

A major issue that the medieval Biblical commentators dealt with was allegorizing of the text. The limits imposed on such interpretations, as well as the necessity for said interpretations, was often a subject of debate. One of the best examples of where such an issue is thoroughly dealt with is the Parshah of the Garden of Eden. This excerpt raises many questions, and indeed seems to contain many elements that, if not imply allegory, certainly fit well with it. This article will attempt to examine how these commentators dealt with these issues, and the conclusions that they came to.

Much of the parshah seems ripe for deeper meaning, specifically the two trees in the garden, the description given of the four rivers, and above all the incident with the snake. Not only do these elements contain difficulties with a simple, literal read, they also seem to fit well with allegory. Indeed, the story of man in the garden contains more fantastical elements than any story later on in the Torah (even including the Tower of Babel and the Great Flood). In fact, that the story has a profound and deep meaning beneath the surface seems to be universally agreed upon (although what that meaning actually is has been thoroughly debated). As Nechama Leibowitz<sup>1</sup> put it, even those who tend to reject allegory as a means of interpretation agree here that it is the hidden, allegorical meaning of the story that we must seek.

Not only is the idea of Gan Eden representing a metaphysical heaven in much of Jewish culture, this distinction has its basis in many Midrashic sources. The Talmud<sup>2</sup> cites a Baraita that lists Gan Eden as one of seven things created before the creation of the world. This is based on the word “mi`Kedem” which can mean both “in the east” and “from before.”<sup>3</sup> The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan explicitly translates “mi`Kedem” as “prior to the creation of the world.”<sup>4</sup> The simple read of this indeed necessitates the garden to be referring to some metaphysical plane.<sup>5</sup> Other Midrashim indicate this as well<sup>6</sup>. The question then arises: Is the garden a physical place as well? This is the backdrop upon which the Rishonim found themselves.

The Rishonim were certainly aware that due to the fantastical narrative, combined with the seemingly accepted position that the Garden can refer to a metaphysical place, the possibility of dismissing the whole parshah as a metaphysical truth rather than a physical one was certainly present. That is most likely why many of them explicate that Gan Eden is indeed a real place, so as to prevent this

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<sup>1</sup> Bereishit Ch. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Pesachim 54a, Nedarim 39b.

<sup>3</sup> A possible etymological link is the rising of the sun in the east, i.e. it's prior position is always eastward.” Another possibility comes from Job 23:8-9, where the compass directions are referred to as Kedem, Achor, Simol, and Yamin. Apparently when describing directions, the orientation would be east, not our modern orientation of north, thus Kedem, lit. before or in front of, represents east. See Rashi ad loc.

<sup>4</sup> See Bereishit Rabbah 15 where R' Shmuel bar Nachman explicitly rejects this view, explaining instead that the verse means before the creation of man. Also see Onkeles who translates “mi`Kedem” as before, but is ambiguous as to which of these two views he ascribes too. Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam associates Onkeles with the opinion in Bereishit Rabbah.

<sup>5</sup> See Ran in Nedarim ad loc. who interprets the passage differently, arguing that the Talmud means not that these things were created first, but that they were considered for creation first, because the word could not exist without them. According to this understanding the Talmud and the Midrash could be referring to a physical place. See the Maharsha ad. loc. who disputes the Ran, saying the Talmud here should indeed be taken at face value.

<sup>6</sup> See Shir Hashirim Zuta 1:4 as quoted by Ramban Genesis 3:22. See further Seder Gan Eden, a much later Midrashic source.

possibility from being accepted.<sup>7</sup> This is said by the Ibn Ezra<sup>8</sup>, Ramban<sup>9</sup>, as well as members of the more rationalistic school like Rambam<sup>10</sup> Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam<sup>11</sup> and Ralbag<sup>12</sup>. All who endeavor to understand the identities of the rivers based on geological arguments implicitly view the garden as a place on earth as well.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it is most likely the rivers themselves that led to such a consensus. The Torah mentioning well known rivers by name does signify a real location on this earth.<sup>14</sup>

Based on the above argument, it can be assumed that those who believed the garden to be a physical place understood the rivers as such.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the question arose of how to deal with the geological difficulties therein.

The only readily identifiable rivers are the latter two, “Perat” and “Chidekel”, the Euphrates and Tigris respectively. Rabbeinu Saadiah, as well as Rashi, Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam<sup>16</sup>, and Ramban<sup>17</sup>, all identify “Pishon” as the Nile. This presents obvious geological difficulties. The Ramban defends the position, by claiming that many rivers go underground for quite a bit before resurfacing, and such a phenomenon can rectify the Nile’s known source with that of the Euphrates and Tigris.<sup>18</sup> The Ibn Ezra takes issue with this opinion<sup>19</sup>, pointing out that, being that the Nile flows north, it would have to

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<sup>7</sup> Compare this with other passages, such as Noah’s Flood, where the Rishonim don’t feel a need to explicate that this was a real event. Clearly, even those who think the story of the Garden did take place as physically described understand that the passage has more allegorical leanings than comparable passages in Genesis.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 3:23. This is the simple read, further collaborated by the Ibn Ezra’s taking pains to understand the exact locations and names of the four rivers, use of geological refutations of other opinions, and assertion that Gan Eden is beneath the Equator, in 2:11. See later in this paper the Abarbanel who reads this Ibn Ezra very differently, based on the Sod (secret) he writes following his assertion of literal truth.

<sup>9</sup> 3:22

<sup>10</sup> In Perush Hamishnayot, introduction to Chelek. See further in this paper as to the relevance of this quote, said in a totally different context, towards how the Rambam read Genesis

<sup>11</sup> 2:8. His position is somewhat complicated by the inclusion of the philosophical idea of Crates of Thebes regarding the division of the earth into four divisions (not unlike the modern conception of continents). He says Gan Eden is not in the quarter of settlement, and regarding the quarter in which it is, not much knowledge has reached us.

<sup>12</sup> 2:9

<sup>13</sup> This includes Radak. Seemingly, those who identify names of the more obscure rivers as rivers known to us also ascribe to this view, adding Rashi and Rabbeinu Saadiah Gaon to our list.

<sup>14</sup> See Bitorato Shel Rav Gedaliah Bereishit 2:8 by R’ Gedaliah Nadel, a major work by a bona fide Torah master who reconciles Bereishit with modern scientific theories. Although he is very open to allegory, as will be seen later in this paper, he thinks the rivers are clear evidence that the Garden itself cannot be anything but literal. Ramban 3:22 seems as well to be making a more concise version of this argument. See Ralbag 2:9 who also seems to understand the rivers as both physical and allegorical.

<sup>15</sup> Although it must be noted, there are several allegorical interpretations of the rivers, such as representing the four kingdoms (Midrash Rabbah), or according to Ramban, four heavenly encampments, and the rivers themselves are given etymological associations (see Rashi and Bereishit Rabbah) pertaining to the nature of their water which no doubt correspond with the above analogies. None-the-less, it seems near impossible to read Gan Eden as a real place and the rivers as pure allegory with no physical manifestation.

<sup>16</sup> Both on the spot at 2:11.

<sup>17</sup> 3:22

<sup>18</sup> For a more modern scholar to take that approach, see Rabbi S. Hirsch in his commentary on the Torah ad. loc., as well as his argument as to why he favors this approach over the next one we will give: the implication of “Rashim” as distinct rivers as opposed to smaller tributaries. Targums Onkeles and Pseudo-Jonathan renders them as complete rivers as well. The Netziv, in Haamek Davar 2:10, agrees to the underground theory as well.

<sup>19</sup> Not with the Ramban’s answer per-se, but presumably his arguments apply to that Ramban as well.

double up on itself and flow south-west for it to share a common origin with the other rivers.<sup>20</sup> He further notes that there is no evidence that this river is the Nile at all, and posits that Rabbeinu Saadiah Gaon, seemingly the source of the river being the Nile, did not receive such a tradition, but felt a need to translate the river as the Nile in his Arabic translation so as not to defame Hashem's name by admitting to the Arabic public he did not know the meaning of a word. Rav Nadel<sup>21</sup> takes this to its logical conclusion- the other rivers<sup>22</sup> were small tributaries of the Tigris and Euphrates.<sup>23</sup> The Identity of Gichon was subject of debate as well<sup>24</sup> but all approaches raised by Pishon apply equally to it as well.

The physicality of the trees is much less discussed. Only the Ramban explicitly mentions them as having existed although presumably they would be included in Ibn Ezra's blanket statement that everything in this Parshah occurred.<sup>25</sup> However, their juxtaposition in between the mentioning of the Garden and the Rivers<sup>26</sup> is indicative that they are of the same literal nature, thus it is likely that all the above sources did believe in their literal existence. While it is true that many early sources point towards

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<sup>20</sup> This is even more compelling when considering how far south the source of the Nile appears to be.

<sup>21</sup> Bitorato Shel Rav Gedaliah Bereishit 2:8

<sup>22</sup> He is not quoting this Ibn Ezra, and indeed he differs. Whereas the Ibn Ezra thought he had a satisfactory river for "Gichon", based on a verse in Melachim, Rav Nadel extends the tributary theory to Gichon as well, rejecting the Ramban's idea of underground rivers on it being illogical.

<sup>23</sup> At first glance, the Ibn Ezra appears difficult. He asserts here as well that the Garden is beneath the equator, an opinion shared by Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam. This seems doubly problematic. On the one hand the equator does not hit any land mass in Asia at all. Furthermore, the Euphrates and Tigris flow southward, meaning their origin is up in the north. It is likely that Ibn Ezra when referencing the "Kav Hashava" did not mean the equator proper for a number of reasons. First of all, he describes the Kav Hashava (lit. line of Equality) as a place where day and night are equal all year. While this is only precisely true at the equator (even there due to some phenomena pertaining to sunlight it is very slightly off), almost anywhere in the tropical zone, day and night will vary very slightly. This understanding is backed by the Ibn Ezra himself, who writes of Gan Eden as being *beneath* the Kav Hashava. Seemingly he does not refer to the exact Equator, but rather a portion of the earth where beneath it, day and night are more or less equal. A candidate for this location would be the Tropic of Cancer, which runs through much of modern day Saudi Arabia and India. As to answer the second question, we must critically examine the verses in question. Ibn Ezra said that *the Garden of Eden* was beneath the Kav Hashava, not Eden itself. The pesukim write that the rivers emerged from Eden to water the Garden. From here, the Talmud in Berachot 34b and Sanhedrin 99a deduces that Eden and the Garden of Eden were distinct places. Similarly, the Talmud writes in Taanit 10a as well as in Yerushalmi Berachot 1:5 that the Garden is 1/60 of Eden. Bereishit Rabbah ch. 15 records a debate as to which was larger, Gan or Eden. Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam also notes that Eden according to the simple read, is larger than the Garden itself. Thus, the Garden being beneath Kav Hashava is no contradiction to the four rivers originating in the north. Modern day Euphrates flows south up until approx. 30 degrees north of the Equator, roughly equal to Eilat, so this still poses a difficulty. Furthermore, the rivers clearly split after flowing through the Garden, and yet the Tigris and Euphrates split even further north than that, at about 38.7 degrees north, above any point in Biblical Israel. The Ibn Ezra hardly could have called that Kav Hashava under any definition, and so he remains difficult. This is made all the more perplexing by the Ibn Ezra's apparent awareness of these river's locales.

<sup>24</sup> See Radak 2:13, Ibn Ezra 2:11

<sup>25</sup> Ramban 3:22 and ibn Ezra 3:23

<sup>26</sup> As opposed to another natural possibility, mentioning the rivers first, and then having the trees only come into play perhaps after the formation of Woman, as the primary role of the trees comes with the story of the snake. Such a juxtaposition would have implied that the trees shared the same nature as the serpent, a hotly contested issue.

the trees having a metaphysical meaning, such as Bereishit Rabbah<sup>27</sup> and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan<sup>28</sup> ascribing to it astronomical dimensions, there are also sources in Chazal to indicate a literal meaning as well, such as the same Bereishit Rabbah, where there is a debate as to what type of tree it was, with various opinions being wheat, grapes, figs and Esrog. The Talmud<sup>29</sup> relates a similar debate, as does Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer<sup>30</sup>. Thus, it would seem the consensus here as well is that there is a dual meaning, but the literal item did indeed exist.

The most difficult issue to deal with, without a doubt, is that of the story of the serpent. Aside from the various theological issues raised by what man's sin was, as well as what changed about the nature of man, the presence of the snake raises technical questions that make a literal read difficult. Beasts are unable to speak, and even if they could speak, they do not possess enough intelligence to communicate on a sophisticated level. Once again, the Rishonim were given some guidance from the Midrashim, where there seems to be two approaches. On the one hand, we have Avot D'Rabi Natan<sup>31</sup> which lists six aliases for "Nachash", one of which (Tziphoni) coincides with one of the Aliases given to the evil inclination in Sukkah.<sup>32</sup> Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer<sup>33</sup> relates that the snake's actions were not of its own accord, but the will of Samael, a synonym for the Satan<sup>34</sup>. The snake was "like a camel" and Samael its rider. On the other hand, we have the Midrash Rabbah<sup>35</sup> asserting that the snake used to stand like a reed, and it had legs. The Zohar<sup>36</sup> records both approaches, citing a debate as to whether the snake was the Evil Inclination, or a literal snake, concluding it was both, with Satan appearing as a snake. The Rishonim gave many novel explanations of the snake, as will be seen, yet the heart of the debate, whether the story has a dual layer, or is purely metaphorical, can already be seen from the Midrashim.<sup>37</sup>

The first commentator to deal extensively with this issue was Rabbeinu Saadiah Gaon. He is cited by Ibn Ezra and Radak<sup>38</sup> as understanding that an angel spoke on behalf of the snake<sup>39</sup>. He, as many others do, equates the speech of the snake with that of Balaam's donkey. The Radak raises many issues with this opinion. He asks why, then, was the snake cursed, why would an angel of the Lord seduce a human<sup>40</sup>, and why was the snake then referred to as wise if it did not speak, and indeed why was the

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<sup>27</sup> Ch. 15.

<sup>28</sup> 2:9

<sup>29</sup> Berachot 40a, Sanhedrin 70a

<sup>30</sup> Here, only one opinion cited says it was a real tree, the other says it was man himself, obviously supporting the idea of allegory. Once more, the path of the majority of Rishonim that there are two levels going on here is well founded in earlier sources.

<sup>31</sup> Ch. 39.

<sup>32</sup> 52a.

<sup>33</sup> Ch. 13.

<sup>34</sup> See Bava Batra 16a for more Synonyms for Satan. Although not listed here, Samael is evidently the same being/impulse as well, as proven by the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim Chelek 2 Ch. 30.

<sup>35</sup> Ch. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Chelek 1, 35b. The existence of the Zohar at the time of the Rishonim and availability to Rishonim assuming its existence is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>37</sup> It seems unlikely to think the story is purely a historical account with no deep allegorical meaning.

<sup>38</sup> 3:1

<sup>39</sup> See Abarbanel Bereishit Ch. 2, who seems to understand R' Saadiah as saying that the Satan appeared as a snake, as opposed to spoke on behalf of a real snake. This is not the simple read of the words quoted by Radak and Ibn Ezra.

<sup>40</sup> Or if the angel was helping along the snake, why would an angel be an accomplice in such seduction?

snake part of this story at all.<sup>41</sup> The Radak himself, in developing his own understanding, answers some of the issues raised on R' Saadiah. It could be that the snake desired to speak the words that it did, but was unable to without the aid of an angel, and that is why it was punished. The snake, then, would have been wise enough to have such abstract desires<sup>42</sup>. This would answer all but one of his questions on R' Saadiah (that of the angel enabling man to sin).<sup>43</sup> Thus Radak maintains that the snake, as well as the donkey, spoke through an outright miracle, although the verse here does not say Hashem opened the snake's mouth as it did by the donkey.<sup>44</sup>

The Ibn Ezra cites other opinions along with R' Saadiah. He quotes one opinion that Chava understood the language of snakes, and when it says that the snake spoke, it meant through gesturing (i.e. its mode of speech). He also cites the view that the snake was Satan, but mocks it, saying that anyone of that school has not read the end of the parshah, where the snake is cursed. The curse of eating dust and crawling on the belly hardly are applicable to the Satan. Ibn Ezra favors the view that the matter is as it literally appears, the snake stood erect, and the same Hashem who gave man intelligence gave the snake intelligence. Although this seems difficult, and the Radak<sup>45</sup> rejects this, based on the theological problem of the snake being intelligent and speaking, a distinction normally viewed as being man's alone, as he alone was created in the Tzelem Elohim, Ibn Ezra maintains that this is what the verse means when it says the snake was wise. Wise- but not so wise as man. This Ibn Ezra can be understood in one of two ways. Either, prior to the curse, the species known as snake was of a different nature, and the curse lowered it to its current degraded stature<sup>46</sup>, or that Hashem, in His wisdom, saw fit to create a special serpent, one of a much higher caliber than its counterparts, and gave it special

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<sup>41</sup> His questions, esp. the final two, imply he did not understand R' Saadiah like Abarbanel. If the snake was really an angel, calling the snake wise would be a reference to the angel, not a physical snake, and a physical snake (that is not really Satan taking on a physical form) was never referenced in our Parshah. The curse would have been upon Satan, not a real "normal" snake.

<sup>42</sup> Such wisdom may have come, as suggested by Chizkuni ad. loc. from the snake partaking from the tree of knowledge, thus "the snake was wiser than all beasts of the field."

<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the reason Radak did not give these answers for R' Saadiah is because of the full quote of what R' Saadiah said, not brought down by the Radak but by the Ibn Ezra. There, R' Saadia asserts that animals contain neither speech nor intellect, thus it is unlikely R' Saadiah would have agreed with the answers Radak posed to these difficulties in his peshat. The answers to these questions given by Abarbanel which will be quoted later fit the spirit of R' Saadiah much better.

<sup>44</sup> This is distinct from the other opinion in that an angel was not involved. Also, it is unclear when we speak of an angel speaking if that means actual speech or some metaphysical form of communication. Here, it seems clear that if the snake spoke through a miracle, it would be actual speech. Yet although the question of the Radak on R' Saadiah is answered, it begs the question, how could Hashem get involved to seduce man? An obvious answer is that all comes from Hashem, and he is entitled to test man as he sees fit. What is unclear is why the Radak feels more comfortable saying this in application to Hashem himself, than he does to an angel of the Lord, especially when Chazal say that the evil inclination is Satan, clearly establishing that there is an idea of angelic beings leading man astray. In any case, the distinction between a direct act of Hashem versus an angelic action is fine enough to require further clarifications. Such a position perhaps arises from his conceptualization of angelic beings and their purposes, and perhaps his understanding of who or what Samael is. Another possible distinction is that Radak did not view R' Saadiah as saying that Satan spoke on behalf of the snake, but rather, as the Haamek Davar 3:1 learns, that the Mazal (guardian angel) of the snake spoke on its behalf (see Bereishit Rabbah, Ch. 10). Then his issue makes more sense, as this angel would indeed be overstepping its bounds in enabling the snake to speak.

<sup>45</sup> Ad. loc.

<sup>46</sup> Rabbi Dovid Zvi Hoffman in his Perush Al HaTorah Ch. 3 takes this a step further, saying it is logical that in those days all predatory beasts were different, but the Torah only relates the change in nature of the snake.

abilities such as legs, speech, and intelligence, in order to test man. Thus “The snake was wise” is rendered as “became wise.” This latter view actually seems to be what R’ Saadiah Gaon says in his *Perush on the Torah*<sup>47</sup>, contrary to how he is quoted by the Rishonim.

The opinion rejected by the Ibn Ezra, that the snake was Satan, is cited by many. Sforno<sup>48</sup> says this explicitly, mimicking the language of the Talmud in Bava Batra that ascribes aliases to the Satan. The Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim*<sup>49</sup> as well quotes the Pirkei D’Rabi Eliezer as authoritative, and that the Satan was driving the snake. The Ralbag<sup>50</sup> understands the snake as “Koach Hadimyoni”, literally the Imaginative Powers, a part of man’s intellect that can lead him astray.<sup>51</sup>

The question thus arises: Are these allegorical interpretations of the snake meant to be a deeper meaning working in tandem with a literal read, or are indeed the entirety of the episode? Ralbag writes that part of the wisdom of the parable is that its simple understanding is something actually extant. It would seem though, that he only makes this point by reference to Eden, the Garden, and the Rivers, but it would seem he learned the snake is completely allegorical.

The Abarbanel<sup>52</sup> brings down the Ralbag and Rambam as understanding the snake as completely allegorical with no real corresponding physical phenomenon.<sup>53</sup> Fascinatingly, he also ascribes this position to the Ibn Ezra. Although the Ibn Ezra is explicitly against such an approach, mocking it, the Ibn Ezra ends his commentary on the topic<sup>54</sup> with an esoteric Sod (secret), which the Abarbanel takes as meaning that some aspects of the story indeed have no corresponding physical phenomenon and are pure allegory. The Abarbanel goes on a lengthy exploration of the legitimacy of such non-literal interpretations. The danger is evident. The story of the Garden, unlike Job or The Song of Songs, is completely embedded in a larger text. Opening it to allegory begs the question, where does the allegory begin and end? What indicates the allegory, and why can an allegory be made here more so than by Mitzvot? The Abarbanel concludes that even this school did understand the garden, trees, and rivers literally, and only placed the snake in the pure allegory category. Further, this group based this understanding on extensive evidence in Chazal of a non-literal interpretation of this passage.<sup>55</sup> Also there is evidence that distinguished between Genesis 1 and 2, and this school never dreamt of reading Genesis One in such a fashion.<sup>56</sup> His position seems well supported in light of the Ralbag’s explicit admission of this fact, and the Rambam in *Peirush HaMishnah*<sup>57</sup> which says Gan Eden is a place on earth. This

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<sup>47</sup> 3:1. Seems very explicit and hard to reconcile with the quote attributed to him in Ibn Ezra and Radak.

<sup>48</sup> 3:1

<sup>49</sup> Chelek 2 Ch. 30.

<sup>50</sup> 3:1

<sup>51</sup> For our purposes this is synonymous with the evil inclination, although of course the Ralbag is being far more specific than that. He writes that the Power of Awakening (or perhaps the power that awakens would be a better translation) is the Evil inclination, and the Power of Imagination leads it along, explaining it would seem the analogy of Samael riding the snake.

<sup>52</sup> Bereishit Ch. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Perhaps Sforno meant this as well.

<sup>54</sup> 3:23. This is far from the only understanding of the Ibn Ezra’s Sod.

<sup>55</sup> He quotes many sources we quoted, as well as some new ones, notably the saying that all this took place on one day.

<sup>56</sup> See the Abarbanel for all his sources.

<sup>57</sup> Intro. to Perek Chelek.

approach in Rambam seems to be taken by R' Nadel as well<sup>58</sup>. Others understood this Rambam as explaining the allegory, but not claiming that the peshat did not literally happen. This is the view of Rabbi Dovid Zvi Hoffman<sup>59</sup> who distinguishes between Philo, who understood the story as an allegory and nothing more, and the Rambam, who thinks that, although the story is an allegory, the events actually occurred as written. He bases himself on Sefer Halkkarim<sup>60</sup> who writes that there are stories in the Torah, such as Gan Eden, where all wise men agree that, although they hint to deep allegorical meanings, portray events that existed in reality as well, just like we understand Mitzvot are to be acted upon literally, although they also contain deep sublime messages as well.<sup>61</sup>

Another opinion of note is that of the Ramban<sup>62</sup>, yet he too is not entirely clear as to his intent. After asserting that Garden, trees, and rivers are all to be understood literally<sup>63</sup>, although they contain heavenly counterparts, and man sinned with both, Ramban asks two very basic questions. How could Hashem, who is good and bestows good, forbid man to eat a tree described as good to eat? Also, if the snake could once talk, why was the loss of that faculty, surely the most pungent part of its curse, not even mentioned? He answers cryptically: rather all these matters are doubled; the revealed and the sealed contain truth. How does this assertion that there is a dual meaning answer questions pertaining to the literal meaning? R' Daniel Bitton<sup>64</sup> in his explanatory footnotes on the Ramban explains as follows. The Ramban already explained<sup>65</sup> that eating from the tree caused spiritual damage, so it is clear why Hashem forbade man to eat from it, once we understand that the entire Parshah is doubled, and that man could perceive the spiritual truth even from the physical, and understood that although the tree was physically beneficial, it was spiritually deadly. This approach in the Ramban has two problems. One, it is difficult to apply this same explanation to the snake as well. Having spiritual danger can explain why the physical tree was forbidden, but the snake having a double meaning, perhaps being the Satan as well, does not explain at all the level of Peshat.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, a careful read of the Ramban reveals his exact language. He did not say that both levels, the hidden and revealed are true (Hem Emet), but rather *contain* truth (BaHem Emet). The implication he is thus giving from this piece as a whole is that there are

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<sup>58</sup> Bitorato Shel Rav Gedaliah Bereishit 3:1

<sup>59</sup> Bereishit Perek 3. He writes "All the commentaries on Rambam say this", but I am not aware of to whom he refers.

<sup>60</sup> Chelek 3 Ch. 21.

<sup>61</sup> R' Yosef Albo was well aware of Moreh Nevuchim, and it is likely he included the Rambam in his consensus of all wise men. Whether he saw Ralbag is unclear.

<sup>62</sup> 3:22.

<sup>63</sup> With the notable absence of any mention of the snake. It could be he was only listing locations (including the trees) as opposed to 'players' in the story, but it is worthy to mention the omission, especially in light of the latter interpretation this article will give in the Ramban.

<sup>64</sup> In the footnotes at verse 3:22. Published by the Maor Institute.

<sup>65</sup> 2:9

<sup>66</sup> This point is clear, but perhaps requires further clarification to the reader. The first question was asking not about how something literally occurred, but how something literal occurring made logical sense. Thus, explaining that man perceived dual meaning in the tree immediately makes the physical and literal command make sense. Whereas the second question, asking not why but *how* a physical event could have occurred, is not answered in the least by saying it had deeper levels as well. Man perceiving the snake to represent Satan does not in any way explain how the snake spoke. One could say that the snake spoke through the angel, but that is not a dual meaning explaining the peshat, but rather a miraculous occurrence made possibly by the realities present in the deeper meaning. Further saying that the snake did not really speak but man, perceiving deeper levels, communicated with its angel would not be upholding the literal peshat at all.

parts of the story, such as the existence of the trees, the Garden, Man's sin, and the Rivers, that must be taken literally. However, some elements, such as the snake speaking<sup>67</sup>, are illogical and only allegory<sup>68</sup>. Thus, to answer all questions, both levels contain truth, and the picture is not complete with only allegory, nor with only the literal peshat, and indeed there may be places where only an allegory fits.

The Abarbanel<sup>69</sup> touches on this. Although he quotes the Ramban as believing all to be literal, he also writes that both the Ran and the Ramban were silent for most of the Parshah because they were at a loss, being unable to explain the Parshah literally.

The Abarbanel's own peshat is that both the literal and allegorical elements are true. The snake was a regular snake that Chava witnessed eating from the tree without being harmed. She constructed a conversation in her mind between herself and the snake, leading her to sin. The Abarbanel explains that the snake was punished much like the Shor Haniskal, and the Ir Hanidachat, because of its evil associations.<sup>70</sup>

In conclusion, we have seen the various approaches the Rishonim have used to deal with the issues presented in the story of The Garden. It seems that all agreed upon allegorical meaning, and even upon the literal existence of everything save the snake, which was a debate.<sup>71</sup> There were two main approaches to reconcile the location of the rivers with modern Geography, and numerous understandings of the snake and what it literally meant. The consensus is clear: heaven is a place on earth.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Or perhaps its existence. The establishment of a deeper level of meaning can explain how man, perceiving this depth, communicated with the snake's angel, and the snake did indeed not speak, or that the snake did not even exist in the literal sense.

<sup>68</sup> Or perhaps a deeper level of meaning.

<sup>69</sup> Bereishit Perek 2.

<sup>70</sup> As mentioned earlier in a footnote, this fits well with R' Saadiah as quoted by Ibn Ezra.

<sup>71</sup> To be precise it was a debate if it was a debate.

<sup>72</sup> Or perhaps, heaven was a place on earth. Whether or not the Garden exists today is debatable. See R' Nadel, as well as Ralbag, who refers to Eden in the present tense and the Garden in the past tense. The destructive angels placed outside the Garden may be interpreted as symbolic of its physical destruction.