

Article of the Month

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The Four Rivers of Eden

In Genesis 2:10-14, we have an account of a river which originates in Eden and subsequently, leaving Eden, divides into four separate rivers. A number of speculations exist as to the significance of these verses — which, of course, are not mentioned to waste space, but to provide some truths for those who seek deeply.

Rivers are waters. Waters (plural) in Scripture symbolize people. It is not, therefore, unreasonable to think that these rivers represent people. Rivers can, indeed, have other prophetic significances in the Bible. But those seem not to be workable in this context. The fact that we begin with ONE river makes it easy to have it represent the HUMAN RACE as contained in our original parents. Once humanity left Eden, its ULTIMATE destiny is to be divided into four distinct classes. Thus, this initial river's departing Eden and becoming four separate rivers seems quite appropriate symbolically.

How to identify these four classes becomes our assignment. Perhaps the most compelling interpretive help is that we have a single passage of Scripture which DOES divide mankind into four classes. That text is Psalm 45 which we will examine shortly.

Jesus' garments, likewise, — perhaps picturing the the justification which comes from his sacrifice — were divided into four parts (John 19:23). This might well represent that the benefits of his sacrifice would be parted among four groups. Garments picture justification — a being “made right” so that a relationship with God can be restored.

Scriptures have informed us that resurrections are divided into earthly and spiritual kinds — each one then subsequently being divided: (1) The spiritual resurrection is divided into “the first resurrection” (the Church or 144,000 — Revelation 14:1) and the Great Multitude (Revelation 7). (2) The earthly resurrection is divided into the “better resurrection” of the Ancient Worthies (Hebrews 11) and the general resurrection of the remainder of the race. The total is four — a number consistent with the four rivers out of Eden as well as with the list given to us in Psalm 45.

It is interesting to note that the river which comes from Eden is divided into four “heads” (in the Hebrew). Literally, of course, this means four beginnings. But “head,” when used symbolically, refer to WAYS OF THINKING. For example, the seven heads on the beast of Revelation refer to the seven different governing philosophies (ways of

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thinking) during the history of the seven-headed beast. If this symbolism is of any value in applying it to Eden's rivers, it suggests that mankind's four ultimate destinies will be determined by the ways those of each group thought.

Psalm 45:13-17 gives us clear insight into the four resurrections about which Scripture has taught us. (1) The "King's daughter" of verses 13 & 14 clearly represents the bride of Christ. (2) The "virgins, her companions" of verses 14 & 15 clearly represent the Great Multitude as bridesmaids. (3) Verse 16 describes the faithful ancients who will be "princes in all the earth" — the class described in Hebrews 11. (4) The 17th verse tells us of "all generations" of peoples — the remainder of the human race.

It is wise, when we can, to base our speculations on available information from other textual sources. Psalm 45 just about dictates to us the meaning of the four divisions of beings who will come out of the Edenic origin of them all.

ETYMOLOGIES

It would, indeed, be nice to be able to identify the four classes by the meanings of the river names supplied in Genesis 2. Unfortunately, the etymologies of these names seem quite obscure — even in McClintock & Strong (which usually gives us the best source of word meanings.).

Nevertheless, there are some HINTS in the passage (Genesis 2:11-14) which help us to confirm our speculations. The fourth river is the *Euphrates*. Because this river is used in Revelation 16:12 to represent mankind's withdrawing (drying up) of its support from the old order, it helps us to understand that *Euphrates* DOES represent mankind in general. Thus, the fourth river is also the fourth resurrection of Psalm 45. As long as the Genesis and Psalm orders are parallel, we now have an easier time of defining each "river."

"*Euphrates*," by the way, means "good and abounding." This is in harmony with Jesus' assurance that "God *so loved* the world that He gave his only begotten son" to save it. God sees humanity as "good" — as worth saving. And "abounding" is a word showing that we are dealing with a very large group. The *Euphrates* seems an apt river to represent the human race.

The first river mentioned is the *Pison*. Its etymology is helpful, if not conclusive. It has the meaning of "streaming" — apparently from a Hebrew root implying "increase." Because the Church increases that which God gives it (i.e., it brings forth much fruitage), this name seems appropriate. And, because "gold" is mentioned in the description of this river's boundaries, the implication that this "river" has something to do with the "Divine" is strengthened.

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We now have found the first and last rivers defined. The remaining two are much by deduction.

The second river, if we follow the order of Psalm 45, SHOULD represent the Great Multitude. “*Gihon*” apparently means something like “bursting forth from a fountain.” Jesus, of course, is the fountain for all spirit-begotten ones of the Gospel Age. “Bursting forth” implies a large quantity — hence, a Great Multitude.

Other hints here are obscure. “Ethiopia” and “Cush” are traditionally regions populated by “black” peoples. There MAY BE some connection here to the removal of the black sheep from the flock in Genesis 30:32-40 or to the ill-defined black woman of Song of Solomon 1:5-7 — who admits to not caring for her vineyard, but who is also “lovely.” These things are a bit too obscure for us to use as proofs; but they may, indeed, be evidences.

The third river is the “*Hiddekel*.” The only remaining group for it to represent (by deduction) is the Ancient Worthies. The etymology is too obscure to be helpful. It implies “rapidity” and “to be sharp.” And it is associated with Assyria — a land which prophetically is the opposite of Egypt (Christendom) and antagonistic to Israel. If this antagonism would represent the antagonism which the Ancient Worthies had against the practices of Israel, the symbolism would be helpful. The Ancient Worthies are all too early to be associated with Christendom, and they were, indeed, the antagonists of Israel’s faults.

As far as their “rapidity” and “arrow-like sharpness” are concerned, we would likely have no problem speculating on how to apply those characteristics to this class.

SUMMARY

While we are, indeed, *guessing* at the meanings of the four rivers emanating from Eden, we can feel comfortable that they DO have meaning or would not be mentioned. Therefore, our speculations are warranted, and basing them on Psalm 45 at least gives us Scriptural basis for our conclusions. Our knowledge of four kinds of resurrections adds to whatever confidence we might lack. As we continue to meditate on this, the Lord will likely provide firmer evidences for our edification.
