

Ibn Ezra's Interpretation of the Garden of Eden: Reality, Allegory, or a Combination of the Two?

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Chapters two and three of Genesis deal with the Garden of Eden. They describe the Garden, the creation of Adam and Eve, their sin and their expulsion from the Garden. Abraham Ibn Ezra ("I.E.") concludes his explanation of the Biblical account of the Garden of Eden with the following comments:

Note, whatever we find recorded in Scripture is true. There is no doubt that it happened exactly as described in Scripture. Nevertheless, it also has a secret meaning. It alludes to the following:

From the light of the Intellect came desire. From the second [came] that which ascends above. For the movement of desire is in front. The leaves from the fig tree also prove this. The third is called "the test." For at first there is [a] potentiality that is not actualized.

The one who understands this secret will understand the meaning of the river that divided into four parts.

This is the secret of the Garden of Eden and the garments of skin.

This secret also teaches that man has the potential to live forever.

The intelligent will understand that this is the ultimate purpose of man's [life on earth].¹

¹ See I.E. to Gen. 3:24: ודע כי כל מה שמצאנו כתוב הוא אמת. וכן היה ואין בו ספק, ויש לו סוד, כי מאור השכל יצא החפץ, ומהשני העולה למעלה, כי תנועות החפץ לפנים היא גם

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Ibn Ezra's comments are extremely hard to fathom. The commentaries differ greatly in their attempt to decode them.

For example, Ibn Ezra reads: מאור השכל יצא החפץ. We have rendered this, "From the light of the Intellect came desire." Others render, "From the light of a [heavenly] intelligence came forth will."² Or, "From the sphere of the intellect came forth man."³ Or, "From the sphere of the intellect came forth the [other heavenly] spheres."⁴

Rabbi Isaac Meijler, the author of *Ezra Lehaviv*, threw up his hands and declared that it is impossible to decipher Ibn Ezra's secret interpretation of the Garden of Eden. He believes that it is better to leave things as they are, rather than exert oneself in deciphering that which cannot be unraveled.⁵

While the details of Ibn Ezra's comments are hard to untangle, the general thrust of his interpretation seems to be clear.⁶ According to Ibn Ezra, the story of the Garden of Eden deals with the purpose of life, that is, it is concerned with living a life that results in the immortality of the soul.⁷

Scripture states that G-d created man out of the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life.⁸ According to Ibn Ezra, the breath of life refers to the soul.⁹ Ibn Ezra's *Yesod Mora* explains that the soul has three powers: *neshamah*, *nefesh*, and *ruach*.¹⁰ He writes:

Three powers are connected to human life. If you wish, you may call them by the following three names: *neshamah*, *nefesh*, and *ruach*.¹¹

עלה תאנה לאות, ונקרא השלישי בשם הבחינה, כי בתחלה יש כח בלי מפעל. והמבין זה הסוד, יבין איך יפרד הנהר. וזה סוד גן עדן, וכתנות העור. גם יורה זה הסוד שיש יכולת באדם שיחיה לעולם. והמשכיל יבין כי זה כל האדם.

² Rabbi Shemuel Tzartzah (14th century), *Mekor Chaim*, in *Margaliyot Tova* (Jerusalem, 5733), Gen. 3:24, p. 11a.

³ Rabbi Yehoshua ben Meir in *Chamishah Kadmonei Mefareshei R' Avraham ibn Ezra*, edited by Chaim Kreisel (Be'er Sheva, 5777), p. 70.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Isaac Meijler, *Ezra Lehaviv* (Lenowitz, 1885), p. 11.

⁶ See Yosef Cohen, *Heguto HaFilosofit shel R' Avraham ibn Ezra* (Israel, 1996), p. 182. See also Nehemiah Sheinfeld, *Daas Ezra* (Jerusalem, 2010), Gen. 3:24, p. 70.

⁷ See I.E. to Gen. 3:24 גם יורה זה הסוד שיש יכולת באדם שיחיה לעולם.

⁸ Genesis 2:7.

⁹ I.E. to Gen. 7:19.

¹⁰ *The Secret of the Torah: A translation of Ibn Ezra's "Yesod Morab Ve'sod Ha-Torah,"* translated and annotated by H. Norman Strickman ("Yesod Mora") (New Jersey, 1995), 7:4, p. 96.

¹¹ Ibid.

Neshamah is the highest-ranking part of the soul, the intellectual part.¹² *Nefesh* is the part that desires food and sex.¹³ *Ruach* is the part which animates man, governs movement, and seeks dominance.¹⁴ According to Ibn Ezra the Tree of Life stands for the intellect, and the Tree of Knowledge for desire. Having stated the above, we can proceed to interpret the earlier noted comments of Ibn Ezra on the Garden of Eden. Ibn Ezra writes:

From the light of the Intellect came desire. From the second [came] that which ascends above, for the movement of desire is in front. The leaves from the fig tree also prove this. The third is called "the test." For at first there is [a] potentiality that is not actualized. (I.E., Genesis 3:24)

"The... intellect" refers to the most important part of the soul, the *neshamah*. Ibn Ezra elsewhere refers to the *neshamah* as man's highest soul, or man's soul from above.¹⁵ It refers to that part of man's soul that comes from the upper world.¹⁶ It is this part of the soul that has the potential for immortality.¹⁷

According to Ibn Ezra in the *Yesod Mora*, "Man's soul... when given by G-d, is like a tablet set before a scribe. When G-d's writing, which consists of the... knowledge of the things made out of the four elements, the knowledge of the spheres, the throne of glory, the secret of the chariot, and the knowledge of the most high, is inscribed on this tablet the soul cleaves to G-d the glorious while it is yet in man and also when its power is removed from the body, which is its place [here on earth]."¹⁸

"The second" refers to the second power of the soul, that is, to desire.

"That which ascends above" refers to the *ruach*, to that part of the soul which "animates man" and governs movement, that is, to the part of the soul which moves a person to satisfy his desires.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. and I.E. to *Kohélet* 7:3. I.E. also notes in the latter that *ruach* is the part of the soul that waxes angry.

¹⁵ I.E. to Gen. 1:26.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Yesod Mora* 10:2.

“From the second [came] that which ascends above” means the second power (desire), gives birth to the third power (*ruach*), the power to satisfy the desires of the soul.

“The third [power, *ruach*] is called the testing ground, for by [it] man is tried,” indicates that man is judged by how he manages his desires.

“For the movement of desire is in front” means man has free will. He can be in control of his actions.¹⁹ The leaves of the fig tree also prove this.²⁰

“For at first there is [a] potentiality that is not actualized” means that intellect and desire are only potential. It is man’s spirit, the *ruach*, that actualizes man’s intelligence and his desires.

Ibn Ezra continues his comments on the Garden of Eden with the following:

The one who understands this secret will understand the meaning of the river that divided into four parts; [that is, the one who understands that the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life have esoteric meaning²¹ will similarly interpret the river that divided into four parts.]²²

Ibn Ezra concludes his comments on the story of the Garden of Eden with the following: “This²³ is the secret of the Garden of Eden and the garments of skin” [that is, the Garden of Eden and the garments of skin are allegories.]

Ibn Ezra continues:

This secret also teaches that man has the potential to live forever, that is, the allegory of the Garden of Eden also teaches that man’s

¹⁹ It is also possible that “for the movement of desire is in front” alludes to man’s sexual organs. Man can control his sexual drive; he need not give in to it. See Asher Weiser, *Pirush HaTorah LeRabbenu Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1976) p. 30.

²⁰ Man can cover or suppress his desires. He need not give in to them.

²¹ A. Weiser, *Peirushei HaTorah LeRabbenu Avraham ibn Ezra* (Jerusalem, 1976), Gen. 3:24, p. 30.

²² The commentaries differ as to how Ibn Ezra interprets “the river that divided into four parts.” The unknown author of the *Avvat Nefesh* claims that the river refers to hylic matter, and the four parts to the four elements. See *Avvat Nefesh* in *Chamishah Kadmonei Mefareshei R’ Avraham ibn Ezra*, edited by Chaim Kreisel (Be’er Sheva, 5777), p. 73.

²³ The above.

soul can attain immortality. The intelligent will understand that this [i.e., attaining eternal life] is the ultimate purpose of man's life on earth.²⁴

If a person eats from the Tree of Life—that is, if he develops his intelligence—he achieves immortality. On the other hand, if a human being eats from the Tree of the Knowledge of good and bad—that is, if he indulges himself in satisfying the pleasures of the flesh—he will cease to exist when he dies.²⁵ Hence, “a person should not occupy himself with the vanities of the world.”²⁶ He should rather devote his life to eating from the tree of life.

Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the Garden of Eden does not contain the concept that Adam's sin had catastrophic consequences. He does not believe that the account of the Garden of Eden teaches that Adam and his descendants were punished with death for Adam's sin. On the contrary, it teaches that mortal man can attain immortality of the soul.

According to Ibn Ezra, corporeal human beings were never immortal. He explicitly states:

Some commentators insist that the verse “For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17) indicates that [corporeal] man was created immortal and that he became mortal as a punishment for his sin...

Now this is absurd. Man and beast both share a common spirit (life force) through which they live and experience sensations in this world. As animals are destined to die, so must man die. The advantage (that man has) over beast lies in the portion from above (the soul) which man has been granted. A Greek physician has proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is impossible for [corporeal] man to live forever.²⁷

Ibn Ezra's esoteric interpretation of the Garden of Eden, being what it is, maintains that the secret explanation of the account of the Garden of Eden does not negate its literal meaning. He makes a similar comment in the *Yesod Mora*. There he writes:

There are... things [in Scripture] that are to be taken literally but also have an esoteric meaning. The account of the Garden of Eden,

²⁴ I.E. to Gen. 3:24.

²⁵ See I.E. to Ps.1:6.

²⁶ Ibid. 7:11.

²⁷ I. E. to Gen. 3:6.

the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Life, the cherubim, and other similar things are examples.²⁸

Likewise, in his introduction to his commentary to the Torah, Ibn Ezra notes that there is “a secret meaning to the Tree of Life.” However, he then goes on to say that the Tree of Life existed in reality.²⁹

Some commentaries take Ibn Ezra at his word.³⁰ Others do not.³¹ Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel, a distinguished Jewish thinker and Bible commentator, was one of the latter. Abarbanel alleges that Ibn Ezra’s assertion that the story of the Garden of Eden is not only an allegory, but is also to be taken literally, is a smokescreen for Ibn Ezra’s true view. Abarbanel contends that Ibn Ezra believes that the story of the Garden of Eden is simply an allegory. Abarbanel writes:

There are among the commentators, those who interpret this chapter in accordance with the plain meaning of the verses. This approach was taken by Rashi and Ramban. Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra also [claims that he] favors this approach. He wrote: “The things described in this portion are to be taken in accordance with their plain meaning.” However, in reality, he does not imagine things to be so, nor does he think so in his heart. We can see that this is so, from his comments and hints later on...³²

Abarbanel accuses Ibn Ezra of acting like a non-kosher animal that has cloven hoofs and displays them in an effort to deceive people into believing that it is kosher.³³ In other words, Abarbanel accuses Ibn Ezra of concealing his “non-kosher” interpretation behind a facade of piety; for Abarbanel maintains that in reality, Ibn Ezra believes that the story of the Garden of Eden is an allegory.

According to Abarbanel, we can ascertain Ibn Ezra’s true belief regarding the Garden of Eden “from his comments and hints.”

To what hints is Abarbanel referring? It appears that Abarbanel believes that when Ibn Ezra puts forward an interpretation and then says

²⁸ *Yesod Mora* 7:11; p. 109.

²⁹ I.E.’s introduction to the Torah; third way in which Torah is interpreted.

³⁰ Rabbi Joseph ben Eliezer Tov Elam HaSefardi (14th century), “Ohel Yosef” in *Margaliyot Tova* (Jerusalem, 5733), p. 85.

³¹ Rabbi Shemuel Tzartzah (14th century), “Mekor Chaim,” in *Margaliyot Tova* (Jerusalem, 5733), Gen. 3:1.

³² *Abarbanel’s Commentary to the Torah* (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 85 (comment to Genesis 2:4).

³³ והנה הראב"ע עם היותו פושט טלפיו בענין הנה דעתו באמת כפי רמיוותיו. Abarbanel’s *Commentary to the Torah* (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 115 (Genesis 3:22).

that the verse “has” or “also has” a *sod* (a secret meaning), Ibn Ezra is hinting that he believes that the secret meaning is the true meaning of the verse. The alternate meaning is offered as a mask to hide his true beliefs. For example, Genesis 2:8 reads “And the Lord G-d planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there He put the man whom he formed.” Ibn Ezra comments:

There is a secret meaning as to why the definite article has been placed in front of the word Adam... It is also possible that the definite article is placed before Adam because the word Adam is derived from the word used for ground (*adamah*). Hence, the name Adam may be a proper name or an adjective.³⁴

According to Ibn Ezra's first explanation, the word Adam is a proper noun. A proper noun does not have a definite article placed in front of it. Thus, Scripture treats “Adam” as a collective noun and not a proper noun. Hence, Adam stands for mankind. Therefore, the real or secret meaning of Gen. 2:8 is, G-d placed mankind in the Garden. This indicates that the story is an allegory.

According to Ibn Ezra's second interpretation Adam in our verse is not a proper noun. It is an adjective meaning “the being created from the ground.” Hence, a definite article may be prefixed to it. This interpretation renders Gen. 2:8 as follows: “And the Lord G-d planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there He put the being whom He had formed from the ground.” Abarbanel comments:

Ibn Ezra stirred the world by... saying... the word “Adam” contains a secret. By this he means that a proper noun does not have a definite article placed in front of it. [For example] one does not say *haAvraham* [the Abraham] or *haYitzchak* (the Isaac). It is therefore fitting that we should always interpret Adam in this section as referring to the specie. Scripture thus speaks of the kind and not of the first human being who was called Adam.³⁵

Another example is found in Genesis 12:6:

And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Shechem, unto the terebinth of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land.

Ibn Ezra comments:

³⁴ I.E. Gen. 2:8.

³⁵ Abarbanel's *Commentary to the Torah* (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 91 (comment to Genesis 2:4).

It is possible that the Canaanites seized the land of Canaan from some other tribe [at that time].³⁶ Should this interpretation be incorrect, then there is a secret meaning (*sod*) to the text. Let the one who understands it remain silent.³⁷

“Let the one who understand it remain silent” indicates that the secret meaning of the verse is its true meaning. However, it should not be publicly divulged. The secret that Ibn Ezra alludes to is, “And the Canaanite was then in the land” which indicates that when “And the Canaanite was then in the land” was written, the Canaanites were no longer in the land. In other words, “And the Canaanite was then in the land” is a post Mosaic gloss.³⁸

In addition to the “hint” from Gen. 2:8, there is another source for ascertaining Ibn Ezra’s true belief regarding the Garden of Eden.

Ibn Ezra wrote two commentaries to the Torah, a long commentary and a short one. The short commentary survives in toto. Its commentary to Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, plus the long commentary on Exodus, make up the standard printed commentaries of Ibn Ezra to the Torah. The long commentary to Genesis remains only in fragments and has been published along with the short commentary in various editions of Ibn Ezra’s commentary to the Pentateuch. It is not certain whether Ibn Ezra also wrote long commentaries to Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is quite possible that Ibn Ezra intended to write long commentaries to these books but for one reason or another was not able to follow through. There are also those who believe that Ibn Ezra first wrote the long commentary and then abridged it. Be that as it may, the long commentary to Genesis survives only in fragments.

In his long commentary to Genesis 3:21, Ibn Ezra quotes Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol’s allegorical interpretation of the Garden of Eden.³⁹ He praises Ibn Gabirol’s interpretation and says it is the best explanation of this narrative. Ibn Ezra writes:

³⁶ This was a noteworthy event. Hence Scripture mentions it (Weiser).

³⁷ I.E. to Gen. 12:6.

³⁸ A. Weiser, *Peirushei HaTorah LeRabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Jerusalem, 1976), Gen. 12:6, p. 51, note 11. In his commentary to Deuteronomy 1:1, Ibn Ezra classifies “and the Canaanite was then in the land” along with the last twelve verses of the Bible which he believes are post Mosaic. For a very differing opinion see Nehemiah Sheinfeld, *Daat Ezra* (Jerusalem, 2010), Gen.12:6, p. 170, note 13.

³⁹ See “*HaPeirusb HaAlegori-Filosofi shel R’ Shlomo ibn Gabirol*” in David Kaufman, *Mehkarim B’sifrut HaIvrit shel Yemei HaBeinayim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5722).

Now I will reveal to you via hints the secret of the Garden and the rivers. I did not find this secret discussed by anyone aside from Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol, for he was a very great expert in the secret of the soul.⁴⁰

Ibn Ezra quotes Ibn Gabirol as interpreting the story of the Garden of Eden as referring to the Upper World (eden) and the lower world (the trees in the garden); the three parts of the human soul, that is, wisdom (the naming of the animals), a life force (Eve), and desire (the snake). It also refers to hylic matter (the river in the Garden); the four basic elements (the four parts of the river into which the river in the Garden divides); sexual desire (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil); the task of man in this world (man must toil for his existence); knowledge of the most high; and immortality (the tree of life).⁴¹

As noted above, Ibn Ezra's quote of Ibn Gabirol's interpretation of the Garden of Eden starts with "Now I reveal to you via hints the secret of the Garden and the rivers. I did not find this secret discussed by anyone aside from Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, for he was a very great expert in the secret of the soul."

It does not read: "Note, the story of the garden of Eden is to be interpreted literally. There is no doubt that it happened exactly as described in Scripture. Nevertheless, it also has a secret meaning. I reveal it to you via hints. I did not find this secret discussed by anyone aside from Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, for he was very great expert in the secret of the soul."

Ibn Ezra's quote of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol's allegoric interpretation of the Garden of Eden without qualification, indicates that Ibn Ezra did not believe that the narrative of the Garden of Eden is to be taken literally.

Furthermore, Numbers 22: 28–30 speaks of Bilam's talking ass. Ibn Ezra comments that "the rationalists" gave a non-literal interpretation for the aforementioned. He adds that Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol and Rabbi Saadiah Gaon were among the latter.⁴²

After quoting the opinion of Rabbi Saadiah Gaon and Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra offers his own opinion:

⁴⁰ I.E.'s *Long Commentary* to Gen. 3:21.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² I.E. to Num. 22:28.

The correct interpretation is that the ass spoke. If you understand the secret of the angels [visiting] Abraham and the secret of Jacob [wrestling with an angel] then you will understand the truth.⁴³

What does Ibn Ezra mean by “If you understand the secret of the angels [visiting] Abraham and the secret of Jacob [wrestling with an angel] then you will understand the truth”?

The answer is found in Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides believes that the narrative describing angels visiting Abraham⁴⁴ and of Jacob’s wrestling with an angel⁴⁵ took place in a vision.⁴⁶ Ibn Ezra’s statement “If you understand the secret of the angels [visiting] Abraham and the secret of Jacob [wrestling with an angel] then you will understand the truth,” seems to indicate that Ibn Ezra interpreted these accounts the way Maimonides did.⁴⁷ In other words despite his assertion that Bilam’s ass really spoke, Ibn Ezra actually believed that the account of Bilam’s talking ass is not to be taken literally.

As is well known, a talking serpent plays a key role in the account of the Garden of Eden. Ibn Ezra cites a number of interpretations regarding the speaking serpent. He notes that Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol and Rabbi Saadiah Gaon did not take the account of the talking snake literally.⁴⁸ He then writes:

It appears to me that we are to interpret the account of the serpent literally. The serpent spoke and walked in an upright position. The One who gave intelligence to man also gave it to the serpent.

This comment minus the statement “If you understand the secret of the angels [visiting] Abraham and the secret of Jacob [wrestling with an angel] then you will understand the truth,” is very similar to Ibn Ezra’s comment to Numbers 22:28–30. It would thus appear that this comment is additional proof that Ibn Ezra did not take the account of the Garden of Eden literally. However, since I.E. leaves out the statement “If you understand the secret of the angels [visiting] Abraham and the secret of Jacob [wrestling with an angel] then you will understand the

⁴³ I.E. to Num. 22:28.

⁴⁴ Gen. 18:1–22.

⁴⁵ Gen. 32:25–31.

⁴⁶ *Guide for the Perplexed* 1; 4; 2; 42.

⁴⁷ This is not to imply that Ibn Ezra took this from Maimonides, for Maimonides makes this point in his *Guide for the Perplexed* which was composed long after Ibn Ezra died.


⁴⁸ In Gen. 3:1 I.E. notes that Rabbi Saadiah believes that an angel spoke for the donkey.

truth,” one can argue, if one wishes, that this comment is to be taken at face value.

Conclusion

There is substantial evidence to support Abarbanel's assertion that Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra did not really believe that the Torah's account of the Garden of Eden is to be taken in accordance with its plain meaning, even though he claims that it should.

The question arises: Can the same be said of other instances in Scripture where Ibn Ezra quotes a controversial novel interpretation, and then rejects it?⁴⁹

Each case must be examined on its own merit. Unless there is substantial literary evidence that Ibn Ezra was concealing his true belief, as in the case of the Garden of Eden, or Bilam's ass, Ibn Ezra should be taken at his word. Otherwise, one can find whatever one wants to in Ibn Ezra.⁵⁰ Spinoza's reading of Ibn Ezra is an example of the latter. But that is a different story. 

⁴⁹ I.E.'s comments to Gen. 36:31.

⁵⁰ See “Avraham ibn Ezra: HaMefarsh SheHayah LeMefurash” in *HaMikra Bereiy Mefarshav* (Jerusalem, 1994), 401–402.