

GRAIN AND RAIN IN GENESIS 2:5, 6

AECIO CAIRUS, PH.D.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines

Genesis 2:5, 6 has been traditionally understood as a description of the original world by using a series of statements about a lack of vegetation, rain, and farmers in spite of a watering system. This study attempts to read the text as a chain of statements about the absence of arid land plants and irrigated grain fields typical of farming in the ancient world. In this understanding the verses prepare the scene for the paradisiacal conditions of the Garden of Eden.

Key Words: Vegetation, grain, rain, irrigation, farming, arid land, Garden of Eden

1. Introduction

Comparison of various English translations of Gen 2:4-6 indicate that these verses present difficulties to the translators. The KJV reads: "These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, and every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground, but there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground."

Other translations render the last part of v. 6 as follows: The NASB and others retain the watering "mist" of the KJV; *The Amplified Bible* mentions a "fog, vapor;" the NIV and other modern versions state that "streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground;" *The Message* writes that "the whole Earth was watered by underground springs," without any indication that those springs opened on the surface of the earth.

In spite of the diversity of suggestions about an unusual water cycle in the original earth (an unavoidable concern since the original earth featured rivers, vv. 10-12), the question arises: Why does v. 5 explain the absence of "every herb of the field" on the basis that "God had not caused it to rain upon the earth" if a mist, fog, vapor, up-welling streams,

underground currents or something other “watered the whole face of the ground” (v. 6). One could reason that plants will grow contentedly without rain while in the presence of any other means of watering. This explanatory clause, as translated by these versions, fails to explain the absence of vegetation presented in the first part of v. 5.

The treatment of this problem in the scholarly literature is rather sparse. Wenham takes note of the fact that source critics such as Gunkel, Schmidt and Westermann ascribe vv. 5 and 6 to different sources in an attempt to explain the contradiction between a barren wilderness produced by lack of rain and an abundant water supply. But, as Wenham points out, “this is to belittle the competence of the author of this chapter, who would not be expected to introduce an isolated sentence into his narrative that conflicts with the context.”¹ He favors the solution of Castellino and Gispén, “without man to irrigate the land, the spring was useless.”² This, again, implies a description of the original world as a barren wilderness. But it is difficult to see where this description would fit, whether in the initial state at the beginning of creation, as some scholars think,³ or after this creation but before agriculture, as others who recognize that this passage presupposes the creation of Gen 1.⁴ However, both positions present difficulties. If the passage refers to a state of the earth before the creation of Gen 1, an arid desert clashes with Gen 1:9, 10 where we find the lands emerging from under the waters. This clash can be avoided if one supposes that one of the sources conceived a desert and the other a submerged land, but then the observation of Wenham above applies. If, on the other hand, Gen 1 is presupposed, an arid earth clashes with Gen 1:11-13, where the earth is covered in green by the creative acts. As these observations show, there is room for additional exegetical proposals, especially when considering the continuity of Gen 1 and 2 and the unity of the narrative line, as this research does.

2. Cereal Grains

R. Younker has addressed some of the problems found in Gen 2:5, 6.⁵ While not directly discussing the textual difficulties stated above, he may

¹ G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary 1; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 59.

² *Ibid.*

³ Such as Gunkel, Driver, Zimmerli, and Schmidt cited in Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*.

⁴ Keil, Jacob, and Cassuto cited in Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*.

⁵ Randall W. Younker, “Are There Two Contradictory Accounts of Creation in Genesis 1 and 2?” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers* (ed. Gerhard Pfandl; Silver Springs, MA: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 2:119-123.

have inadvertently led towards a possible answer. Younker states that Gen 2:5 mentions four things as absent in the original world, "(1) thorns; (2) agriculture; (3) cultivation/ irrigation; (4) rain."⁶ Following U. Cassuto,⁷ Younker shows that the "herb of the field" (עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה) refers to cereal grains such as wheat or barley that were used for bread-making and represented the very staff of life for the original readers of Genesis. However, in chap. 3:18, 19 these cereals appear as agricultural crops in connection with God's judgment on humanity because of sin. By pointing to the absence of grasses or cereals, our passage is setting the stage for the garden of Eden, where humans enjoyed instead "all kinds of trees . . . that were pleasing to the eye and good for food" (2:9).

One may note that in the ancient Near East grains were the basis of the economy of great civilizations such as Egypt, Mesopotamia and ancient Persia.⁸ In regions where rain was scarce or non-existing, short-lived plants and grains were grown in large valleys by using the annual rise of the river waters. The grains might be directly sown on the damp ground once the first crest of the flood had passed but then needed to be supplemented by irrigation while the water level was still high (and accessible) for the next couple of months; this would suffice for plants bearing grain after three or four months. In this way, land could be used that otherwise would have featured thorny shrubs or scrub trees only. The close association of arid land plants with cereal grain in Gen 2:5 seems to indicate that the author had the situation of those river valleys of the ancient Near East in mind, and not rain-fed agriculture as it is known in other lands.

3. Lack of Rain

English translations have rendered the explanatory clause of the Hebrew in Gen 2:5b *כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ* ("because the Lord God did not send rain upon the earth," literal translation) with a pluperfect: "the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth" (KJV) or "had not sent rain on the earth" (NIV). The use of the pluperfect might suggest that the lack of rain was a feature already present at the time of the creation of man. However, the pluperfect is not a feature of the Hebrew text, but inferred

⁶ Younker, 2:123.

⁷ Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis* (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961), 102.

⁸ See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "The History of Technology – Irrigation," 1994 edition. Mesopotamia, Egypt and Persia are the oldest documented places of agricultural irrigation.

by translators. The perfect verb, appearing here in the Hebrew, may be translated as a simple past form: "because the Lord God did not send rain on the earth." As such, the verbal form is good for any time that can be related to the narrative.

What then is the relationship between the lack of rain and the grain plants or their absence in the original world? One may assume that the lack of rain makes for a lack of plants. However, the opposite may be true when taking into consideration the agricultural conditions of the ancient Near East as shown above: It is the cereal growth (as opposed to the presence of more valuable, longer living plants such as vines and/or fruit trees), and not its absence, that which would be naturally associated with the absence of rain. Thus, the English text may be read as if by moving the comma in the KJV: "and every herb of the field, before it grew because the LORD God did not cause it to rain upon the earth." In other words, the text would state "and every grain plant had not yet grown, [as it grows today] because the LORD God has not sent rain upon the earth."

As an alternative understanding, the text could specify particular kinds of grain plants. For, as Cassuto points out,⁹ cereal plants would have existed also in the original world, but only as few and far-between specimens of the wild kind, not as extensive grain plantations of tame varieties (today called cultivars). If such was the intention of the Genesis author, the text might be rendered as "and no grain ([of the type] due to the Lord God not sending rain upon the earth) had yet grown." The point of the clause, then, would be that other kinds of cereal, the wild ones, might have been present.

By any of the latter two modes of interpretation, Gen 2:5 would be setting the stage for the Garden of Eden by contrasting it with later agricultural conditions. There would be in the original world no dry patches of land where only thorny shrubs grew, for the earth was then covered in greenery (Gen 1:12, 13); nor would irrigated grain fields be sprouting, which implies an adaptation to arid lands. Thus the mention of the Lord God not sending rain had nothing to do with a climatic condition of the original earth. The text would merely deny that irrigated fields motivated by a lack of rain were then in existence as later they would be. In other words, it would not affirm or deny a lack of rain in the original world; it would merely point out that grains grown on account of a lack of rain did not yet exist.

⁹ Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis*, 121.

4. The Absent Farmer

Denying the existence of irrigated lands ties in with the absence of a man who would irrigate and cultivate the land: “and no grain grew (as it grows/of the kind that grows) because the Lord God did not send rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the earth” (2:5). The flow of this argument seems logical: The presence of a man would be required for fields cultivated in the absence of rain. This kind of man or farmer was not present, and therefore, in the original world there were no grain fields. In contrast, the opposite, or traditional understanding, which blames the absence of grain in the original world on the absence of rain and yet suggests that there was watering of the ground, would not connect logically with the absence of farming.

The Hebrew of Gen 2:6 may strengthen the argument for the absence of grains because of the absence of irrigated fields. According to the traditional understanding, v. 6 describes a bewildering world, which has rivers fed by mist, fog, vapor, up-welling streams or underground currents. In contrast, the present analysis shows that Gen 2:5, 6 does not describe any particular water cycle; instead, it establishes a logical connection of clauses. All clauses in v. 5 have been understood here as logically consecutive: In the original world there were no arid patches, so no thorny shrubs were present (v. 5a), nor were grain fields growing (as they do today) because God did not send rain on the earth (v. 5b), for at that time there was no man to till the earth (v. 5c). One would then expect for v. 6 to fall logically in place too by keeping the absence of a farmer in view when describing the water that wets the whole ground.

Indeed, one may ask who or what is the subject of the verb *הֶעֱלָה* related to the “going up” or “coming up” of whatever it was that “watered all the surface of the ground.” The verb *הֶעֱלָה* may be recognized as either a *qal* stating that the subject of the verb “rose itself/went up” or a *hip'il* pointing out that the subject “caused something to rise/go up” in order to water the ground.

The traditional understanding, neglecting the mention of the absent farmer in v. 5b, holds that the mist or the water stream rose or went up. The alternative understanding, however, implies that the not yet existing farmer is the subject who would “till the earth” (v. 5c) by “causing streams to rise and water all the surface of the ground” (v. 6) precisely in circumstances when “the Lord God did not send rain upon the earth,” and the ground needs to be irrigated with the help of the annual flood of rivers. The water stream, then, would not be the subject but the object of *הֶעֱלָה*.

In this way the consecutive chain of ideas is complete. In the original world there were no extensive arid patches. Thus, no thorny shrubs were

present (v. 5a), nor were grain fields growing (as they do today where God did not send rain on the earth) (v. 5b). The reason is that then there was no man to till the earth (v. 5c) and to raise a stream to water the whole surface of the ground (v. 6).

5. The Absent Irrigation Canal

Note, however, that the text is not speaking of a man who actually tilled the fields and irrigated them in the original world. On the contrary, the text makes a point of the non-existence of such a man at that time, in spite of the presence of rivers. In contrast to this record of non-existence, the traditional understanding causes the text to speak of something that actually did water all the surface of the ground. If such were the case, one would expect the first verb of Gen 2:6 to be in the perfect, more or less equivalent to the indicative mood of European languages when expressing a simple past action (statement of fact). However, the text reads *יַעֲלֶה*, which is an imperfect, often having a subjunctive force in Hebrew (the “would” or “might” forms in English translation). In other words, by using the imperfect the text expresses the idea that “there was no man to till the earth (v. 5c) and who would raise a stream to water all the surface of the ground (v. 6).”

Tsumura has challenged this translation, found among other scholars in M. Dahood.¹⁰ According to Tsumura, *יַעֲלֶה* may indeed be taken as a *hip'il*, but the water source mentioned in the text must be its subject and not the subject. Otherwise, he argues, the source would be mentioned after the verb, as *יַעֲלֶה אֵד* and not before, as it stands in the text, *אֵד יַעֲלֶה*. But as it is well known,¹¹ the word order regarding verb, object and subject is quite flexible in Hebrew. In the same Paradise story we can find examples of object-verb word order, even with the same tacit subject continuing from the previous clause, as e.g. Gen 3:18 (“thorns and thistles it [sc. the earth of 3:17] will produce you”) just as it is proposed here (the man of Gen 2:5 is tacitly the subject of v. 6).

The last verb in v. 6, *וַיַּשְׁקֵהוּ* is formed with a consecutive *וַ*, and the perfect *הַשְׁקֵה*, a configuration semantically equivalent to an imperfect and therefore parallel to *יַעֲלֶה*. Thus, there was no man who would both raise a stream and water the entire surface of the field.

¹⁰ David T. Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 96, 97.

¹¹ See E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 456.

6. Terminological Connections

This study suggests that Gen 2:5, 6 contrasts the original world with later agricultural conditions of the ancient Near East, especially the regions where lack of rain requires the use of irrigation. The following terminological detail supports this perspective: As linguists have pointed out, the Hebrew term יָבַח (v. 6) may correspond to the Akkadian *edu*. This seems convincing because Akkadian is a Semitic language (cognate to Hebrew), and it preserves endings that were lost in the Northwestern pronunciation of Semitic languages, notably the noun nominative ending *-u*. In other words, Northwest Semitic יָבַח equals Northeast Semitic *edu*. The Northeast Semitic (Akkadian) *edu*, “refers to the annual inundation of Babylon by the Euphrates as well as to irrigation.”¹²

Based upon the Akkadian *edu* as evidence for the Hebrew יָבַח referring to irrigation, it may be suggested that v. 6 has the farmer of v. 5c in mind as the subject of the verb יָבַח rather than a natural process watering the surface of the ground. This evidence has been felt to be compelling enough to be recognized by the *Nueva Biblia Española*: “When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, there were no shrubs on the earth yet, nor did grass sprout in the field, because the Lord God had not sent rain to the earth, nor was there a man who would till the field and draw a spring from the earth in order to water the surface of the field.”¹³

Note that this translation recognizes the subjunctive mood of the verb יָבַח in v. 6 (“would till . . . and draw”)¹⁴ while retaining the lack of rain as a feature of the original world rather than as a reference to later agriculture (v. 5). As a consequence, this version seems to deprive the Genesis conception of the original world of any water to recharge its rivers, whether atmospheric, subterranean or irrigational. The interpretation underlying this rendering has, in fact, motivated the

¹² R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 2:17. The Sumerian term mentioned above was written through the cuneiform logograms A.DÉ.A (actual pronunciation unknown), and it may have been the source of the Semitic terms *edu* and *ed*. See also Wenham, *Gen 1-15*, 58 and the more detailed study in Tsumura, *Earth and Waters*, 93-116.

¹³ My own retranslation; the original reads: “Cuando el Señor Dios hizo la tierra y el cielo, no había aún matorrales en la tierra, ni brotaba hierba en el campo, porque el Señor Dios no había enviado lluvia a la tierra, ni había hombre que cultivase el campo, y sacase un manantial de la tierra para regar la superficie del campo.” See Gen 2:4b-6 in *Nueva Biblia Española*. This version has been adopted by the Spanish Episcopal Conference and is also used in Latin America.

¹⁴ *Cultivase . . . sacase* (see previous footnote).

conception of the original world as an arid place.¹⁵ Such an idea would make the rivers of Eden even more mysterious than the English versions quoted previously.

We have already reviewed evidence that the original world, covered in greenery, had no plants typical of arid lands; that the *עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה* of v. 5b is not just any weed of the field, but specifically cereal grain; that this kind of grain was expected to exist by the ancient reader in places where God did not send rain and so an *אָרְז* or irrigation canal, was provided in its stead; and that such irrigation requires a farmer whose non-existence in the original world is recorded in v. 5c. When translating these verses, all this information can be put together in a simple, straightforward narrative without positing that the Genesis author conceived extraordinary water sources or cycles.

7. Summary and Conclusions

In synthesis, I suggest the following translation of Gen 2:5, 6:

Now no thorny shrub had yet appeared on the earth, and no cereal plant, existing because the Lord God has not sent rain on the earth, was yet growing, and there was no man who would till the field, and raise from the earth an irrigation canal in order to water the whole surface of the field.

In conclusion, then, the text does not explain the lack of plants of the field in the original world on the basis of a lack of rain. Also, the text does not state what the rain situation in the original world was,¹⁶ and thus should not be used for speculating about any kind of strange conceptions about a water cycle in the original world according to Genesis. On the contrary, the text refers to a lack of rain that happened later, a problem which would eventually cause human beings to plant grain in irrigated fields; but that circumstance did not yet exist in the original world, no farmer being present in order to irrigate a field through a canal.

Genesis 2:5, 6 then, suggest an earth that enjoyed paradisiacal conditions without plants typical of arid lands, such as thorny shrubs or

¹⁵ See Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:17. I myself entertained this idea in the past, but I think now that it is not correct after elucidating here the relationship of the lack of rain to grain (and not to the absence of grain).

¹⁶ It is safe to assume that the author sees rains of such magnitude as those predicted in Gen 7:4 as being unknown so far. This realization may have later contributed to depict pre-flood peoples as incredulous about the announced universal flood (1 Pet 3:20).

irrigated grain fields. Such scenario, in turn, allows for the planting of Eden in the immediately following context (vv. 8, 9), as the original tree-garden home of human beings who, in spite of living by the rivers, were not irrigation farm workers but privileged guests.