

Palm Trees in Paradise

Victorian Views of the Ancient Near Eastern Landscape

NAOMI F. MILLER



1 "The Saviour Returns to Nazareth." Palm trees add an exotic flavor to an otherwise typical English landscape.

From J. Queen, *Delineations of Sacred Scenes* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, ca. 1827-1853). Reproduced courtesy of Rare Book Dept., Free Library of Philadelphia

The significant origin stories of Western civilization take place in the ancient Near East, a fact that provoked interest in the region long before the many recent crises focused our attention there. Throughout the 19th century, Europeans and Americans imagined this ancient land in painting, drawing, and writing. Little information was available, and these portrayals tended to reflect general artistic and scholarly trends of the time, as well as the experiences of the individual artist.

In the early 19th century, classical and biblical texts were the main sources of information about the ancient Near East. As the century progressed, firsthand travelers' accounts provided new, eye-witness details about a world remote from Europe. Archaeological and epigraphic discoveries also played an increasingly important role in determining how the ancient Near East was portrayed. In the latter part of the century, views of the ancient landscape were based in part on these reports on the land and people of the actual Near East; however, they were also influenced by the Orientalist movement.

A hundred years of research have since expanded our data base and altered our interpretive frameworks; but, like the Victorians of yesterday, we continue to use ancient and historical texts, modern geographical analogies, and archaeological data to create a picture of the ancient landscape.

Early Views of the Near East

It is sobering to realize just how little was known in the 19th century about the ancient civilizations. The first scientific excavations at Near Eastern sites did not begin until the latter half of the century, and the results of this research were not immediately accessible to the public.

2 Map of the Near East, showing places mentioned in the text.

With only meager documentary evidence, contemporary writers were pretty circumspect in their imaginings about the natural environment, in marked contrast to their musings on racial origins and distinctions.

Interest in biblical themes, however, is apparent in 19th century painting and drawing. For example, the Garden of Eden was a common subject for landscape study. Although people did not doubt the accuracy of the geographical description of Eden in the Bible, they projected their own vision of perfection onto it. Thus, an 1832 rendering shows the strong influence that the English landscape garden had on the artist's view of Paradise (Fig. 3). Even Bible stories concerning somewhat more historical events were set in the same type of English garden (Fig. 1).

Compositions from the early 19th century frequently reflect the ideals of contemporary landscape painting, with artfully placed vegetation in the foreground, and diagonal lines leading the eye to the midground and background (cf. Clark 1976). Unfortunately, exotic scenes that follow these Western pictorial conventions are often indistinguishable from English landscapes. One way some artists avoided this problem

was by careful selection of vegetation. For example, an illustration of "The Temptation" (Fig. 4) features the Lebanon cedar, a tree introduced to England in the 17th century but whose Eastern origin was well known.

Plants are sometimes shown in imaginative juxtaposition: Lebanon cedar, a tree of hills and mountains in the Levant, and palms, which grow in more tropical climes, may be shown growing side by side. Even as late as the 1860s, Gustave Doré depicted the exotic East not only with palm trees, but also with what appears to be prickly pear cactus, a New World native that was imported into the Old World long after the biblical events he was illustrating (Fig. 5). Most commonly, however, it is a clump of palm trees that lets the viewer recognize an exotic oriental locale (Fig. 6).

Travelers' Accounts

In the course of the 19th century, interest in and knowledge of the Near East grew. Although Europeans had reported on their travels through the region from the time of Marco Polo (1254?-1324?), the 19th century saw an increase in military,



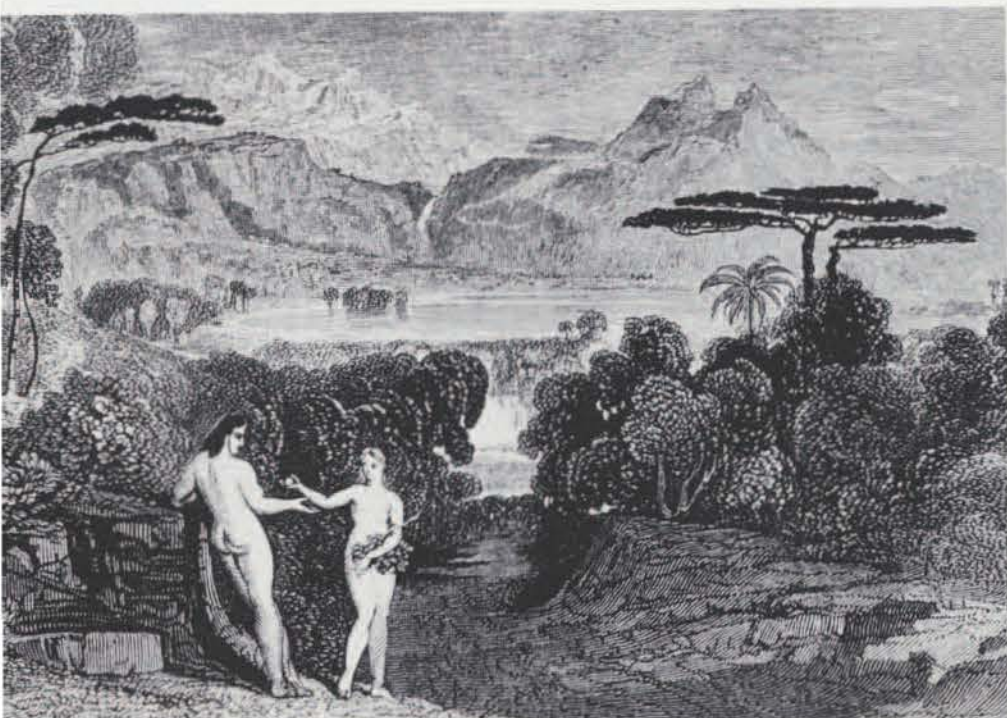


3 "Adam and Eve." Early 19th century illustrations of biblical scenes are frequently set in an idyllic English landscape.
From Mrs. Mary Martha Sherwood (nee Butt), *Scripture Prints* (New York: Pendleton and Hill, 1832), frontispiece

commercial, and scientific contacts. Napoleon and the French were active early on in Egypt and North Africa, and the British, too, eagerly sought power and influence. At first only the intrepid traveled to the Near East, frequently disguised as Arabs, Turks, or Bedouins; by the end of the century, however, Europeans traveling in the area were more common, and tourists were derided for affecting local costume (Thornton 1983).

Nineteenth-century Europeans already had some idea of what to expect from the published reports of previous travelers. Their information about the region as it was in ancient times, however, came primarily from the Bible and classical writers. One can imagine the ironic tone of one traveler who commented, "When we passed that way on our journey from Busrah to Baghdad, the land was flooded by the spring rains, so we saw nothing of the beauties of paradise" (Hume-Griffith 1909; see Fig. 8). This traveler may not have been aware that he was actually passing through what might be better described as a *pre-Edenic* landscape (see box on Garden of Eden).

In report after report, travelers contrast Herodotus's description of Babylonia, whose fertile fields were said to yield 200-fold, with the sorry state of the modern countryside. One visitor considered Syria to be



4 The words accompanying "The Temptation" embody the philosophy of English gardening practices of the late 18th and early 19th century. "The landscape is intended to convey an idea of the earthly paradise which, in the perfection of its beauty, was no doubt a type of the heavenly. Lofty hills are seen in the distance, blending in most agreeable harmony with the minute features of the scene....Nearer, more gentle declivities appear, sloping down into fertile valleys laved by crystal streams...the cedar tree...here stands conspicuous, towering 'in pride of place' above all other trees...."

From J.H. Caunter, *The Picture Bible*, illustrated by J. Martin and R. Westall (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), ill. 2

a country so highly favoured by Heaven, that it unites, by a happy combination of various properties of soil and climate, the advantages of every zone...yet, in every age [it has been] wasted and depopulated by the ravages of conquerors. The very play-ground of ambition. (Conder 1830)

Another scholar wrote:

Babylonia was once the most fertile spot on the face of the earth...but now this whole region is little more than a desert. The yearly incursions of the Arabs compel the inhabitants to seek the protection of the walled towns, whose governors more slowly, but as surely, rob them of their little all. (van Lennep 1875:22)

Many of the European tourists to the Near East, especially those visiting the Holy Land, tried to imagine what life was like in biblical times. Whether to compare or contrast, they interpreted what they saw through their interest in the Bible (Fig. 7):

The lands of the Bible have passed through various vicissitudes, and been overrun and occupied by many strange nations. Yet it is acknowledged that in no other portion of the globe have traditions, customs, and even modes of



5 "Samson Slaying the Lion." The anachronistic prickly pear cactus in this scene evokes desert wilderness.

From G. Doré, *The Holy Bible* (London: Cassell, Peter, and Galpin, 1866). Reproduced courtesy of Rare Book Dept., Free Library of Philadelphia

Where Is the Garden of Eden?

As recorded in Genesis, "And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads" (Gen. 2:10). Some scholars thought the four rivers were scattered from Ethiopia to the Indus, and north to Armenia (Mt. Ararat). But others figured that the four rivers were in lower Mesopotamia. The etymology of the word *Eden* is consistent with a location in lower Mesopotamia, for the Akkadian word *edinu*, derived from *edin* in Sumerian, means plain (Davis and Gehman 1944).

The Sumerian "genesis" story describes how this undifferentiated pre-Edenic world of sky, earth, and the waters became separated:

When heaven had moved away from earth,
And earth had separated from heaven,

And the name of man was fixed;
When the Sky God, An, had carried off the heavens,
And the Air God, Enlil, had carried off the earth,
When the Queen of the Great Below, Ereshkigal,
was given the underworld for her domain.
(Wolkstein and Kramer 1983)

Insofar as Eden has a real world referent, current opinion places it at the head of the Persian Gulf, where its four rivers, listed from east to west, could be the Karun (Pishon), Karkheh (Gihon), Tigris, and Euphrates (Fig. 2). This marshy region where the separation between solid land and water is blurred could have been the model for the Sumerian vision of undifferentiated Creation.



6 One difference between "The Judgment of Adam and Eve" and the 1832 "Adam and Eve" in Figure 3 is the addition here of palm trees to signify a Near Eastern locale. While many areas of the Near East do have a lot of palm trees (see cover, this issue), in other regions one could and can travel many days before setting sight on a single one.

From J.H. Caunter, *The Picture Bible*, illustrated by J. Martin and R. Westall (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), ill. 3 (detail)



7 European culture has long been fascinated by the Near East as the source of its moral and historical traditions.

From Gage 1871, title page

thought, been preserved with greater fidelity and tenacity. This is the uniform testimony of all who visit the East...The remarkable reproduction of Biblical life in the East of our day is an unanswerable argument for the authenticity of the sacred writings. (van Lennep 1875:5)

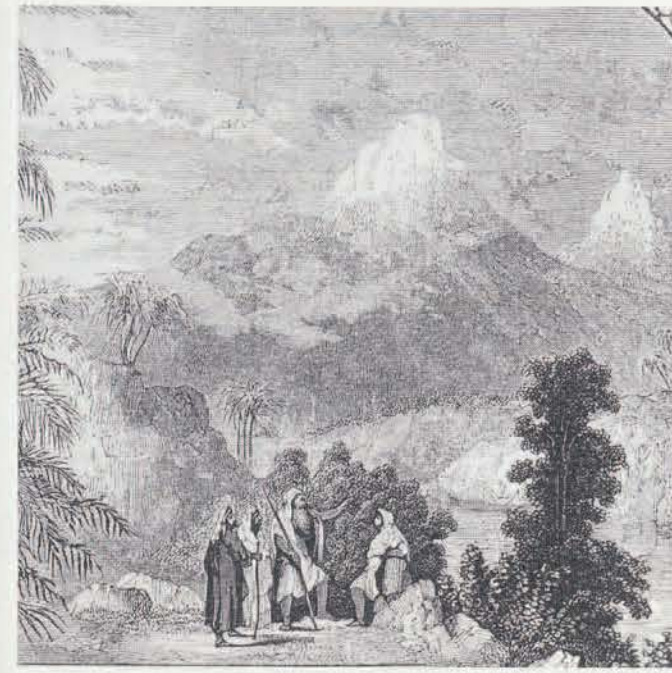
Artistic Trends

By the latter half of the 19th century, "Oriental" subjects in painting, literature, and music had become very popular in the West. Artists were among the many tourists to the Near East, and their responses and motives were similar to those of their literary counterparts. Illustrations depicting the Near East in antiquity became less fanciful, but showed anachronistically modern landscapes. An example of the growing sophistication and interest in accurate representation can be

seen in two views of Mt. Ararat, the first published in 1846, complete with palm (Fig. 9a), and the second in 1884 (Fig. 9b).

Biblical scenes were set against an ethnographically traditional and topographically modern backdrop. For example, Horace Vernet "shocked" his audience by depicting biblical characters in Bedouin dress, and to justify his use of these modern details wrote an article entitled "Some Analogies that Exist Between the Costume of the Ancient Hebrews and that of Modern Arabs" (Thornton 1983).

Art historians have noted that an interest in accurate portrayal was



9a Mt. Ararat. This history book, published in the first half of the 19th century, presented imaginative renderings as real places.

From J. Frost, *Pictorial History of the World* (Philadelphia: Walker and Gillis, 1846), 19



9b Mt. Ararat. By the late 19th century, Bible lands were more likely to be portrayed in a documentary style.

From J.L. Hurlbut, *Manual of Biblical Geography* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1884), 20

One need only recall the Victorian obsession with "Progress" to recognize this view of the unchanging Arab as an example of the smug superiority frequently expressed by well-heeled Victorians towards people of other cultures and classes.

within the mainstream of the "realist" tradition of painting in the latter half of the 19th century (Clark 1976). The Orientalist painters did not extend their interest in realism to the depiction of widespread poverty (Stevens 1984:21) or the more "modern" aspects of the Near Eastern scene, but when it came to landscape painting, artists did try to capture the strong light and barren vistas.

Contributions from Archaeology and Epigraphy

A new source of information in the 19th century was the texts and art that

were emerging from ancient mounds after millennia of burial. During the second half of the 19th century, major archaeological excavations were underway throughout the Near East. Many of the sites belonged to cultures familiar from the Bible (Babylonia and Assyria), and the new information was incorporated into biblical interpretations (see box titled "Glimpse of History's Dawn"). Important Assyrian archives and bas-reliefs began to tell a different side of the story.

Assyrian reliefs uncovered at Nineveh and elsewhere depict a stylized view of the landscape, the background against which murder and mayhem could be shown. In one such relief, King Assurbanipal (8th/7th c. B.C.) reclines in his garden in the

presence of his wife and servants; the severed head of the Elamite king hangs inconspicuously in the trees (Fig. 10a,b). Figure 10c shows an imaginative reconstruction of the historical Mesopotamian scene. The critical characters are all there—the King, wife, servants, and heads—although the artist neglected to pick up on a convention of Assyrian garden portrayal: unnatural combinations of plants, like palm trees and grapevines.

Assyrian texts published at the turn of the century complement contemporary representations of gardens. They record that the Assyrian kings collected exotic plants on their military campaigns, and grew them together on royal estates. A Tiglath-pileser I relief states:

"Glimpse of History's Dawn"

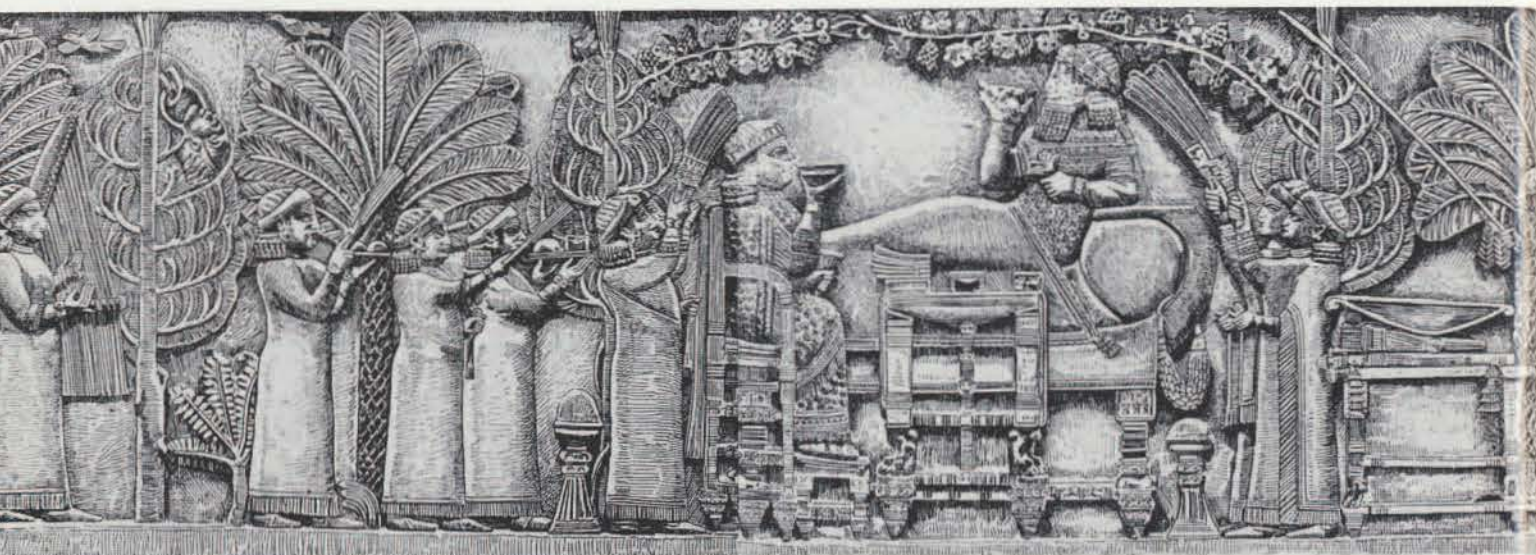
The existence of the Sumerians, a non-Semitic pre-Babylonian people with their own language and culture, was first seriously proposed in 1869. Thirty years later, details of Sumerian civilization finally began to make an impression on the public at large, and a dramatic one at that. For example, the Sumerian texts and inscriptions found during The University Mu-

seum's excavations at Nippur inspired this headline in the *New York Herald* of August 30, 1896: "History is Upset." These finds, the headline continued, "will change completely the chronology of the Old Testament and astound orthodox believers. Glimpse of history's dawn; remarkable discoveries showing that we are thousands of years older than we thought we were."



8 "Inundation of palm groves near Basrah, February-April 1896." At the head of the Persian Gulf, the distinction between land and water can be blurred.

UM neg. 9822



10a,b
 "Feast of Assurbanipal." This illustration that depicts an Assyrian relief was reproduced many times. Palm and grape are shown growing in the garden.

From G. Perrot and C. Chipiez, *Histoire de l'art dans l'antiquité* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1884), 2:figs. 27, 28

Cedars and urkarina trees / and allakanish trees, in the countries / I have conquered...I took, / and in the gardens of my land / I have planted them. And rare garden-fruits / which were not found within my land / I took, and in the gardens of Assyria / I have caused them to flourish.

(Budge and King 1902:91)

Long before Europeans suspected the existence of Assyrian gardens, they knew about the Hanging Gardens of Babylon from classical sources. The ancient author Josephus said that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, tried to re-create the mountainous terrain of his homesick Persian wife. The gardens were supposedly built on stone vaults or terraces, irrigated by mechanically raised waters of the Euphrates river. Soon after the discovery of the Assyrian reliefs, scholars recognized a relationship between earlier Assyrian gardening practice and the

10c
 Feast of Assurbanipal rendered by a Victorian artist. Based on the Assyrian original, the varied vegetation in this garden scene should have included both the vine and the date palm. In nature, these two plants do not have overlapping distributions; in a garden, they may.

From G. Le Bon, *Les premières civilisations* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1889), fig. 268

later historical accounts of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (Perrot and Chipiez 1884:445; Figs. 11, 12).

Modern Views of the Ancient Near Eastern Landscape

The dominant impression in many rural areas of the Near East today is one of an environment modified by humans. Trees are largely restricted to the banks of watercourses and cultivated plots, and in many areas of former forest, animal dung is a major fuel. Victorians, too, were quite aware of the importance of fuel and the effect of over-exploitation on the environment (Fig. 13). In 1832, for example, Thomas Upham wrote that forests

are mentioned so frequently [in the Bible] as to convince us, that the Hebrews anciently were not often compelled, like the modern inhabitants of Palestine, to burn the excrements of animals for fuel; although it may sometimes have been the case, as is probable from Ezek. 4:15. (1832:16)

Some travelers noted the reduced state of the Lebanese forest, and others pointed out that erosion had dramatically changed both the shape of the land itself and the climate

(Gage 1871). But these authors had no way to date the changes they saw. Thus, even though some people recognized that landscape change must have occurred over the millennia, visual images of the ancient landscape did not generally incorporate these observations.

It is fair to ask how far our understanding of the ancient Near Eastern landscape has progressed in the past hundred years. Modern paleoenvironmental research has demonstrated that fairly widespread deforestation and degradation of pasture area had occurred by the time of the early civilizations (Miller 1991), and that detectable human modification of the vegetation had already begun in some areas as early as 6000 B.C. (Köhler-Rollefson 1988).

We will never know just what the Babylonians and Assyrians saw when they looked out across the steppe or traveled into the mountains, but were we to be transported back 3000 years, we might not find the view totally unfamiliar. Yet, if we looked closely, we would notice an absence of some species, especially introduced crops and weeds from the New World and elsewhere. There would also be better quality pasture, with lower proportions of plants that are unpalatable to grazing animals. Forests would be more extensive, and probably denser as well. And at any particular location, the topography could well be different, as over the centuries wind and water have rearranged the shape of the land itself. If we traveled back to yet earlier times, or to regions remote from the ancient centers of population, the vegetation and landscape would be even less recognizable.

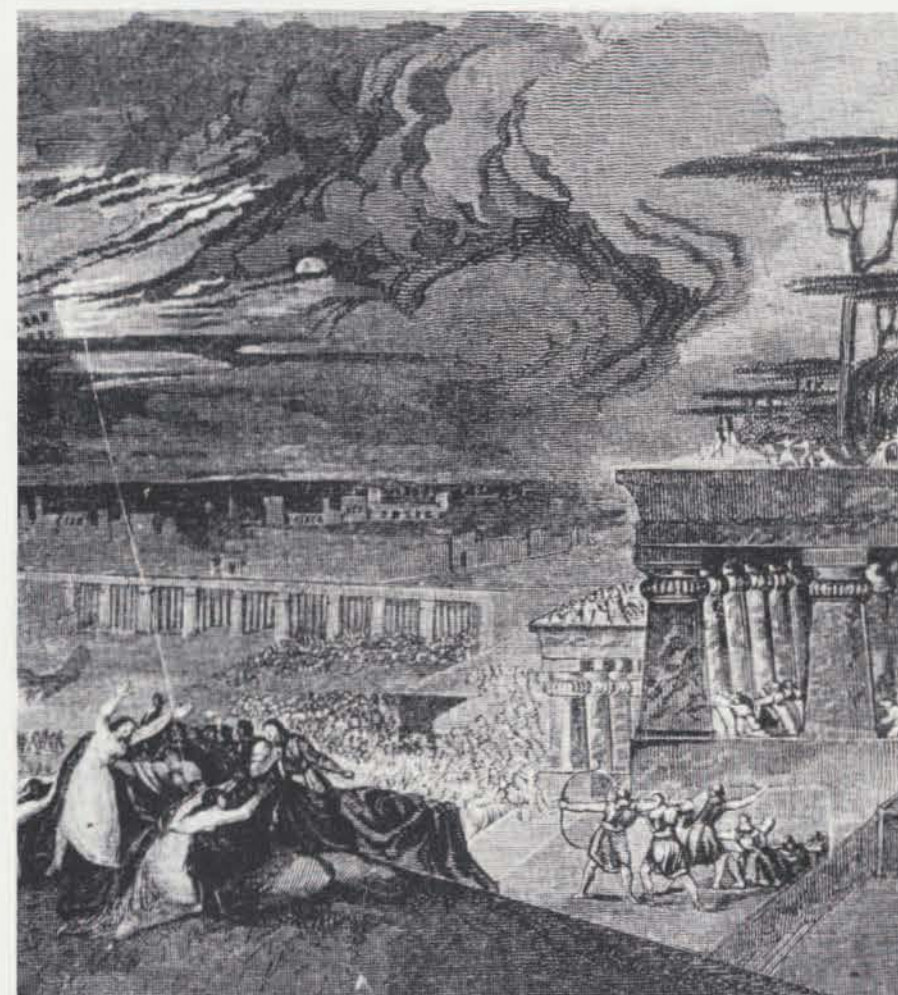
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 Detail of an imaginative reconstruction from the "Fall of Babylon," where the hanging gardens "were supported upon double arches of immense thickness." Note the characteristic silhouette of the Cedar of Lebanon (right), a tree not exactly adapted to the lower Mesopotamian environment!

From J.H. Caunter, *The Picture Bible*. Illustrated by J. Martin and R. Westall. (London: Henry C. Bohn, 1847), ill. 87



11
 "Temple in a royal park." Historical traditions helped to explain archaeological discoveries: "One is familiar with the famous hanging gardens of Babylon; the bas-reliefs teach us that the Assyrians, too, sometimes aimed at this type of luxury. On a fragment that comes from Kuyunjik [Nineveh], one sees a row of trees surmounting a terrace that supports a series of pointed arches."

From G. Perrot and C. Chipiez, *Histoire de l'art dans l'antiquité* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1884), 2:445 and fig. 42






13

Some of the desertification observed by European travelers had already occurred in antiquity. The major factor in this change may have been salinization, brought on when farmers reduced the fallow period in their fields (Adams 1981). In this view of Ur of Chaldees (Iraq) taken in ca. 1900, much of the land has been spoiled by salinization; but the many large ancient mounds and traces of canal irrigation show that the region was populous in former times.

Photograph by Underwood and Underwood; UM neg. S4-139931

Today, scholarly works occasionally include artists' reconstructions of ancient settlements, but these are generally placed in a generic, simplified setting. A major modern source of popular representations of the ancient Near Eastern landscape is illustrated Bible stories and similar materials aimed at children. Depictions range from schematic or fanciful backgrounds to plausible renderings of the present-day rural landscape. Victorian sensibilities are still encountered, as in this caption to a photograph of the Jordan river:

"Trees and shrubs on the banks of the River Jordan glow in the evening sunlight. It was probably just such a peaceful sight as this which greeted the Israelites as they came down to the Jordan, ready to cross over into the promised land" (Rowland-Entwhistle 1981:21). A lack of imagination may prevent us from visualizing a landscape much different from today's, and more research would probably sharpen our reconstructions, but after a hundred years, we have not surpassed the depictions made by our Victorian forebears. 

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