

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 Morah Ve'sod Ha-Torah,"* translated and annotated by H. Norman Strickman ("Yesod Mora") (New Jersey, 1995), 7:4, p. 96.

¹¹ Ibid.