

THE GARDEN OF GOD

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There are three basic types of gardens in Ancient Near Eastern literature: (1) royal parks, (2) cultic/temple gardens, and (3) forests at the divine/human borders. All of these gardens have several similar features: lush and exotic foliage; abundant waters; and limited access.

The most well-known garden in Tanakh is the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden includes the deity, the issuing of divine decrees (Gen. 3:14–19, 22–24), the source of the life-giving waters which supply the earth (Gen. 2:6, 10–14), abundant fertility, trees of supernatural qualities and great beauty (Gen. 2:9), and people. A less frequently discussed account of Eden as the “garden of God” (also called “gods’ garden”)¹ is described by Ezekiel as a place of great luxury: *You were in Eden, the garden of Gog, every precious stone . . . carnelian, chrysolite, and amethyst; beryl, lapis lazuli, and jasper; sapphire, turquoise, and emerald; and gold beautifully wrought . . .* (Ezek. 28:13).

A much earlier example is the “Jewel Forest” described in Gilgamesh, which contains trees with precious gemstones as fruit:

There was the garden of the gods; all round him stood bushes bearing gems . . . there was fruit of carnelian with the vine hanging from it, beautiful to look at; lapis lazuli leaves hung thick with fruit, sweet to see. For thorns and thistles there were hematite and rare stones, agate, and pearls from out of the sea. (Tablet IX).²

While some scholars view this earlier example of the garden of the gods as a parallel to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2–3, this does not seem to be the case, as one of the main features of the Ancient Near Eastern “garden of the gods” is the presence of deities and lack of humankind. What interests me is: who has access to the garden of the gods; how is its exclusivity maintained; and why all of the jewels?

Beginning with access, according to its name, it is a garden for “the gods.” While several biblical texts use the plural noun “Elohim” (literally “gods”) to

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designate the God of Israel,³ “*elohim*” refers also other biblical supernatural creatures as well as foreign deities.⁴ Beings called “*elohim*” in the Tanakh share certain characteristics: for example, they inhabit the non-human realm but occasionally they “roam” the human world; they are more powerful than humans; they are immortal; they affect humans’ lives; and they guard their “superior” status vis-à-vis humans zealously.

All Ancient Near Eastern cultures had some variation of a pantheon of divine beings who administer the affairs of the cosmos. A comparison of the Tanakh with other Ancient Near Eastern texts reveals several overlaps between those of the surrounding nations and ancient Israel's. One similarity between the biblical supernatural creatures and other Ancient Near Eastern divine beings is a hierarchy. The first tier of the Ugaritic gods consisted of the god El and his consort Atirat (referred to as Asherah in the Hebrew Bible). Atirat's status as the wife of El and the mother of other deities provides insight into the many allusions to her and her symbol, the “Asherah pole,” in the Hebrew Bible.

According to archaeological evidence, at least some Israelites considered the Israelite deity to have had a divine consort, Asherah. In 1975-76 an excavation team led by Ze'ev Meshel uncovered artifacts from the 9th-8th century BCE in North Sinai (Kuntillet 'Ajrūd). One of the two of the pithoi unearthed has a Hebrew blessing formula “by YHWH, our guardian, and by his Asherah.”⁵ Another is inscribed “by YHWH of Samaria and by his Asherah.”⁶ There is also a 7th century BCE burial inscription found in Khirbet el-Qom which reads: “Blessed be Uriyahu by YHWH, and his Asherah, for from his enemies he (YHWH) has saved him.” Additionally, nude, buxom goddess figurines were found in domestic contexts in Tell el-Duweir and point to popular cults that coexisted with monotheistic Judaism. This type of pillar figurine is typical of those produced in great numbers in Judah at this time.⁷ These figures and those on clay plaques with nude female figures probably represent fertility or mother goddesses. Does “his Asherah” refer to an entity, giving credence to Asherah as God's consort? If so, the Canaanite Asherah, with her depictions would be in tandem with El and his consort – the highest hierarchy among the gods.

The second tier of the Ugaritic deities was a younger group of gods which included the war god Baal and the war goddesses Anat and Astarte. Ugaritic forces of destruction included Yamm, the god of the sea (known also as Nahar, the River), and Mot, the god of death as well as Resheph (burning) and Deber

(pestilence). In total, more than two-hundred thirty-four deities are recorded in Ugaritic texts. Feared and admired rather than loved, these gods were revered and praised as masters, but still subordinate to El. They could display kindness, but were fickle and at times, as explained in Ugaritic literature, poor decision makers, which explained why humans suffer such hardships in life. Humanity was created to ease their burdens and provide them with daily care and food. Often aloof, the gods might respond well to offerings, but at a moment's notice might also rage and strike out at humans with a vengeance that could result in illness, loss of livelihood, or death.

The corresponding second tier of Hebrew Bible divine beings also consisted of lesser beings. Some of the members of this court include beings called “sons of god.”⁸ As in Ugaritic texts, some of these gods had fearsome roles and occasionally the same names as the Ugaritic gods. For example, in Habakkuk 3:5, *Pestilence marches before Him, and plague/burning comes at his Heels*. In both cases these lesser beings were clearly subordinate to the highest deity (El and YHWH), forming their heavenly entourage. Additionally, “all of God’s host” could be considered part of the second tier as participants in the wars of the Israelite deity⁹ similar to that of the relationship of El and his war gods – Baal, Anat, and Astarte.

Just as El’s second tier gods would sometimes determine the fate of humans, so too the second tier biblical gods. For example, in Job, the “divine beings” appear before God as a group to report on the performance of their tasks and receive orders and one of them is the “adversary” – Satan, who carries out his functions under God’s directions (Job 1:6 ff.; 2:1 ff). Occasionally they appear in a “courtroom” setting: *God stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings He pronounces judgment* (Ps. 82: 1).

Ancient Near Eastern gods met in various and sundry locations: sacred mountains and lush gardens (i.e., “garden of the gods”). The descriptions of these gardens highlight their beauty and fertility, but they are to be enjoyed solely by the gods. With regard to the sacred mountains, in Ugarit texts, El and his council met on Mount Zaphon. Similarly, the in Tanakh God is associated with mountains,¹⁰ even with the summit of Zaphon.¹¹ The Ugaritic palace in Zaphon was paved with bricks that made both El’s house and Baal’s house “a house the clearness of lapis lazuli.” Likewise, when Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders ascended the mountain they saw the seated God of

Israel, and under his feet was a likeness of *pavement of sapphire*, analogous to El's (Exod. 24: 9-10).

Although humans could approach the sacred mountains, the gardens of the gods were safeguarded by fierce monsters to bar human access. The Cedar Forest at the entrance to the mountain range Mashu where the gods reside was guarded by the monster Humbaba and the Jewel Garden was guarded by Scorpion-Man and his wife (Scorpion-Woman):

“The name of the mountain is Mashu...

Scorpion-man guards its gate...

Scorpion-man calls to his wife:

[The purpose of their com]ing I would learn.”¹²

Although not gods per se, Ezekiel describes fearsome looking divine functionaries – cherubim – who guard the biblical garden of the gods surrounded by flares. The Biblical cherub is a winged celestial being which appears in several places: in the story of the Garden of Eden after the expulsion of Adam and Eve, God stationed cherubim at the entrance of the garden to prevent humans from re-entering (Gen. 3:24); in Ezekiel a cherub lives on *God's holy mountain* (Ezek. 28:13ff); in Exodus two wooden images of cherubim overlaid with gold, face one another on the two ends of the covering above the Ark in the Tabernacle and form the throne of God with their outstretched wings (Ex. 25:18–20; 37:7–9).¹³ In Ezekiel's vision, the chariot throne¹⁴ is supported by four creatures which he identifies as cherubim.¹⁵ This description parallels the golden throne which was excavated from the tomb of the Egyptian king Tutankhamen. Ancient Near Eastern thrones were often decorated with images such as Tutankhamen's throne which includes powerful lions and uraei (sacred royal snakes).¹⁶

The descriptions of the cherubim vary, but generally they are either two-winged creatures or four-winged creatures. The two cherubim in the Tabernacle and in Solomon's Temple have two wings each (Ex. 25:20; I Kings 6:24, 27) and one face (Ex. 25:20). In the Temple vision of Ezekiel, the cherubim engraved on the walls and doors have two faces, a man's face and a lion's face.¹⁷ The lion image is similar to other Ancient Near Eastern fantastic creatures with feline bodies, long ears, wings, and crest feathers – a combination of animal and bird – elements typical of Near Eastern lion-griffins as well to the human-headed, winged lion, a creature that also appears as a gate guardian

on the doorjambs in the palace of Ashurnasirpal 2 at Nimrud.

In Ezekiel's description, as in other Ancient Near East representations, the symmetry of four predominates: each of the four cherubim has four wings and four faces. Two of their wings, spread out above, touch one another, and the other two cover their bodies. Their four faces included one of a man, a lion on the right side, an ox on the left side, and an eagle (Ezek. 1:10). Those cherubim have legs and *each one's feet were like a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands* (Ezek. 1:7–8). Another description is *the cherubs appeared to have the form of a man's hand under their wings.... each one had four faces: one was a cherub's face, the second a human face, the third a lion's face, and the fourth an eagle's face* (Ezek. 10:14) where Ezekiel includes the face of a cherub among the four faces and omits that of the ox.

Ezekiel's description seems just as fearsome as the Ugarit: *They had the figures of human beings. However, each had four faces, and each of them had four wings; the legs of each were [fused into] a single rigid leg, and the feet of each were like a single calf's hoof; and their sparkle was like the luster of burnished bronze. They had human hands below their wings. The four of them had their faces and their wings on their four sides. Each one's wings touched those of the other. They did not turn when they moved; each could move in the direction of any of its faces. Each of them had a human face; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right; each of the four had the face of an ox on the left; and each of the four had the face of an eagle [at the back]. Such were their faces. As for their wings, they were separated: above, each had two touching those of the others, while the other two covered its body. And each could move in the direction of any of its faces; they went wherever the spirit impelled them to go, without turning when they moved. Such then was the appearance of the creatures. With them was something that looked like burning coals of fire. This fire, suggestive of torches, kept moving about among the creatures; the fire had a radiance, and lightning issued from the fire. Dashing to and fro [among] the creatures was something that looked like flares* (Ezek. 1:5-14).¹⁸

Winged creatures are well-known from the art and religious symbolism of the Ancient Near East. Winged bulls were placed at the entrance of Babylonian and Assyrian palaces and temples; they appear on the pottery incense altars

from Taanach and Megiddo; winged sphinxes, griffins, and human creatures are represented in the art and iconography of Carchemish, Calah, Nimrud, the Samarian ivories, Aleppo, and Tell Halaf.¹⁹ It is possible that Ezekiel's description of the fierce cherubim might have been inspired by Hittite reliefs of winged human-headed bulls.

The motif of the composite human-animal-bird figure is widespread in various forms in art and religious symbolism throughout the Fertile Crescent, functioning as "guards" who prevent mortals from entering into the presence of deities. Thus, biblical cherubim seem to be connected with this artistic tradition. Sphinxes – particularly the winged variety seem virtually indistinguishable from the biblical cherubim and examples of sphinx or cherub thrones are known from two pre-Israelite artifacts. Two examples dating to Iron I, predate the Solomonic temple: the Megiddo plaque, which depicts a divine figure or king seated on a throne flanked by cherubim; and the Ahiaram sarcophagus, which portrays the king seated on sphinx throne with highly stylized wings that compose the sides of the throne. The cherubim of the Bible are hardly the round-faced infant cherubim known in Western art. They, like their other Ancient Near Eastern counterparts, prevented humans from accessing the garden of the gods.

The third point I wish to raise is that the gardens of the gods are adorned with "blazing gemstones." Precious stones are mentioned in various contexts in the Hebrew Bible, but the most comprehensive list is the description of the breast piece worn by the high priest. The breast piece was set with 12 precious stones arranged in four rows with three stones in each row to represent the 12 tribes: *The first row shall be a row of carnelian, chrysolite, and emerald; the second, of turquoise, sapphire, and amethyst; the third of jacinth, agate, and crystal; and the fourth, of beryl, lapis lazuli, and jasper...* (Exod. 28:17–20).²⁰

Nine of these jewels (carnelian, chrysolite, and amethyst; beryl, lapis lazuli, and jasper; sapphire, turquoise, and emerald) are exactly the same as those in the garden of the gods quoted above. Why jewels in the garden of the gods? And why the similarity with the High Priest's breastplate? Although the Sumerians probably did not influence the Hebrews directly,²¹ there is little doubt that the Sumerians did influence the Canaanites, who preceded the Hebrews. Significantly, both the Sumerian Jewel Garden and the biblical garden of God contain some of the same priceless jewels.

All Ancient Near Eastern sanctuaries required officiants, and just as sacred space needed to be differentiated from secular, the occupants of the sacred offices had to be distinguishable from the rest of the worshippers. Throughout the Ancient Near East, officiates dressed lavishly – unlike the other worshippers. For example, a relief from the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal 2, depicts a king and an attendant. Officials were richly dressed, with jewelry including rosette bracelets, armbands, a collar of beads, probably of semiprecious stone, pendant earrings, and a crescent-shaped pectoral. At the ends of their short sleeves were bands of incised plant motifs representing embroidery. They carried swords whose scabbards, like the king's, ended in the image of two roaring lions. Sumerian priests of their deities also wore elaborate robes.

Similarly, the attire of the biblical High Priest was colorful, and intended (probably) to make an impression.²² The Israelite deity wanted his “highest level” of worshippers – his chief supplicant – to impress and overwhelm the rest of his tribe. Thus, one explanation for the similarity of jewels in both Ancient Near East texts may be the fierce determination of the biblical writers to match and ultimately surpass all foreign deities – at least in the eyes of the Ancient Israelites. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, there is a general acknowledgement of foreign deities – even the Israelite deity recognizes their existence. Indeed, the covenant established between the Israelite deity and the ancient Israelites is very specific: *You shall have no other gods besides me* (Exod. 20: 3), not “there are no other deities.” This command warns against violating the covenant by worshipping any other nation’s deities – but the text here does not necessarily deny that these other deities did exist.

Just as the High Priest was more awe-inspiring than the rest of the Israelites, so to the biblical deity was presented as more powerful than the rest of the Ancient Near Eastern gods. The Ugaritic Jewel Forest contained some jewels (carnelian; lapis lazuli; unspecified “rare stones”, agate, and pearls) but they are not described in as much detail as in Ezekiel’s garden. In effect, the biblical garden of God is “more impressive” than that of El and his lesser gods.

Not surprisingly, there are many similarities between El and the Hebrew Bible deity: both were the creator god; both were the father of the rest of the gods as well as humankind; both were the god of wisdom; both were considered fairly good-natured, beneficent beings, although both exhibited bursts of anger when not obeyed. Indeed, El is associated often with the epithet “bull,”

indicating strength, stubbornness, and ferocity, a trait which the Israelite deity shares as well.

In sum, the biblical garden of the gods was resplendent. Humans may have heard about it but were denied entrance. It was ultimately restricted to God, like the Jewel Garden of Gilgamesh lore – but, perhaps, even more luxurious.

NOTES

1. A similar phrase (“garden of YHWH”) is in Gen. 13:10 and Isa. 51:3.
2. In the Sumerian story Enki and Ninhursag, the land of Dilmun (associated with modern Bahrain) is the premier garden of the gods where “waters of abundance” flow forth to the land (“Pure are the cities –and you are the ones to whom they are allotted. Pure is Dilmun land. Pure is Sumer – and you are the ones to whom it is allotted. Pure is Dilmun land. Pure is Dilmun land. Virginal is Dilmun land. Virginal is Dilmun land. Pristine is Dilmun land” (J.B. Pritchard 1969. lines 55–64; line 38-9.) El dwells “at the sources of the (two) rivers, in the midst of the (double) deep.” Similarly, Ezek. 47:1–12, Zech. 14:1–21, and Joel 4:16–18 all picture life-giving water rushing forth from the sanctuary on Mt. Zion, and when it reaches the Dead Sea *every creature that comes to the stream lives, and its fish are prolific* (Ezek. 47: 9–10).
3. E.g., Genesis 1:1: In the beginning Elohim created the heaven and the earth.
4. E.g., Exodus 12:12: all the gods of Egypt.
5. W.G. Dever. Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? *BASOR* (1984) p.21-22.
6. Kuntlitt Mayes. *‘Ajrūd and the History of Israelite Religion in Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation* ed. J.R. Bartlett (1997) p. 62.
7. Tell el-Duweir was the major fortified center in Judah that was destroyed by the Assyrian army under Sennacherib (701 BCE). The city's fate is chronicled in the Bible and represented in wall reliefs from the Assyrian palace at Nineveh.
8. Psalm 97:7; Psalms 82:6 refers to these divine beings as “sons of the Most High.”
9. Joshua 5:13–15; 10:12b–13a; Judges 5:20; Psalm 148:2–3.
10. E.g., Exodus 34:26; 1 Kings 8:10.
11. The Jerusalem temple is said to have been located in the *heights of the north* (Isa. 14:13).
12. H. and J. Lewy, *Hebrew Union College Annual*, XVII (1943), 13 f.
13. Cherubim are counterparts of two enormous cherubim, carved of olivewood and covered with gold, each of which had a 10-cubit wing span, and each was 10 cubits high in the Holy of Holies of Solomon's Temple – and this role of the cherubim is alluded to in several biblical passages where God is spoken of as “He who sits [enthroned] upon the cherubim” (e.g., 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Isaiah 37:16; Psalm 80:2; 99:1). In 2 Sam. 22:11 and Psalms 18:11 the deity *mounted a cherub and flew; gliding on the wings of the wind*. Cherubim were appropriated also for cultic symbolism and used for decorative purposes: they were embroidered on the veil separating the “holy place” from the “most Holy” (Exod. 26:31; 36:3) and on the curtains of the Tabernacle (Exod. 26:1; 36:8.); carved on all the inner and outer walls (1 Kings 6:29), the doors of the inner and outer sanctuary (1 Kings 6:32, 35); the panels of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 7:29, 36); and carved on the walls and doors of the Temple envisioned by Ezekiel (Ezek. 41:18–20, 25).

14. *Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form* (Ezek 1:26).

15. *I looked, and on the expanse over the heads of the cherubs, there was something like a sapphire stone; an appearance resembling a throne could be seen over them* (Ezek. 10:1); Cf. 1 Chron. 28:18.

16. Here the uraei appear in elaborate headdresses and are coiled into the corners of the throne; their outstretched wings form the armrests.

17. Ezekiel seems to have borrowed the motif of a “two-faced” cherub from the paradigm of the Tabernacle in Exodus or from Solomon’s Temple, or it may be the result of his describing a two-dimensional picture on a flat surface rather than the three-dimensional one of his chariot vision.

18. Tangentially related to the cherub is the seraph which appears in the Hebrew Bible in two distinct contexts: serpents and “composite” divine beings. Beginning with serpents, in the singular and plural is it the name of a species of serpent (Num. 21:6; Deut. 8:15; Isa. 14:29; 30:6). In Num. 21 the deity sends “seraph-snakes to punish the complaining Israelites (when the people, complain the deity tells Moses to make a “seraph” [i.e., copper serpent] and place it on a standard, to serve as an apotropaic device). Entwined serpents with wings indicating the equilibrium of the forces of life and death have been traced as far back as late third millennium Mesopotamia, in the design of the sacrificial cup of King Gudea of Lagash. Rituals designed to avert an evil power or concerning healing which involve serpents and images of them are known from Egypt and Mesopotamia. In addition, the serpent as a life-healing symbol was a common feature in the Canaanite fertility cult. It was associated with the mother-goddess Asherah on pendant reliefs and on incense altars. A small bronze serpent was found at pre-Israelite Gezer, and a bronze plaque with a woman flanked by two serpents was unearthed in Late Bronze Age Hazor. Finally, primitive religions frequently give examples of the conjunction of opposites, of serpents as symbols of sex and death or of death and rebirth. In Isa. 14:29 and 30:6, the word seraph is qualified by the word “flying” so that in this context the seraph-snake is a purely legendary species (cf. the description of the seraphim in Isa. 6:2: *Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet* [i.e., lower extremities] *and with two he flew*).

19. Two winged beings flank the throne of Hiram, king of Byblos, and winged bulls were placed at the entrance of Babylonian and Assyrian palaces and temples.

20. From the Talmudic period onward, biblical scholars have tried to determine the mineralogical nature of these stones and to identify them in terms of the names of modern minerals. The only source specifying a mineralogical property is the description found in *Midrash Rabbah*:

“There were distinguishing signs for each prince; each had a flag and a different color for every flag, corresponding to the precious stones on the breast of Aaron ... Reuben’s stone was ’odem and the color of his flag was red; and embroidered thereon were mandrakes. Simeon’s was pitdah and his flag was of a yellow (or green) color ... Levi’s was bareqet and the color of his flag was a third white, a third black, and a third red ... Judah’s was nofekh and the color of his flag was like that of the sky ... Issachar’s was sappir and the color of his flag was black like stibium ... Zebulun’s was yahalom and the color of his flag was white ... Dan’s was leshem and the color of his flag was similar to sappir ... Gad’s ’ahlamah and the color of his flag was neither white nor black but a blend of black and white ... Asher’s was tarshish and the color of his flag was like the precious stone with which women adorn themselves ... Joseph’s was shoham and the color of his

