Luther's Paradise Flooded

Alessandro Scafi

Spot the Difference

A splendid golden palace features prominently on a page of a late fifteenth-century manuscript. It is situated at the top of a world map, painted to introduce a medieval account of the earth's waters and fish in Book XIII of Bartholomeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum* ('On the Properties of Things'), a late thirteenth-century encyclopaedia of theology and science, here translated into French (fig. 1). God, flanked by two angels, blesses the earth and its waters. The image has the 'T–O' structure typical of many medieval maps (see cat. 47). The outer ocean (the 'O') surrounds the inhabited Old World, which is divided into three parts (forming the 'T') by the Don, the Nile and the Mediterranean Sea. The image was made when Europe was embarking on its age of exploration and the illumination shows four large sailing vessels cutting through the seas. The endeavours of ships like these would soon lead to the discovery of the New World waiting beyond the confines of the map. The palace at the top, though, points to a notion lingering from medieval times: the belief that somewhere on earth paradise survives. Presiding over the whole earth, the golden building is located at the eastern edge of the world and it represents the Garden of Eden, described in Genesis, where Adam and Eve lived in unspoiled perfection when they were first created. In the traditional manner, Eden is connected to the rest of the earth by the biblical four rivers (discussed in Bartholomeus Anglicus's text), but separated from it by its impenetrable architecture. In this image the divine blessing is conceived to be a light that shines down not only on paradise but also on the fifteenth-century world of geographical exploration.

Another image, slightly later than the first, tells a different story. This is the woodcut illustrating the opening of Genesis in Martin Luther's translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into German, first published by the Hans Lufft press in Wittenberg in 1534 (cat. 10).[1] Here, too, God the Father blesses the world that lies beneath him and the biblical Eden is depicted, complete with the first humans at its centre enjoying the beauty, perfection and harmony of creation. But there is a crucial difference: in the illustration accompanying the medieval discussion of the world's waters, God blesses an extant Eden that is placed on a cartographic representation of the earth as it was then believed to be; in the Wittenberg Bible, by contrast, printed only few decades later, God blesses a prelapsarian Eden that exists without reference to the world that came into being after the sin of Adam and Eve and the destruction of the Flood. Corresponding to Luther's reading of the biblical text, the later illustration marks a radical shift in the Christian debate on the nature and location of Eden, and bears witness to a post-medieval approach to the paradise narrative.

Paradise on Earth

In modern times paradise has generally been thought of as an otherworldly place: true paradises are conceived to be paradises lost (to use Proust's words).[2] For medieval Christians, however, the Garden of Eden, described in Genesis as an earthly garden possessing trees and rivers, was a real geographical location that could be indicated on maps: a paradise that had been lost to humans after the Fall and the expulsion, but which was thought actually still to exist somewhere on earth. Writing in the early fifth century, Augustine stressed the necessity of believing in the historical truth of the Bible, and in Eden as a physical place. Adam, said Augustine, had a real physical body, and must have been placed, along with Eve, in a real material paradise. The four

Fig. 1 Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Livre des propriétés des choses* (French translation by Jean Corbechon). Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, MS Français 9140, fol. 226v

rivers mentioned in Genesis – the Tigris, Euphrates, Gihon and Pison (the last two usually identified as the Nile and Ganges) – flowed out from Eden to water the earth and make life possible.[3]

In the eighth century Bede took the same view that Eden was of this world: 'we are not allowed to doubt that the place was and is on earth.'[4] Paradise was thought of as being out of reach, made inaccessible by impassable barriers, and yet connected to the inhabited and known part of the earth by the four rivers. Clues were found in the biblical text that seemed to promise a solution to the geographical mystery of Eden's location. The Hebrew version of Genesis qualifies *gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden) with the term *miqqedem*, a phrase that may connote time or space, and which either sets the paradise narrative at the beginning – the dawn of time – or locates it in the Far East where the sun rises. Whereas in his Latin translation (known as the Vulgate), Jerome rendered the Hebrew temporally, stressing the fact that Eden was made at the beginning of time, the translators of the Septuagint (the Greek text produced in Egypt in the third century BC) and of the *Vetus Latina* (the 'Old Latin' texts that existed before the Vulgate) chose to give the expression its spatial meaning, stating that God planted paradise in the East. Isidore of Seville, writing in the seventh century, included the earthly paradise among the regions of Asia; a century later Bede wrote that the eastern Eden was separated from the rest of the world by a vast expanse of land or sea, and was at such an altitude that it had survived untouched by the Flood. Bede suggested that the land of Havilah – described in the Bible as bordering paradise and surrounded by the River Pison (Genesis 2:11) – was a region in India. Scripture portrayed Havilah as a land rich in gold, and Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* said the same about India (VI: 21–24). As shown by two highly influential twelfth-century texts, the anonymous *Glossa ordinaria* and Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*, medieval theology had by then settled on the essentials of Eden: it was a real place on earth, inaccessible because of original sin, yet connected to the inhabited world through the four rivers; though out of sight, it was probably situated somewhere in the remotest eastern corner of Asia, at an exceedingly high altitude, which saved it from being damaged by the Flood.

In the early centuries no Christian scholar ventured to suggest exactly where paradise was. In the thirteenth century, however, with the introduction of Aristotle and Greek science to the West, the revival in astronomical geography and the emergence of much new geographical and astronomical data, the problem of the earthly location of Eden took on greater importance. Late medieval scholars attempted to interpret the religious mystery of paradise in terms of rational geography, but failed to reach a consensus. No theologian or geographer was decisively able to solve the problem of Eden's location. Was it at the equator, south of the equator, or maybe north of it? On some fifteenth-century maps Eden was depicted as a highly fortified settlement contiguous to the inhabited earth but concealed behind the impenetrable walls of a medieval castle, giving the impression that it belonged to a different, independent level of reality. An example of this kind of depiction is found in the Walsperger world map of 1448 (cat. 124). Despite the best efforts of the learned, the earthly paradise eluded all rational attempts to locate it. Accordingly, by the end of the fifteenth century the exegetical stage was set for crucial changes in how people conceived paradise. By about 1500 the belief that paradise existed in the past could be interpreted in a much more literal, narrow and exclusive way. And this is where Martin Luther enters the story.

Paradise Lost

The earthly paradise was believed to be forever beyond the horizon for postlapsarian humans and, while European Renaissance explorers were discovering new lands, no trace of the biblical paradise was found – neither in India, Ethiopia, China, Japan nor in the New World. More importantly, the intellectual search for the site of Eden presented biblical exegetes with huge difficulties. The very idea of a heaven on earth threw up a number of contradictions and paradoxes. For one thing, the characteristics ascribed to the Garden of Eden (its perfectly temperate climate, for example) did not seem to correspond to any place on earth; in addition, the impossibility of identifying Eden's precise location was further complicated by the difficulty of coming up with a plausible altitude for the mountain on which paradise was thought to be situated, preserved from the Flood.

From a sermon delivered in 1523 and 1524 we may conclude that, from the very outset, Luther struggled to come up with a consistent theory about the location of the earthly paradise. Discussing Adam's descendants to Noah (Genesis 5), he endorsed the traditional view that the Old Testament patriarchs Enoch and Elijah, allowed by God to escape death, were miraculously transferred to the Garden of Eden. When he considered Eden's location, however, he concluded that nobody had a clue where it was: perhaps not even Enoch and Elijah, despite the fact that they had lived there.[5]

Some sixteenth-century scholars attempted to provide a rational interpretation of Genesis that was consistent with the geographical lore of the age, arguing that the biblical paradise was not confined to a specific location but had once encompassed the entire earth. In their view, the qualities ascribed to Eden in Scripture were characteristic of the earth as a whole and of the blessed state experienced by Adam and Eve before their sin, and could therefore not be restricted to an enclosed garden. Supporters of the whole-earth paradise theory acknowledged that Adam and Eve had occupied a precise site which was particularly pleasant and delightful but they insisted that the rest of the earth, destined for Adam and Eve's progeny, was equally beautiful and fruitful. The ruin wrought on paradise by human sin and the ensuing divine curse extended across the earth as a whole.

This idea solved many difficulties, not least the controversial notion of a localised and secluded Eden left empty and unused after Adam's sin. But the problem with the whole-earth paradise theory was that, despite its rational appeal, it went against the letter of Scripture. In particular, it contradicted the Genesis narrative, which explicitly states that Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise and so implies the existence of some kind of boundary between Eden and the rest of the world (Genesis 3:23-24). Those scholars who adhered to the whole-earth theory interpreted the biblical account of Adam and Eve's expulsion allegorically, as a reference to a general change in the human condition, and not as the physical banishment from an isolated garden.

Fig. 2 The Creation of Eve. In: *Biblia, deutsch*. Nuremberg: Anton Koberger 1483, fol. 5r. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, 2° Inc. 28046

We may suppose that Martin Luther sympathised with the notion that human sin had brought about the ruin of the natural world. In his Table Talk, the record of his private and informal conversations based on notes taken by his followers between 1531 and 1544 (published in 1566, twenty years after his death), Luther is reported as saying that he held paradise to be the whole world. Apparently, in conversations with his students, he expressed the opinion that the four rivers mentioned in the Book of Genesis surrounded the earth. His view, articulated in private, was that the original paradise,

Fig. 3 The Creation of Eve, Hans Holbein the Younger. In: *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*. Basle: A. Petri, 1523–1524, fol. Ir. Universitätsbibliothek Basel, FG V 21:1

spoiled after the sin of Adam and Eve, extended across the face of the earth and the description of Eden in Genesis referred only to the particular setting in which Adam was placed by God.[6]

However, in his public *Lecture on Genesis* (compiled between 1535 and 1545), Luther distanced himself from those Christian thinkers who believed in a whole-earth paradise.[7] It is true that when he discussed the creation of the world he seemed not to distinguish between paradise and the rest of the earth, pointing out that, had man not sinned, God would have transferred him to heaven 'from paradise, or from the earth'.[8] Later in the text, however, he clearly states that Scripture explicitly distinguishes the Edenic Garden from the rest of the earth, and that to imagine Eden as the entire earth is 'obviously wrong'.[9] Luther's overriding priority was to safeguard the authority of the sacred text. He therefore wished to avoid casting doubt on its historical truth by introducing allegorical approaches that strayed too far from the Bible's actual words. To discard the letter of the text for the sake of detached spiritual meanings was, in Luther's view, a desecration of Scripture.[10] If the Bible reported that Adam and Eve were driven out of a particular place, and that an angel had been instructed to guard its entrance, it meant, Luther concluded, that some sort of boundary between paradise and the rest of the earth must have existed and that paradise had once occupied a specific piece of land. Only by envisioning the Garden of Eden as a secluded garden, separated from the rest of the earth, was it possible to preserve the letter of the biblical account of Adam and Eve's expulsion.

For Luther, it was all in the sacred text. 'Eden' was a proper noun, the name of a place, and the spatial meaning of the Hebrew term *miq-qedem* indicated that paradise was located in the east.[11] The whole earth as originally created by God was perfect and beautiful, but God intended to create Eden, man's original home, as 'the temple of the entire world', its most excellent and delightful part.[12] The rest of the earth was also thoroughly delightful, but paradise had its own superior magnificence. Eden was not a miniature garden, however. While a literal reading of the text suggested Luther should have conceived it as a secluded area, he held onto the notion that Eden must have been a rather large region, able to accommodate not only Adam and Eve but their descendants as well, which Luther thought would be a great number. Had the first human pair remained in their state of innocence, God would have extended the garden to make it the dwelling place of all their progeny before they were later transferred to heaven. Taking all these factors into account, Luther stated that the secluded Garden of Eden occupied an area corresponding to present-day Syria, Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula.[13]

Luther's interpretation of the Genesis narrative had to conform closely to the letter of Scripture. After the Fall and the expulsion, the whole earth was cursed by God, including Eden which lost its original fertility and its entrance was guarded by the cherubim and the flaming sword. During the time from Adam to Noah the vast region occupied by the earthly paradise, which in the meantime became covered with thorns and thistles, remained under angelic guard, inaccessible to mankind.[14] But what became of it subsequently?

Paradise on earth was nowhere. This was Luther's trump card. The Garden of Eden, he argued, had disappeared. It was wiped out by the Flood, along with its trees and rivers: destroyed by the curse that sins deserve because, in the age after original sin, mankind proved to be wicked and idolatrous. The entire human race was destroyed except for a few righteous people – Noah and his family – who remained to fulfil the promise of Christ's redemption.[15]

We may wonder how and why Luther abandoned his initial uncertainty about the issue and developed his 'paradise flooded' theory. It is likely that he came across the work of the influential Roman churchman and head of the Vatican Library Augustinus Steuchus who, in his *Recognitio Veteris Testamenti ad hebraicam veritatem* (published in 1529), stated the view that the Garden of Eden had been destroyed by the Flood.[16] Luther might also have been influenced by the fact that, in the 1520s, the Flood was the topic of the day in Northern Europe. Astrologers predicted a great flood would occur in the year 1524 because of the conjunction of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn in the zodiac sign of Pisces (cat. 113). Luther wrote against these astrological predictions, which in any case did not come true,[17] but the vivid description in a sermon given in 1527 of the distress felt by Noah when facing the deluge prompts us to consider his personal knowledge of floods that occurred in his lifetime: in particular the St Felix Flood that took place in Holland and Flanders in 1530.[18] Accordingly, writing about the destructive power of Noah's Flood in his commentary on Genesis, Luther reflects: 'If today rivers overflow with such great damage to men, cattle, and fields, what would be the result of a worldwide flood?'[19]

The idea that the earthly paradise disappeared after the Flood preserved the literal truth of the biblical narrative from criticisms based on modern geographical knowledge. There was no point in wondering about the exact location or altitude of paradise because it had been wiped from the face of the earth, which had itself been totally disfigured. According to Luther, the Flood changed everything on earth, including the four rivers described in Genesis. As a consequence of Adam's sin these had already become corrupted and, as it were, 'leprous',[20] but after the Flood they were destroyed altogether, since the tremendous deluge of rain had overwhelmed them and changed their courses. When God first made the world, Eden was a paradise in comparison to the rest of the earth; analogously, in its prelapsarian state, the earth as a whole was a paradise compared to its wretched condition after the Fall.[21]

God's entire creation, Luther argued, including sunlight, the purity of the air and the abundance of water, had been damaged by the sin that brought about the Fall and the Flood. Following God's curse, all things underwent a change for the worse. Luther's belief that, as a consequence of sin, all trace of paradise had been erased, and the earth had radically changed, was consistent with his more general theological views.[22] Luther accepted that God had created Adam in his own image as a righteous and perfect being: a most beautiful creature, fit to enjoy immortality. After Adam sinned, however, his body was corrupted: his innocence and immortality were lost, and the image of God in him was destroyed in the same way as the original beauty of paradise and the world was destroyed. The advent of Christ and his sacrifice on the Cross redeemed mankind and re-established the world of God's grace, restoring the divine image in man. And yet, Luther was convinced of the importance of acknowledging the tragedy of human sin, along with God's curse as its inevitable outcome, because corrupt mankind would soon face a much-deserved inundation of fire, the prelude to a final restoration.[23]

Fig. 4 The Sixth Day of Creation, Michael Wolgemut, Wilhelm Pleydenwurff. In: Hartman Schedel: *Das buch der Cronicken vnd gedechtnus wirdigern geschichte[n]*, Nuremberg, 1493, fol. 5r, cat. 25

The woodcut facing the beginning of Genesis in the Wittenberg Bible faithfully illustrates Luther's interpretation, bringing home the weight of the curse inflicted on nature and mankind. The image derives from an iconography established in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Bibles that depicted the creation of Eve, both in manuscripts and printed editions. Examples include the Malermi Bible (1471) and the Walters Manuscript, dated to 1507.[24] An example closer to the Wittenberg Bible is the woodcut preceding Genesis in the Cologne Bible that was reused in the Koberger Bible (fig. 2) and in the Grüninger and Otmar Bibles, where we see creation originating in the mouth of God.[25] God the creator, placed at the top, occupies with his angels the outer ring of a diagrammatic scheme of the universe made up of four concentric circles, with the four winds at the corners. The

Fig. 5 The Garden of Eden (Detail), Lucas Cranach the Elder (workshop) and Monogrammist MS. In: *Biblia, das ist die gantze Heilige Schrifft Deudsch*. Wittenberg, 1534, vol. I, adjacent to Genesis 1-2, cat. 10

outer ring stands for the empyrean. Inside is the material heaven, with the sun, the moon and the stars; then comes the ocean surrounding the earth, with fish and animals. The figure of God reappears at the centre of the image, creating Eve out of Adam's rib. The focus here is on the moment when God made the first woman in Eden, which is set at the centre of the universe. The iconography was also taken up by Hans Holbein in 1523 and 1524 (fig. 3).[26]

Another iconographical precedent for the Wittenberg woodcut is found in the successful world history compiled by the German humanist Hartmann Schedel and printed in 1493 in Latin and German by the publisher who also produced the Koberger Bible.[27] The images showing the fashioning of Adam (but not Eve) on the sixth day and God's rest on the seventh (fig. 4 and cat. 25) share some similarities with the Wittenberg woodcut. In the latter, however, God is seen blessing his creation from outside, at the top, but is not shown forming Adam or Eve in the middle of the concentric circles. In Luther's Bible, Adam and Eve have already been created and are seen upright in the Garden of Eden. A similar iconography, though showing the moment of the Fall, is found in some German printed Bibles, including the Sensenschmidt and Zainer Bibles (1476–1478 and 1477).

In the Wittenberg woodcut God the creator, radiating light and clothed in vibrant red, with long hair and a flowing beard, blesses the universe below him. Eden is depicted as a vast region, lushly vegetated, rich in fauna, with the single river rising from its source in the middle of the garden before dividing into four streams (as explained in Genesis) which make their way to the sea (fig. 5). We see coastal outlines, islands and mountains but there is no boundary separating the beautiful landscape of Eden, set on a sea-encircled landmass, from the rest of the earth.

In this image God has already divided light from darkness and separated the waters above and below the firmament; he has created dry land and vegetation, shaped the sun, the moon and the stars, given life to birds and fishes and to land-based animals; finally, he has made man and woman. The woodcut portrays the perfect and uncorrupted universe at the end of the seven days of creation. We read in Genesis that on the sixth day God blessed Adam and Eve and then entrusted the earth and all its creatures to them: to rule over, care for and cultivate. This is the moment illustrated in the woodcut, just before the Fall, possibly in the early afternoon of the sixth day. Although Luther had made it clear that nothing certain could be said about the timing of the Fall, he supposed that after Adam had been created on the sixth day, Eve was created later that same day while Adam was sleeping, and that their sin had probably taken place on the seventh day.[28] In the woodcut Adam and Eve are represented naked, still unashamed and innocent: pure and perfect like the world in which they dwell, surrounded by obedient animals. For Luther, had Adam and Eve not sinned, animals would have remained subservient, and the woodcut portrays their prelapsarian condition. A snake is visible, standing upright to the left of the couple, not yet crawling on the ground, as it was condemned to do after the Fall (Genesis 3:14). In Luther's view, the peaceful and beautiful universe depicted in the woodcut was subsequently disfigured by human sin and therefore cursed by God. The Flood then destroyed all that remained of the original, uncorrupted creation. Showing a beauty that no longer exists, the woodcut features a lost world.

Unlike the map in the late fifteenth-century copy of Bartholomeus Anglicus's encyclopaedic work, which shows God blessing the entire world, the image in Luther's Bible depicts God blessing only the world as it was first created, before the corruption brought about by the Fall and the devastation produced by the Flood. Luther's image illustrates the tragedy of human sin as a consequence of which paradise was cursed; paradise was flooded; paradise was no more.

I am grateful to Thomas Eser for drawing my attention to Luther's sermons of 1523/1524 and 1527 and to the possible impact of the prediction of a great flood in 1524 and the 1530 St Felix Flood on Luther's thinking about the destructions brought about by the Flood during Noah's time.

1 See Füssel 2003.
2 Proust 1927, vol. 2, p. 13: '[...] le vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdu'.
3 A detailed discussion of the emergence and development of the otion of an earthly Eden in the Western tradition is found in Scafi 2006.
4 Beda/Jones 1967, p. 46: 'nos tamen locum hunc fuisse et esse terrenum dubitare non licet'.
5 WA 14, p. 182.
6 WA TR 1, p. 549.
7 On Luther's reading of Genesis, see Asendorf 1998.
8 WA 42, p. 59: 'donec Deus hominem transtulisset de Paradiso seu terra'.
9 WA 42, pp. 68–70, 74: 'Sed hic cum palam falsum sit'.
10 WA 42, p. 173.
11 WA 42, pp. 66–67.
12 WA 42, p. 172: 'Templum totius mundi'.
13 WA 42, pp. 74–75.
14 WA 42, pp. 58–59, 171–172.
15 WA 42, pp. 58–59.
16 Steuchus 1529, fols 22–24.
17 Warburg 1932, p. 512. – Zambelli 1986.
18 WA 24, pp. 183 and 190–199.
19 Luther 1958, vol. 1, p. 90. – WA 42, p. 68.
20 Luther 1958, p. 101. – WA 42, p.77: '[...] quatuor haec flumina corrupta et quasi leprosa'.
21 WA42, pp. 67–68, 74–75, 88–90, 98.
22 See, e.g., Ingram 1993.
23 WA42, pp. 58–59, 75–76, 152–156, 168, 260–261, 263.
24 *Biblia*. Venice: Vindelinus de Spira, 1471. – Bible (incomplete); Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, Manuscript, W.805, fol. 6v.
25 *Hijr begint Genesis dat ijrste boeck* [...]. Cologne: Bartholomaeus of Unckel, 1478–79. – *Biblia*. Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1483. – *Biblia*. Straßburg: Johann Grüninger, 1485. – *Bibel*. Augsburg: Johann Otmar, 1507. See also Delano-Smith/Ingram 1991, p. 2 and Eichenberger/Wendland 1977, fig. 107 p. 73.
26 For Holbein's woodcuts see exhib. cat. Basel 1997, figs. 95–96, pp. 131–132.
27 Schedel 1493.
28 WA 42, pp. 61–62.