great rivers, paradise confused any attempts to pin it on a map. It eluded the control, captivity, or ownership of any one nation, people, religion, or time. In direct contrast to the wars, economic exploitation, fratricidal divisions, and environmental devastations of empires, it offered experiences and visions of justice, of the goodness of ordinary life, and of a vibrant peace. Paradise was described in terms recognizable as earthly life at its best. In these descriptions, it could be experienced as real—not as a permanent state of being but as aspects of life itself. It flourished where people took responsibility for the well-being of all and respected and protected the great cycles of life that sustain human life.

Many of the Psalms date from the second temple period. They praise God's creativity, justice, and healing, using images of paradise.<sup>35</sup> They begin with a hymn to the virtuous and wise, who are rooted in God "like trees planted by streams of water" (Ps. 1:3). Green pastures and still waters are the abode of those tended by the divine shepherd in Psalm 23, who face their enemies and death with equanimity. Psalm 48:1 says, "[God's] holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth." Psalm 104, a version of the Creation story, sings with joy for God's creative power and greatness, "From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work" (Ps.

104:13). In Psalm 36, the unjust flatter themselves and plot mischief, but those who seek shelter under God's wings of love and righteousness receive blessing:

*They feast on the abundance of your house,  
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.  
For with you is the fountain of life;  
in your light we see light. (Ps. 36:8–9)*

The Psalms affirm that the gifts of paradise are tangible in this life. “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). They speak of respite from weariness, pleasure in companionship, freedom from oppression, comfort in sorrow, delight in beauty, satisfaction of hunger, and protection from danger. Though these precious aspects of life can be lost or compromised, they are real dimensions of human experience on the earth, not imaginary ideals. This is what it means to say that paradise is in this world: the actual tastes, sights, fragrances, and textures of paradise touch our lives. They call us to resist the principalities and powers that deny the goodness of ordinary life, threaten to destroy it, or seek to secure its blessings for a few at the expense of many.

The descendants of the exiles who rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem did not enjoy a long peace. The Persian Empire gave them breathing space for a time, until the Greeks conquered the region and brought them once again under oppressive imperial domination. Then in c. 63 BCE, the Romans occupied Galilee and Judea. They maintained a line of client Jewish kings who heavily taxed the people for Rome and for their own gain. Herod (c. 74–4 BCE) was notoriously profligate and violent. He massively expanded the Jerusalem temple as a monument to his dynasty and put a Roman eagle over the main entrance. Many Jewish resistance movements protested Herodian and Roman abuses—often with nonviolent acts and sometimes in armed revolt. The Romans suppressed opposition by crucifying dissident leaders and burning towns to the ground. Jewish opposition intensified until the Romans destroyed the second temple in 70 CE. They finally leveled Jerusalem in



139, rebuilt it as a pagan city, and renamed the region Palestine in honor of Israel's enemies, the Philistines. A hundred years later, the Roman governor of Palestine did not even know the name Jerusalem.

In Galilee, the legacy of paradise would feed a movement of resistance, led by a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. Like a tree planted by the water, his movement took root, moistened by the waters of paradise and shaded by its trees and vines. In the long genealogy of paradise and its call to humanity to live justly and ethically, Jesus was yet another branch of this great, sheltering tree.