THE ETYMOLOGY OF EDEN

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

1. Eden an Akkadian word

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

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

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

The second objection arises from the history of the word in Babylonia. Speiser rightly observes that it is "exceedingly common" in Sumerian. In Akkadian, on the other hand, its occurrence is limited to the single entry in Syllabary b cited above.6 Wherever "steppe" is to be expressed in Akkadian, and wherever there are Akkadian renderings of Sumerian compositions using eḏin the word normally found is sēru, edinu never appears.7 This could be an accident, Akkadian texts containing eḏinu having escaped recovery. Yet given that sēru so often translates eḏin, and that there are several known synonyms of sēru in Akkadian, it seems safe to conclude that eḏinu was not a word current in Akkadian, but simply a learned scribal transcription of the Sumerian word-sign in the Syllabary. Again, a learned Hebrew scribe might have borrowed an extremely rare word from Babylonian because it could allow a popular etymology, but it can hardly be considered very likely, and is not the case with other Akkadian loan-words in Biblical Hebrew. The number of ancient readers who could have understood such ingenuity would not have been large.

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

2. Eden a West Semitic word

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