

The Pishon River: Fact or fiction?

Was there ever a real Pishon River that flowed out of the Garden of Eden, or was it just a figment of Moses' imagination? The original reference comes from the Book of Genesis, which traditionally identifies Moses as its author. Here are two accounts from reputable scientific journals. Decide for yourself...

Satellite Uncovers Ancient Arabian River

Geologists studying remote sensing images of Arabia have found a dry riverbed covered by desert sands. The 850-kilometer channel begins in the Hijaz Mountains of western Saudi Arabia and ends in a delta that covers more than two-thirds of Kuwait, says Farouk El-Baz, director of the centre for remote sensing at Boston University. Parts of the ancient channel had been mapped as drainage courses, or wadis (also commonly known as a dry wash, gulch or box canyon), but no one had recognized it as a large river system because large dune fields cut across it.



Arabia has had wet periods at times over the past 200,000 years. Water last flowed in what El-Baz calls the Kuwait River between 5,000 and 11,000 years ago; ***some stretches of the river may have been up to 5 kilometers wide!*** But over many centuries, the region became one of the driest in the world, and blowing sands covered the channel. The river runs along a fault, so that there should still be ground water deep in the channel. El-Baz says this water might be tapped by wells several hundred meters deep. Sand-covered parts of the old channel may contain the remains of prehistoric settlements, from the time before the river dried. El-Baz sees signs to the south of three other dry rivers that would have drained other parts of Arabia. He has asked NASA to use a shuttle-based radar experiment to study the region later this year; the radar can penetrate the sand to study the rocks and channels beneath.

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Pishon, the River of Havilah

According to Genesis 2:11-12, the Pishon River “winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there).”

Dr. E. A. Speiser, who before his death in 1965 was Chairman of the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, first considered either Kerkha or Karun as possible candidates. But as the land of Havilah is most commonly connected with the Arabian Peninsula (Gen. 10:26-29; 25:18; 1 Chron. 1:20-23), he also suggested that one of the now dry wadis (dry riverbeds) that slope down from the south, could be identified with the Pishon river, adding: “It remains to be shown, however, that any of the present wadis was sufficiently active during the period in question to constitute a sizable and perennial river.”

That a “sizable and perennial river” once did exist in this area that in every respect meets the description of the Pishon river has, in fact, been clearly demonstrated in later years by modern climatological research and satellite studies. James A. Sauer, former curator of the Harvard Semitic Museum’s archaeological collections and up to his death in the late 1990’s a leading excavator of various sites on the Arabian Peninsula, has summarized these findings in his article, *The River Runs Dry. Creation Story Preserves Historical Memory*, published in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Vol. 22:4, July/August 1996, pp. 52-57, 64.



Sauer starts by saying that he speaks as a former skeptic. He had long doubted that archaeology could uncover evidence of the earliest Biblical stories, having previously written numerous papers in which he had criticized the optimism of W. F. Albright and many of his students. “Now I am recanting,” he writes. “My current work on climate change had led me to conclude that Albright and his students were clearly correct to look for connections between the archaeological evidence and early Biblical traditions.”



Contrary to the previously prevailing view, recent research has shown that dramatic climatic changes have occurred within historical times in the Near East and elsewhere. According to carbon 14 dating, a global wet phase began in about 7,500 BC that lasted until about 3,500 BC. The warm wet humid climate during this period encouraged the growth of subtropical vegetation in the areas around the Persian Gulf. In southern Saudi Arabia ancient lakes existed in what is today the largest sand desert in the world, and further north a river originating in the Hijaz Mountains in the west runs toward northeast across the whole Arabian Peninsula into the head of the Persian Gulf.

This large river, which in places was 3 miles wide, was discovered in the early 1990's by Boston University scientist Farouk El-Baz while studying a satellite photo of central Arabia. Much of the river channel is today concealed by sand dunes. It has been named the Kuwait River, as it reached the Persian Gulf via the now dried riverbed called Wadi Al-Batin that runs along the northern border of Kuwait. In about 3,500 BC the climate suddenly changed, and a drier period followed that peaked in the period 2,350-2,000 BC, causing the Kuwait River to dry out. (This climatic disaster also brought the Akkadian empire to an end. See the Science magazine, Vol. 261, 20 August 1993, p. 985: "How the Akkadian Empire Was Hung Out to Dry," and *ibid*, pages 995-1004: "The Genesis and Collapse of Third Millennium North Mesopotamian Civilization.")

Sauer concludes that the Kuwait River most probably was the Pishon River. Citing Genesis 2:11-12, he gives the following interesting comments: "Although the meaning of some of the details in this passage is uncertain, it does seem to describe a river flowing into the head of the Persian Gulf from the low mountains of western Arabia, the path followed by the recently discovered Kuwait River. An important key is the Biblical phrase 'the gold of that land is good.' Only one place in Arabia has such a deposit—the famous site of Madh edh-Dhahab, the 'Cradle of Gold.' This ancient and modern gold mining site is located about 125 miles south of Medina, near the headwaters of the Kuwait River. The Biblical text also mentions bdellium and onyx. Aromatic resins (bdellium) are known in Yemen to the southwest, and, although they are not thought to have been produced in the vicinity of Medina, they could easily have been brought there. Semiprecious stones such as alabaster also come from these areas, but it is uncertain whether other precious stones, such as onyx, do."

Sauer adds, "In any event, no other river would seem to fit the Biblical description. I am therefore inclined to think that the Kuwait River could be the Pishon of the Bible. If so, it implies extraordinarily memory on

the part of the Biblical authors, since the river dried up sometime between 3,500 and 2,000 BC.”

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