



## **Tree of Life**

### Study Notes

At key points in the biblical story, there's usually a tree somewhere in the mix playing an active role. Why did the authors include all of this tree imagery? Our video Tree of Life explores this question. However, these notes go a level deeper than we can cover in a five-minute video. In the following pages, we'll explore key concepts, passages, and tree-related images that will enable you to gain a better understanding of the tree of life theme throughout the Bible.

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# Facts About Trees in the Bible

[from Matthew Sleeth, *Reforesting Faith: What Trees Teach us about the Nature of God*]

Here's an interesting piece of Bible trivia: What is the most frequently mentioned living thing in the Bible? Other than God and humans, it's trees! A word search in an average English translation (NIV) yields the following statistics:

- "Tree" 293x
- "Fruit" 212x
- "Branch" 107x
- "Root" 57x
- "Forest" 51x
- "Vine" 72x
- "Leaf" 19x

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**Total: 811 Occurrences**

That's a lot! And this does not include the hundreds of times specific tree species are mentioned: palms, acacia, oak, terebinth, willows, sycamore, fig, olives, pomegranates, etc.

Some of the most famous biblical statements include trees.

GENESIS 1-2	Fruit trees and the tree of life and the tree of knowing good and bad
EXODUS 3	Moses and the burning bush-tree
PSALM 1	The righteous one is "like a tree planted by streams of water"
JOHN 15	"I am the vine, you all are the branches"
MATTHEW 13	The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that becomes a great tree for the birds
ACTS SPEECHES	The cross is regularly referred to as "the tree" (Grk. ksulos ξυλον). Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29: "Jesus...put to death by hanging him on a tree"

Do you notice anything about these passages? These are some of the most strategic moments in the biblical narrative. Trees accumulate layers of symbolism as they occur in the foreground of these key pieces of the story:

- Creation and Eden
- The rebellion in the garden resulting in the fall of humanity
- The covenants
- The promised land
- The temple
- Hope for the Messiah
- Jesus' parables
- Jesus' death

- The work of the Spirit
- The new creation

## Trees in Genesis 1

The importance of tree symbolism begins on the first page of the Bible. There are three take-aways we'd like to highlight from Genesis chapter 1.

### 1. God gives trees a “self-generating” form of life and provision.

*Then God said, “Let the land bring forth vegetation, **plants which produce seed, and fruit trees on the land producing fruit** after their kind, whose **seed is in it**. And it was so.*

*And the land brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good.*

*There was evening and there was morning, a third day.*

GENESIS 1:11-12

\*Most scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) with changes and emphasis added for understanding.

Notice how the trees are given the gift of self-generation, a kind of perpetual life where the future of their life and lineage is contained within themselves. The land has the potential to generate this life (at God’s invitation), but then this ability is passed onto the trees as well. Trees provide the most basic form of provision for the creatures of the earth. Without humans, trees do just fine. Without trees, humans perish.

### 2. Within the literary design of Genesis 1, humans are set in analogy to the trees.

GENESIS 1:1-2 - PROLOGUE				
1 act	Day 1	Light, it was good	Lights	Day 4
1 act	Day 2	Waters separated above and below	Sky fliers and water swimmers	Day 5
1 act	Day 3	Dry land emerges from the water	Land animals	Day 6
<b>+1 act</b>		Plants and <b>trees of fruit (<i>peri</i> - פרי)</b> with seed in them	<b>Humans who are fruitful (<i>parah</i> - פרה)</b> and multiply and are given the fruit trees to eat	
Genesis 2:1-3 - Epilogue				

Notice the third and the sixth day are set in analogy with each other.

- Each forms the third +1 design in the flow of each triad of days.
- The +1 element of both days is the provision of seed—trees on day three and humans on day six. Humans are given life by eating the fruit/seed of day three.

What can we learn from this literary design? The author purposefully sets humans and trees parallel to each other.

### 3. Trees are part of the divine blessing that is given to humanity

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

God created man in his own image,

in the image of God he created him;

male and female he created them.

God blessed them; and God said to them,

"Be **fruitful** and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Then God said, "Behold, **I have given you every plant** yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, **and every tree of fruit producing seed**; it shall be food for you;

and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food," and it was so.

GENESIS 1:26-30

Note: The **fruit** trees are given to sustain life and enable the **fruitful** multiplication of humans and animals.

## Humans and Trees in Genesis 2-3

Moving along in the story to the garden of Eden, the presence and significance of trees continues. In Genesis 2, God causes the human and the trees to emerge "from the ground." This Hebrew play on words further demonstrates how humans and trees are meant to be seen in analogy with one another. Take a look:

<p>And the Lord God <b>formed</b> (wayyitser ויצר) <b>human (adam)</b> of dust <b>from the ground (min ha-adamah)</b> and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.</p> <p>GENESIS 2:7</p>	<p>And the Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there he placed the <b>human (ha-adam)</b> whom he had formed.</p> <p>And Yahweh God caused to <b>sprout</b> (wayyatsmakh ויצמח) <b>every tree from the ground (min ha-adamah)</b> that is pleasing to the sight and good for food;</p> <p>And the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowing of good and bad.</p> <p>GENESIS 2:8-9</p>
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Let's make a few observations from the above text. The origin of people is set in analogy with the origin of trees. Just as humans depend on God for life-breath, the trees provide what humans need for life. Humans come "from the ground" just like trees. Trees are also beautiful and can be a source of blessing and life, and the same can be said of humans. The passage closes

with the two trees in the garden, one representing eternal life and the other tree constituting a test of faith. Later in Genesis 3, the humans *do not* choose the path of life and blessing through their test at the second tree. The connections in this short passage are clear; the author wants us to ponder this analogy.

PEOPLE = TREES

People have the capacity to channel blessing and perpetuate life like the tree of life.

Let's reflect on what we know about trees to wrap our minds around this association. While food is what the trees provide in Genesis 2, we also know now that they (along with all plants) produce the oxygen in our atmosphere that sustains all biological life. Trees developed a complex and sophisticated biological structure to capture CO<sub>2</sub> and transform it into O<sub>2</sub>.

Now let's turn to human anatomy. Last century, the shape of our lungs was finally mapped out in a bronchogram. As you look at the image below, the relationship between humans and trees becomes even more clear.



The human lung is an inverted tree that inhales the O<sub>2</sub> produced by the trees (Matthew Sleeth, *Reforesting Faith*).

### Metaphor Scheme: People are Plants

This metaphorical pairing of people as trees is productive throughout the Hebrew Bible (Lakoff and Turner, *Metaphors We Live By*).

SOURCE DOMAIN	TARGET DOMAIN	BIBLICAL EXAMPLES
Tree	Person	<i>People from the ground // trees from the ground.</i>  GENESIS 1-2
Seed	Descendants	<i>Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, since I am <b>childless</b>, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Since you have given no <b>seed</b> to me."</i>  GENESIS 15:2-3

Fruit	Descendants	<i>Be fruitful and multiply.</i> GENESIS 1:26-28
	Results of one's life	<i>The righteous will <b>flourish</b> like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still <b>bear fruit</b> in old age, they will stay fresh and green...</i> PSALM 92:12-14
Uprooted	Infertile (of womb)	<b>Later Genesis narratives</b> Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel are "uprooted/barren" (רָקַע).
Cut off, withering	Death, destruction	<i>Behold, the Lord, the God of hosts, will <b>lop off the boughs</b> with a terrible crash; Those also who are tall in stature will be <b>cut down</b> and those who are lofty will be <b>abased</b>. He will <b>cut down</b> the thickets of the forest with an iron axe, and Lebanon will <b>fall</b> by the Mighty One.</i> ISAIAH 10:33-34
Water	Divine life, divine instruction	<i>"For I will <b>pour out water</b> on the thirsty land And <b>streams</b> on the dry ground; I will pour out <b>my Spirit</b> on your offspring And my blessing on your <b>seed</b>; And they will spring up among the grass Like <b>poplars</b> by streams of water."</i> ISAIAH 44:3-4
Leaves	Productivity	One who meditates on the Torah is "like a tree planted by streams of water, whose leaf does not wither, in everything he does, he prospers." PSALM 1

## Narrative Significance of the Tree of Life

There is no more famous tree in the Bible than the tree of life. This tree is located in the center of the garden and imparts eternal life. Let's read the first passages where this tree is introduced to the narrative.

*And Yahweh God caused to sprout every tree from the ground that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; **and the tree of life was in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowing of good and bad.***

GENESIS 2:9

*Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, **he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.**"*

GENESIS 3:22



So is this some kind of magical tree? Remember, we see in Genesis 1-2 that God is the author of all life, and trees are potent images of God giving the gift of “self-regeneration” to his creation. Knowing this, the reader should know that the tree of life cannot be magical in the sense of offering its own life to the eater. Rather, God is the giver of life, and the tree is at the center of the temple-garden. Proximity to the tree is significant in the sense that it brings one in proximity to the author of life. Scholar Bruce Waltke further discusses this principle.

*[The tree of life] represents life that is beyond the original life that God breathed into human. The first human by nature is susceptible to death.... Nevertheless, continued eating from the tree could renew life and prevent death. Apart from disobedience to God's command, mortals had access to this tree... The tree of life allows humanity to transcend its mortality, the state in which it was created on the sixth day, so it can move to a higher dimension... to eternal life and immortality. As one partakes of this... fruit by faith, one participates in this eternal life. This highest potency of life was available in the garden and becomes once again available to us as we reenter the temple-garden through the second Adam... and look forward to the resurrection of our bodies.*

BRUCE WALTKE, AN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY, 257.

## Ancient Near Eastern Perspective on the Tree of Life

The tree of life was an iconic image in the ancient world. It's helpful to compare and contrast this tree's significance in Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Egyptian culture with the biblical portrait. Theologian William Osborne helps us enter an ancient mindset.

*As any astute tourist quickly observes, the landscape of much the Near East is predominantly stark and barren. The land is comprised of innumerable shades of brown, with only brief interjections of green and blue. The higher in elevation one goes, the greener the picture becomes. Consequently, mountains and rivers, along with the forests that adorn them, seem to be natural focal points anyone who lives or travels in these lands. The ancient peoples, from the remote western world of Egypt to the eastern river marshes of Babylonia, lived in the land, not simply on it. They were all agrarian cultures, whose livelihood was found and maintained among the shade, fruit, shelter, and beauty of their trees. As a result, there can be little doubt that this lifestyle had a significant effect on these ancient cultures and the way they perceived the world. Trees were some of the most sacred elements in ancient Near Eastern civilizations.*

OSBORNE, TREES AND KINGS, 31.

## Sacred Trees in Ancient Egypt

Let's start with Israel's southern neighbor, Egypt. Nut, the sky goddess, is often associated with the sky-dome and the gift of rain. She is also often portrayed as a tree that supplies fruit, water, and life for the land. See the images below.



*These images and strong associations between the tree and the goddess do not indicate that the ancients necessarily believed the tree was equal to the deity, but that the god was like the tree, or at least that the tree was an embodiment of the deity...*

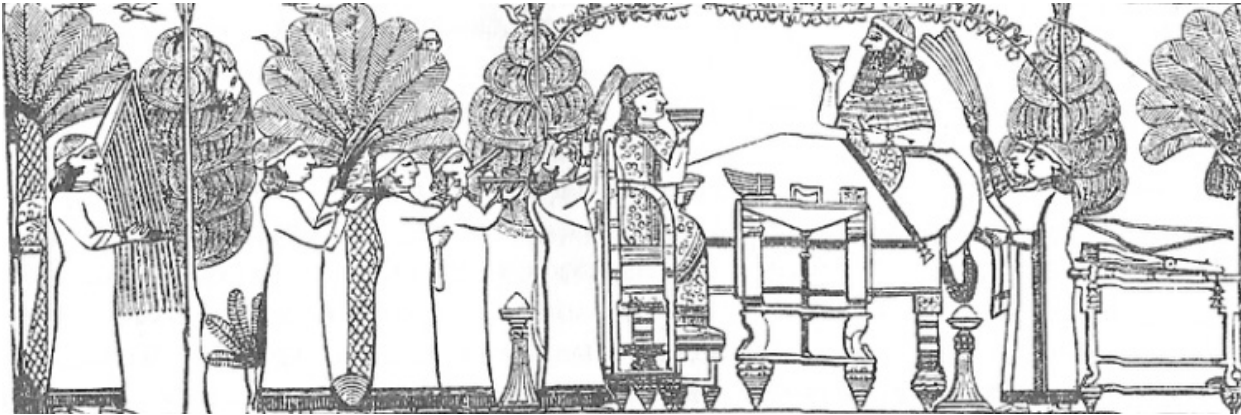
OSBORNE, TREES AND KINGS, 38

Egyptian kings were often portrayed as trees. The productivity of ancient Egypt was completely dependent upon the Nile, which flooded and irrigated the shores and deltas annually. Osiris was the deity associated with the Nile, the one who provided fertility for the land through the waters. In Egyptian mythology, Osiris was believed to have a son named Horus, who was incarnate as the pharaoh. The king stood as the sole mediator between the gods and the people, responsible for fertility and order. In the image below found in the temple of Karnak, you can see King Sety I (early 1200s B.C.) sitting in the middle of a tree. He is being crowned and given a scepter by Thoth, who is writing his name on the leaves of the tree. This is an image for the king's role as a god giving life to the land through the sacred tree.



## Sacred Trees in Mesopotamian Culture

Trees were also important cultural symbols for Israel's neighbors to the north (Assyria) and east (Babylon). Trees and gardens were associated with the royal gardens of imperial kings. The image below shows a garden party at Asshurbanipal's palace.



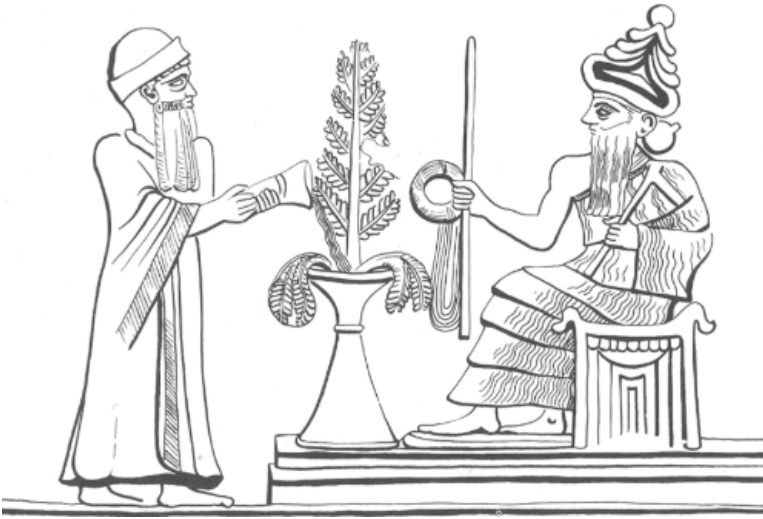
In fact, Asshurbanipal's royal garden in Nimrud was designed as a microcosm of his empire. The royal inscription of Sennacherib (Text 8) states:

*By the will of the gods, vines, fruit trees of all kinds, olive trees, aromatic trees, flourished greatly in my gardens. Cypress trees...grew tall and sent out shoots. I created a marsh for the flow of water for the gardens... Birds of the heavens, herons...boars and deer...gave birth in abundance.*

Visualize this greenery below.



Trees were also associated with the gods. The image below depicts Ur-Nammu of Ur (2060–1955 B.C.) offering a libation to a tree, which apparently represents the moon god Nanna who sits enthroned behind it (cf. 239). The beneficent power of the god is present in the tree (cf. 253–55). The king, in strengthening the tree by a drink offering, enhances that power. In return, the tree dispenses life-giving water.



Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, 135.

Mesopotamia developed a motif that a divine tree existed and was protected by the gods. Below you can see a carving from Nimrud, showing goats around a tree of life and symbolizing its vitality. There's also cherubim, showing that it is the domain of the gods.



## Conclusions

What can we learn from symbolic trees in the ancient Near East? Scholar William Osborne identifies that tree imagery reveals three interwoven truths.

1. Abundance and prosperity from the gods is depicted as abundant gardens and tree-filled forests.
2. Deities and their powers to give fertility are regularly associated with tree symbols.
3. Kings who mediate the power of the gods are either the caretakers of trees or symbolized as trees themselves.

How does this compare and contrast with the biblical account of the cosmos? In Genesis 1-2, all humanity is given the royal task of stewarding the garden and its trees. This fits with the pattern of the **image of God**—all humanity assumes the role of the king. The tree is not divine. It's a symbol of divine life and abundance that can be internalized (eaten). The tree is not magic. It's an image of proximity to the source of divine life.

## The Tree of Knowing Good and Bad

There are two trees in the garden. We've talked a bit about the tree of life, and now let's take a look at the other tree, the tree of knowing good and bad.

*Then the Lord God took the human and put him into the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From **any tree** of the garden you may surely eat; but from **the tree** of knowing good and bad you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."*

GENESIS 2:15-17

The text states that one tree represents life and another represents a knowing that leads to death. The woman who represents "life" (her later name "Eve") falls prey to a deception unto death. Then she becomes like a "tree of testing" for her husband, and he too fails. This story takes place in Genesis 3.

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?"*

*The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'"*

*The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

*When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.*

*Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.*

GENESIS 3:1-6

In this passage, we see **humans becoming trees of testing to one another**. The test pattern of the tree found in Genesis 3 is replicated by the tests posed by people throughout the rest of the Bible. Here's just one example from the book of Proverbs.

*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,  
and the one who is wise saves lives.*

PROVERBS 11:30

After Adam and Eve fail the test, they receive individualized warnings. The literary design is set in parallel structure.

<p>To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply Your <b>painful toil</b> (עצב) and conception, In <b>painful toil</b> (עצבון) you will bring forth children; and your desire will be toward your husband, And he will rule over you."  GENESIS 3:16</p>	<p>Cursed is the ground because of you; In <b>painful toil</b> (עצבון) you will eat of it All the days of your life. Both <b>thorns and thistles</b> it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.  GENESIS 3:17B-19</p>
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### Interpretive Keys for Genesis 3:16-17

This short but complex passage is worth expanding upon. Here are a few interpretive keys that are often missed.

#### Genesis 3:16: Consequences for the woman

- "Pain" (Heb. *'itsabon*) **is not** the Hebrew word for labor pains.
- The word *'itsabon* is used in the next verse (Genesis 3:17) to refer to the frustrating toil the man will experience in the field (see also Genesis 5:29, Isaiah 14:3).
- The verb (Heb. *'atsab*) can refer to emotional grief (Genesis 6:6, 2 Samuel 19:2).
- The pain is followed by the word "conception" (Heb. *heryon*) not labor.

*The "pain" of 3:16 ought not be understood as the physical pain of childbirth, but of the unrelenting labor required even of pregnant mothers in a pre-industrial, agrarian subsistence economy, and the concomitant psychological stresses of motherhood in such a milieu.*

CHRISTOPHER HEARD, AN INTERTEXTUAL READING  
OF JABEZ' PRAYER IN 1 CHRONICLES 4:9-10.

*The best way to translate Genesis 3:16a is, "I will greatly increase your pain along with conception; in painful circumstances you will give birth to children." The pain (Heb. *'itsabon*) is not the pain of childbirth, but the painful family circumstances in which the woman will now bring children into the world. In Genesis 3:17, the man is likewise told he will farm his land in the midst of "pain" (Heb. *'itsabon*). The double use of the same word in verses 16 and 17 emphasize the woman's fate mirrors the man.*

IAIN PROVAN, SERIOUSLY DANGEROUS RELIGION, 119.

### 3:16: “Your desire will be for your husband, but he will rule over you.”

- This is a reversal of Genesis 1:28 (“rule the land”). Now the man will relate to the woman as if she is part of creation rather than a co-ruler over creation.
- “Desire” is the same Hebrew word used to describe sin’s desire to devour Cain in Genesis 4:7 (Heb. *teshuqah*), but it is also used in Song of Songs 7:11 for the lovers’ desire for one another. The word “desire” is not inherently negative or positive. Context determines its meaning, and Genesis 3:16 is an excellent example of double-meaning in biblical poetry.
  - **Negative:** When the woman’s desire is to devour, like sin (Genesis 4:7), it will provoke a power struggle that ends in conflict and death.
  - **Positive:** When the woman’s desire is positive (Song of Songs 7:11), it will result in union, intimacy, and eternal life.

### 3:17-19: Consequences for humanity

- The punishment for humans is not work—as if there was no work before. They were gardeners! (Genesis 1:28) Neither is the punishment the new growth of thorns and thistles (they are included in the plants named in Genesis 2:5).
- They will be cut off from proximity to God’s life-giving presence, symbolized by the tree of life.

*The punishment is that work will now involve more pain than before. The work will be experienced in a different way—as a struggle with an earth that is more reluctant to give up good things, and that insists on producing “thorns and thistles for you” (Gen 3:8). The wording of this verse is strange, and underlines that it is not the world that has changed but people’s experience of this world... The land will still provide food, but only at a greater cost.*

IAIN PROVAN, SERIOUSLY DANGEROUS RELIGION, 121.

## Conclusions About Humans and Trees in Genesis 3

After the rebellion in Genesis 3, we are left with a new reality. The woman will produce seed in difficulty and struggle (עצב, עצבון). The man will eat from the ground with difficulty and struggle (עצבון). This suggests that what is produced from the ground is analogous to what is produced from the woman. In other words, the ground and the womb are parallel.

GROUND		WOMB	
Fruit trees	Thorns and thistles	Seed of the woman	Seed of the serpent

What are the implications of this? Every human is faced with a choice. People can be like trees of life or thorns and thistles. As the story continues in Genesis 4, Cain becomes the first “thorn person” instead of a tree of life.

## Sacred Trees in Genesis 4-50

At the end of Genesis 3, humans are exiled from the Eden tree of life because they have become trees of testing to one another. But there is the expectation that just as trees produce seed (Genesis 1:11-12), so also will the woman produce seed (Genesis 3:15-16) that will overcome the snake, while also being overcome by it. Genesis chapters 4-50 primarily document God’s work with the family who would be that seed. In the following pages, we’ll highlight several key moments in the story related to our tree theme.

### Tree Symbolism in the Flood Story

The next mention of trees to note is in reference to the materials used by Noah to build the ark (gopher). This “ark of gopher” is described in analogy to the ark of the covenant in the book of Exodus.

ARK OF NOAH Genesis 6:14-15	ARK OF THE COVENANT Exodus 25:10-11	ATONEMENT COVER Exodus 25:17
“Make (עשה) for yourself an ark (תבה) of woods/trees (עץ) of <b>gopher</b> (גפר)...”	“Make (עשה) an ark (ארון) of wood of acacia...”	“Make (עשה) an atonement cover (capporet / כפרת) of pure gold...”
“and you will pitch (copher / כפר) it with pitch (copher / כפר), inside and outside (מבית ומחוץ)...”	“and you will overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside (מבית ומחוץ)...”	
“three hundred cubits its length (ארכו), fifty cubits its width (רחבו), and thirty cubits its height (קמתו).”	“two and a half cubits its length (ארכו), a cubit and a half its width (רחבו), and a cubit and a half its height (קמתו).”	“two and a half cubits its length (ארכו), and a cubit and a half its width (רחבו).”

What is the significance of this analogy? The trees of gopher become the means of salvation for righteous Noah and his family. These gopher trees will land him on the sacred mountain where he will intercede for all humanity and creation.

Now he called his name Noah, saying, “This one will give us **comfort** (nakham) from our work and from the pain (itsabon) of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed.”

GENESIS 5:29

Then the Lord saw that **the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every purpose of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.**

The Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and he was **pained** (itsabon) in his heart.

The Lord said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them.”

GENESIS 6:5-7



*So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him.*

*Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by their families from the ark.*

*Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar.*

*The Lord smelled the soothing aroma; and the Lord said to himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, **for the purpose of man's heart is evil from his youth**; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done."*

GENESIS 8:18-21

In the climax of the story, we find Noah on a sacred mountain under the shadow of the trees of gopher, building an altar and giving a burnt offering of ritually pure animals. Noah is functioning as a priest! Noah receives a full restatement of the Eden blessing and an eternal covenant promise that God will allow creation to endure so he can fulfill his redemptive purposes.

## Abraham Among the Sacred Trees

The turning point in the book of Genesis occurs in chapter 12. Abraham is called out of Mesopotamia to go to the land of Canaan. His first entry into the land portrays him and Sarah as a new Adam and Eve and Noah.

*So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him...Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan.*

*Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the **oak of Moreh** (Lit. "oak of visibility") Now the Canaanite was then in the land.*

*The Lord **appeared** (Heb. **yera'eh** "became visible") to Abram and said, "To your **seed** I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.*

*Then he proceeded from there **to the mountain** on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and **there he built an altar** to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.*

GENESIS 12:4-9

What is going on in this passage? Abraham journeys into Canaan and ascends to a high hill (Shechem). There is a high tree there called "vision," where Yahweh appears to him in a vision. Then he goes to a mountain next to Bethel ("house of God") and builds another altar where he worships Yahweh. Abraham is a **human meeting with God on a high place under a tree**. Sound familiar? This is Eden imagery! The story continues.

He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, **to the place where his tent had been at the beginning**, between Bethel and Ai, **to the place of the altar** which he had made there formerly; and there Abram **called on the name of the Lord**.

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and **look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward**; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your seed forever.

I will make your seed as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.

Arise, **walk about the land** through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you."

Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the **oaks of Mamre**, which are in **Hebron**, and there he **built an altar to the Lord**.

#### GENESIS 13:3-4, 14-18

Abram goes back to the Eden place at the "house of God"/Bethel, and from that high place, God tells Abram to look out upon the promised land as a new Eden. He is instructed to "walk about" (התהלך). This is a unique verb that recalls Genesis 3:8, where God comes "walking about" (מתהלך) in Eden to look for the humans. Abram is depicted as a new Adam, walking about the trees and mountains of a new Eden. After this he moves from the oak of Moreh (מורה) to the oaks of Mamre (ממרא), where he meets God on a mountain yet again.

So they made a covenant at Beersheba; and Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, arose and returned to the land of the Philistines.

Abraham **planted a tamarisk tree** at Beersheba, and there **he called on the name of the Lord**, the everlasting God.

And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days.

#### GENESIS 21:32-34

Abraham has just made a covenant of peace with his Philistine neighbors, so he memorializes that peace by planting (נטע) a tree. The only two appearances of this word in Genesis is when God plants the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8) and Noah plants his garden-vineyard (Genesis 9:20).

Under his tree, Abraham called on the name of Yahweh, which means to build an altar, offer sacrifices, and meet with Yahweh. Once again, this tree is an Eden symbol.

But all is not right between Abraham and Yahweh because earlier in Genesis 21, he and Sarah mistreated Hagar (the immigrant) and her son by sending them to their deaths out in the wilderness.

So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a **skin of water** and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba.

When **the water in the skin** was used up, she cast the child **in the place of one of the bushes**.

Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, "Do not let me see the boy die." And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept.

God listened to the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is.

"Arise, lift up the boy, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Then God **opened her eyes** and **she saw a well of water**; and she went and **filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink**.

#### GENESIS 21:14-19

Hagar and Ishmael are exiled from Abraham's family because Sarah saw Ishmael "playing" (21:9), and God tests Abraham by telling him to listen to the voice of his wife, which landed them in a heap of trouble last time (16:2). Abraham doesn't resist his wife's voice, and he exiles the woman and her child.

Abraham virtually sends them to their deaths. He gives them only a skin of water as he sends them into the wilderness, and it drains right away, putting Hagar and Ishmael in mortal danger. But God provides for the immigrant and her son by showing them an Eden-spring by a tree and giving them the Eden blessing of Abraham.

In the next part of the narrative, Abraham's many sins catch up with him on a mountain with a tree. Because of Abraham and Sarah's sin, God tests Abraham's faithfulness with the ultimate requirement: the life of his only son.

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the **land of Moriah**, and offer him there as a burnt offering on **one of the mountains** of which I will tell you."

#### GENESIS 22:1-2

What is the significance of this location? The land of Moriah (מוריה) means "the land of vision," intentionally mirroring the "oak of vision" (מורה) in Genesis 12. Abraham has been meeting God by trees on mountains, and here God calls Abraham to a mountain named similarly to the hill with a tree in Genesis 12, where he also built an altar. This is all building the anticipation: will Abraham worship God here on this mountain?

<sup>3</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split **woods for the burnt offering**, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

<sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and **saw** the place from a distance.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you."

<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the **woods of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son**, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and **the woods**, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

<sup>8</sup> Abraham said, "God will **see** for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and **Abraham built the altar** there and arranged the **wood**, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the **wood**.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

<sup>11</sup> But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

<sup>12</sup> He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you **fear** God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

<sup>13</sup> Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a **ram** caught in the **thicket** by his horns; and Abraham went and took the **ram** and **offered it up for a burnt offering in the place of his son**.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham called the name of that place The Lord Will **See**, as it is said to this day, "**In the mountain of Yahweh** it will be **seen to**."

<sup>15</sup> Then the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven,

<sup>16</sup> and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son,

<sup>17</sup> indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. **18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed**, because you have obeyed my voice."

#### GENESIS 22:3-18

Here are some facts to note about this passage:

The root word "see/fear" (ראה/ירא) is a motif word in this story.

The narrator draws the reader's focus on the tree/wood—the wood of the burnt offering, taken along, placed on Isaac, and arranged on the altar.

The ram in the thicket on the mountain is an inverted image of the tree of life. Ram is spelled with the same letters as oak (איל). Isaac's life is spared, and his substitute is offered from the "tree."

Verse 14 is the narrator's comment, who draws a direct analogy between Yahweh's provision of a substitute on Mount Moriah and a future sacrifice that will be offered on this same mountain, the temple in Jerusalem.

Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac is offered here as an image of a future faithful descendent, who will offer a sacrifice of great cost in Jerusalem that will release the blessings of Eden's tree of life to all of the nations.

## Sacred Trees in the Story of Jacob and His Sons

Often making a mess of his circumstances, Isaac's son Jacob frequently journeys in and out of the land of his forefathers. These mini-exiles involve encounters with sacred trees at high places. Let's look at a few examples.

<sup>10</sup> Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran.

<sup>11</sup> He came to **the place** and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of **the place** and put it under his head, and lay down in **that place**.

<sup>12</sup> He had a dream, and behold, **a ramp/stairway** was set on the land with **its top reaching to the heavens**; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

<sup>13</sup> And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am Yahweh, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; **the land** on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your seed. 14 Your seed will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

<sup>18</sup> So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top.

<sup>19</sup> He called the name of **that place Bethel** ("house of God"); however, previously the name of the city had been **Luz** ("almond tree").

GENESIS 28:10-14, 18-19

Notice the following observations about this passage:

- The narrator waits to reveal the name of the place until the very end. Yahweh appears in a vision, just as he did to Abraham in Genesis 12. And at the end we find that it's the same exact place, Bethel or the "house of God."
- In Genesis 12:8 we find that Abraham built an altar at a high place and worshiped God, and here the same thing happens to his grandson.
- The dream in Genesis 28:12 is an Eden image, the place where heaven and earth meet. And from this Eden-place, Jacob's "seed" will "spread out" to bring the Eden blessing to all nations. **This is an image of Abraham's "seed" planted in Eden, growing into a tree of blessing for all the nations.**
- In Genesis 28:19 we find out that the name of this place before Bethel was Luz (לזל), which means **almond tree** (see Genesis 30:7).

<sup>1</sup> Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to **Bethel** and live there, and **make an altar there to God, who appeared to you** when you fled from your brother Esau."

<sup>2</sup> So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments;

<sup>3</sup> and let us arise and go up to **Bethel**, and **I will make an altar there to God**, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone."

<sup>4</sup> So they gave to Jacob all the **foreign gods** which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the **oak which was near Shechem**.

<sup>5</sup> As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

<sup>6</sup> So Jacob came to **Luz (that is, Bethel)**, which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him.

<sup>7</sup> **He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel**, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.

#### GENESIS 35:1-7

As Jacob settles in the land again, he is at the Oak of Moreh at Shechem, exactly where Abraham first camped and built his altar in the land (Genesis 12:4-6). Here Jacob compels his family to leave behind the foreign gods they accumulated while in Mesopotamia, and they bury them under the place where Abraham first worshiped Yahweh in the land. Then Jacob comes to the same place he saw the vision of the stairway, Luz/Bethel, and builds an altar there.

Notice the interchange between Abram and Jacob's interactions with land and tree imagery.

A	Abram: Enters the land / Shechem / altar / vision / oak tree - Genesis 12:6-7
B	Abram: Enters the land / Bethel / altar - Genesis 12:8
B'	Jacob: Leaves the land / Bethel / pillar / vision / almond tree - Genesis 28:10-20
A'	Jacob: Re-enters the land / Shechem / altar / oak tree - Genesis 33:18-20, 35:1-4
B''	Jacob: Re-enters the land / Bethel / altar / vision / oak tree - Genesis 35:8

## Joseph's Eden-Blessing and Trees in Genesis 49

In the closing of Genesis, an aging Jacob (whose name has been changed to Israel) gives final farewell blessings to his sons in the form of a poem. Joseph's blessing is of note and full of Eden-tree imagery.

Joseph is a **fruitful branch**,  
**A fruitful branch by a spring**;  
Its **branches** run over a wall...  
From the God of your father who helps you,  
And by the Almighty who **blesses** you  
With **blessings** of heaven above,  
**Blessings** of the deep that lies beneath,  
**Blessings** of the breasts and of the womb.  
The **blessings** of your father  
Have surpassed the **blessings** of my ancestors  
**Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting mountains**;  
May they be on the head of Joseph,  
And on the crown of the head of the one distinguished  
among his brothers.

GENESIS 49:22-26

## Joseph is an image of the tree of life!

Why is this significant? Joseph suffered persecution from his brothers and was sold unto death. Yet he was vindicated and exalted to a place of leadership among the nations. When faced with the choice to be a tree of blessing or a “thorn person,” Joseph chose the former. Even though Joseph is one of the youngest sons, a significant portion of the narrative is spent on his story. This is likely why Joseph is described with Eden-tree imagery here—a tree planted by streams of water, who mediates the blessing of “eternal mountains” to others.

## Sacred Trees in the Exodus Story

In a miraculous move of God’s provision, the family of Joseph is saved from famine and settles in Egypt. Several hundred years later, they find themselves numerous enough to form a nation. Pharaoh senses the threat and begins oppressing the people. The book of Exodus starts here and follows the journey of the people and their reluctant leader Moses out of Egypt. It should come as no surprise that this significant moment in Israel’s history is full of tree imagery.

## Moses Meets God at Mount Sinai at the S’neh Bush

When we first meet Moses in Exodus 2, he is introduced as a “new Noah.”

*Now a man from the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi.*

*The woman conceived and bore a son; and when **she saw that he was good**, she hid him for three months.*

*But when she could hide him no longer, she got him an **ark of reeds** (תבה גומא) and **covered it over with tar and pitch**. Then she put the child into it and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.*

EXODUS 2:1-3

We then jump to adult Moses meeting God on a mountain top by a tree.

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, **the mountain of God**.

The angel of the Lord **appeared** to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a **bush** (Heb. *s'neh* סנה); and he **looked**, and behold, the **bush** was burning with fire, yet the **bush** was not consumed.

So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and **see** this marvelous **sight** (Heb. *Mar'eh* מארה) why the **bush** is not burned up."

When the Lord saw that he turned aside to **look**, God called to him from the midst of the **bush** and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

Then he said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for **the place on which you are standing is holy ground.**"

He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was **afraid to look** at God.

"Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"

And he said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought **the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.**"

EXODUS 3:1-6, 10-12

Things to note in this passage:

- Moses (who is a new Noah, also saved by an ark in Exodus 2) meets with God atop a new Eden-mountain in a fire-vision under a bush-tree called *s'neh*, a pun on the name Sinai.
- His encounter on the mountain is a sign/symbol of the time when all Israel will meet God on this same mountain in fire and fear.
- The verb root "see/fear" is the same as in Genesis 22, where Abraham met with God on Mount Moriah. This also sets up the same expectation about this place. Just as Abraham had to give up his son for his sins, only to receive him back through a substitute, Moses will also have to give up his own life as a substitute for the sins of his people, only to receive it back again.
- Notice that this meeting place of heaven and earth, of God and human, is described as a "holy place" that requires humans to change their ritual status before they enter. In this way, the holy mountain becomes an anticipatory image of the tabernacle, temple, and the new Jerusalem.



## Sacred Eden Trees in the Wilderness

On the way out of Egypt, God leads the people into a test of faith as they run out of water. This also happens to be the same place Hagar ran out of water in Genesis 16.

*Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness and **found no water**.*

*When they came to Marah, they **could not drink the waters** of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah.*

*So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall **we drink?**"*

*Then he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him **a tree**, and he **threw it into the waters**, and the **waters became sweet**.*

*There he made for them a statute and regulation, **and there he tested them**.*

*And he said, "If you will **listen-listen to the voice** of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the Lord, am your healer."*

*Then they came to **Elim (oak trees)** where there were **twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees**, and they camped there **beside the waters**.*

EXODUS 15:22-27

Things to note in this passage:

- Israel is led into a dry land where there is water that is not drinkable. And instead of crying out to God to "heal" the waters, they grumble against God.
- But Moses intercedes (צעק), and God shows him a tree (עץ), which he casts into the waters so that they become sweet.
- These are all Eden images. The bitter water provided in the wilderness can become sweet by means of a tree, if only God's people pass the test. This test (נסה) is about whether or not they will "listen to the voice."
- This is followed by a story about a place called "oak trees," where there are springs of water and lots of trees, just like Eden. If God's people pass the test, the life of Eden is given to them.

## Moses, Israel, and God at Mount "Tree-Bush"

Moses brings all of Israel to Mount Sinai to meet with God, where they will face their greatest test.

## What is the significance of Mount Sinai?

The name “Sinai” recalls the s’neh bush of Exodus 3, and it later becomes associated with the test (נסה) by the spelling of its name, Sinai (סיני) // “test” (נסי). While the “bush-tree” of Exodus 3 is not mentioned, it doesn’t need to be. The mountain is named after it, so that the entire Sinai narrative becomes an Eden-space—a high mountain surrounded by wilderness with a tree on top, where one representative human meets with God.

*In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of **Sinai** (סיני).*

*When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of **Sinai** (סיני) and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain.*

*All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.*

*Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and **we will listen**; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.”*

*Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to **test** (׳וּסִי) you, and in order that the fear of him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.”*

EXODUS 19:1-2

Israel’s test is the same test given to Adam, Eve, and Abraham. Will they listen to God’s voice instead of the voice of “the other” who speaks lies?

*Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel:*

*‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to myself.*

*Now then, **if you will listen-listen to my voice** and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine;*

*and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.”*

EXODUS 19:3-6

The story continues as we wait and see how Israel will respond to this test. Unfortunately, led by their priest Aaron, they fail the test in a similar way to Adam and Eve. This is the famous golden calf story found in Exodus 32.

*Now when the people **saw** that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not have **knowledge** what has become of him.”*

*Aaron said to them, “Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”*

*Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.*

**and he took** from their hand, and he **formed it** with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "**This is your god**, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."

**And Aaron saw**, he **built** an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord."

So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down **to eat** and to drink, and rose up to play.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.

They have quickly turned aside **from the way which I commanded them**. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!"

The Lord said to Moses, "**I have seen** these people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation."

#### EXODUS 32:1-10

This story sets the design pattern for Israel's idolatry—worshiping false gods near Eden-mountains with sacred trees on top. This paves the way for the future stories of high places, Asherah poles and "luxuriant trees" in Israel's story.

However, after this failure, Moses offers his own life as a sacrifice of atonement on the mountain with the S'neh bush.

On the next day Moses said to the people, "You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now **I am going up to the Lord**, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

Then Moses returned to the Lord, and said, "Alas, these people have committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves.

**But now, if you will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from your book which you have written!"**

The Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot him out of my book."

#### EXODUS 32:30-33

Moses' words echo God's command to Abraham:

Offer him (העלה) up as a going-up offering (לעלה)	And now I am going up (אעלה) to Yahweh
GENESIS 22:2	EXODUS 32:30

Also, Moses' words are a double-entendre in Hebrew, as the consonants can be vocalized in multiple ways. Here are the two options:

1. "And now, **I will go up (e'eleh)** to Yahweh; perhaps I can atone for your sins."
2. "And now, **I will make a going up offering (a'aleh)** to Yahweh; perhaps I can atone for your sins."

Moses then proceeds to offer up his life in the place of the people. Coincidence? We think not.

## The Tabernacle as a Sacred Tree Garden

The people settle in at the foot of the mountain. Since they cannot go up to the top of the mountain to interact with God’s presence, God brings his presence down to them through the building of the tabernacle. The tabernacle built at the foot of the mountain is essentially a “mini-Eden” made of sacred trees.

The ark of the covenant placed in the tabernacle resembles Noah’s ark.

ARK OF NOAH Genesis 6:14-15	ARK OF THE COVENANT Exodus 25:10-11	ATONEMENT COVER Exodus 25:17
“Make (עשה) for yourself an ark (תבה) of woods/trees (עץ) of <b>gopher</b> (גפר)...”	“Make (עשה) an ark (ארון) of wood of acacia...”	“Make (עשה) an atonement cover (capporet / כפרת) of pure gold...”
“and you will pitch (copher / כפר) it with pitch (copher / כפר), inside and outside (מבית ומחוץ)...”	“and you will overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside (מבית ומחוץ)...”	
“three hundred cubits its length (ארכו), fifty cubits its width (רחבו), and thirty cubits its height (קמתו).”	“two and a half cubits its length (ארכו), a cubit and a half its width (רחבו), and a cubit and a half its height (קמתו).”	“two and a half cubits its length (ארכו), and a cubit and a half its width (רחבו).”

The three-part design of Eden is matched by the three stories of the ark and the three-part design of the tabernacle.

EDEN	THE ARK	TABERNACLE	THE TEMPLE
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eden</li> <li>Garden</li> <li>Tree of life in the middle</li> </ol>	<p><b>Genesis 6:16</b></p> <p>“You shall make a window for the ark, and finish it to a cubit from above; and set the door (פתח) of the ark in the side of it; you shall make it with lowers (תחתיות), seconds, and thirds (שלישים).”</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Courtyard</li> <li>Tabernacle</li> <li>Holy of holies</li> </ol>	<p><b>1 Kings 6:6, 8</b></p> <p>“The lowest (תחתונה) story was five cubits wide, and the middle was six cubits wide, and the third (שלישית) was seven cubits wide; for on the outside he made offsets in the wall of the house all around in order that the beams would not be inserted in the walls of the house....</p> <p>The door (פתח) for the lowest side chamber was on the right side of the house; and they would go up by winding stairs to the middle story, and from the middle to the third.”</p>
MATERIALS			
Tree of life	Gopher wood	Acacia wood	Cedar of Lebanon (1 Kings 6:9, 10, 15, 36) Cypress (1 Kings 6:15, 34) Olive wood (1 Kings 6:23, 31)

# Israel in the Promised Land: Sacred Trees and Exile

After the exodus and wilderness journeys, Israel enters into the promised land. However, things start going downhill quickly. The people start worshiping other gods on top of false-Edens, “the high places” (Heb. *bamah* בָּמָה). These high places can refer to actual tall hills.

*“Ar of Moab, the kings of the **high places** of Arnon...”*

NUMBERS 21:28

*“He made him ride on the **high places** of the earth...”*

DEUTERONOMY 32:13

*“Blessed are you, O Israel;  
Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord,  
Who is the shield of your help  
And the sword of your majesty!  
So your enemies will cringe before you,  
And you will tread upon their **high places**.”*

DEUTERONOMY 33:29

High places can also refer to *symbolic* mountains where people worshiped their gods, like when Samuel dedicates a meal or Solomon worships Yahweh at a high place (Heb. *bamah*).

*They answered them and said, “He is; see, he is ahead of you. Hurry now, for he has come into the city today, for the people have a sacrifice on the **high place** today. As soon as you enter the city you will find him before he goes up to the **high place** to eat, for the people will not eat until he comes, because he must bless the sacrifice; afterward those who are invited will eat. Now therefore, go up for you will find him at once.” So they went up to the city. As they came into the city, behold, Samuel was coming out toward them to go up to the **high place**.*

1 SAMUEL 9:12-14

*Now Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except he sacrificed and burned incense on the **high places**. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great **high place**; Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.*

1 KINGS 3:3-4

Unfortunately, key leaders of Israel are often found worshiping other gods in the high places. For example, Solomon builds a high place for Chemosh, the god of Moab.

*On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built **a high place** for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.*

1 KINGS 11:7-8

In another example, Jeroboam builds alternative temples in northern Israel and builds houses on the high places.

*Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will return to the house of David. If this people **go up** to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will return to their lord, even to Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah."*

*So the king consulted, and **made two golden calves**, and he said to them, "It is too much for you to **go up** to Jerusalem; **behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.**" He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. And he made **houses on high places**, and made priests from among all the people who were not of the sons of Levi.*

1 KINGS 12:26-30

## The Luxuriant Trees and Asherah

You'll also find two other tree imagery categories that appear in the more rebellious parts of Israel's story. First, the people plant "trees of luxuriance" on the high places. Notice how the Hebrew words for "trees of Eden" (Heb. 'ets eden עץ עדן) and "trees of luxuriance" (Heb. 'ets ra'anan / עץ רענן) include similar letters, which are jumbled up, signifying the backwards nature of these trees.

TREES OF EDEN	TREES OF LUXURIANCE
'ets eden    עץ עדן	'ets ra'anan / עץ רענן

Next is Ashera (אשרה), a Canaanite goddess of fertility, whose rituals were performed in gardens and on tall hills before a ritual tree. This word is also a scrambled version of the Hebrew word for blessing, "asher" (Heb. אשר). In this way, the word functions as a sort of "anti-blessing." Take a look at some passages that include reference to the luxuriant trees and Ashera.

*You shall not **plant for yourself an Asherah of any kind of tree** beside the altar of the Lord your God, which you shall make for yourself. You shall not set up for yourself a sacred pillar which the Lord your God hates.*

DEUTERONOMY 16:21-22

*Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger. So they forsook the Lord and **served Baal and the Ashtaroth.***

JUDGES 2:11-13

Now Rehoboam the son of Solomon reigned in Judah. Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city which the Lord had chosen from all the tribes of Israel to put his name there. And his mother's name was Naamah the Ammonites. Judah did evil in the sight of the Lord, and they provoked him to jealousy more than all that their fathers had done, with the sins which they committed. For they also **built for themselves high places and sacred pillars and Asherim on every high hill and beneath every luxuriant tree.** There were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel.

1 KINGS 14:21-24

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Hephzibah. He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel. For **he rebuilt the high places** which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and **he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah**, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and **worshiped all the host of heaven and served them.** He **built altars in the house of the Lord**, of which the Lord had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my name." For he **built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.** He made his son pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord provoking him to anger. Then he **set the carved image of Asherah that he had made, in the house of** which the Lord said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever."

2 KINGS 21:1-7

## Jerusalem as a New Eden

The trees of Israel's high places are contrasted with the high place that is Jerusalem, a new Eden that God grants to David. Here's how the story unfolds in the book of Samuel.

David captures and establishes Jerusalem as the capitol

Now the king and his men went to **Jerusalem** against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, and they said to David, "You shall not come in here, but the blind and lame will turn you away;" thinking, "David cannot enter here." Nevertheless, David **captured the stronghold of Zion, that is the city of David...** Then Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David with **cedar trees and carpenters and stonemasons; and they built a house for David.** And David realized that the Lord had established him as king over Israel, and that he had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel.

2 SAMUEL 5:6-7

<p>David brings the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem</p>	<p><i>And so it was, that when the bearers of the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling.</i></p> <p><i>And David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, and David was wearing a linen ephod.</i></p> <p><b>So David and all the house of Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouting and the sound of the trumpet.</b></p> <p><i>So they brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent which David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.</i></p> <p><i>When David had finished offering the burnt offering and the peace offering, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts.</i></p> <p><i>Further, <b>he distributed to all the people</b>, to all the multitude of Israel, both to men and women, <b>a cake of bread and one of dates and one of raisins to each one</b>. Then all the people departed each to his house.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">2 SAMUEL 6:13-15</p>
<p>God promises to “plant” a new garden from the seed of David</p>	<p><i>“Now therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth.</i></p> <p><b><i>I will also appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them</i></b>, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly,</p> <p><i>even from the day that I commanded judges to be over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. The Lord also declares to you that the Lord will make a house for you.</i></p> <p><i>When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your <b>seed</b> after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom.</i></p> <p><b><i>He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”</i></b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">2 SAMUEL 7:8-13</p>

Just like God planted people in Eden, now he is going to plant a new people in this new Eden. From that group of people, a seed of David will arise to build a new temple/house. The promise extends further as this seed will receive an eternal throne in God’s Kingdom. This concept lays the foundation for the hope of Israel’s prophets as they await the righteous seed amidst the turmoil of their nation.

## Tree Imagery in the Scroll of Isaiah

The scroll of Isaiah is full of tree imagery to warn and encourage Israel in the face of exile. In this first example, notice how Isaiah regularly uses inverted Eden imagery to parody Israel’s choice of the high places.



Zion will be redeemed with justice  
And her repentant ones with righteousness.  
But transgressors and sinners will be crushed together,  
And those who forsake the Lord will come to an end.  
Surely you will be **ashamed** of the **oaks** which you have **desired**,  
And you will be **ashamed** at the **gardens** which you have chosen.  
For you will be like an **oak** whose **leaf** fades away  
Or as a **garden** that has **no water**.

ISAIAH 1:27-30

Notice here how Isaiah describes Jerusalem as an anti-Eden, whose tree of life has become a dying tree and whose water of life has dried up. It's also a sort of hyperlink to Psalm 1, inverting the ideal "tree person."

Isaiah also uses Eden imagery to accuse Israel of their failure to spread the Eden blessing to the people.

Let me sing now for my well-beloved  
A song of my beloved concerning his **vineyard**.  
My well-beloved had a **vineyard on a fertile hill**.  
He dug it all around, removed its stones,  
And **planted** it with the **choicest vine**.  
And he built a tower in the middle of it  
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;  
Then he expected it to produce good grapes,  
But it produced only worthless ones.  
And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,  
Judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard  
that I have not done in it?  
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?  
So now let me tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard:  
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;  
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.  
I will lay it waste;  
It will not be pruned or hoed,  
But **briars and thorns will come up**.  
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.  
For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel  
And the men of Judah **his delightful plant**.  
Thus he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;  
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

ISAIAH 5:1-7

Isaiah announces that Yahweh is going to purge Israel to create a new holy remnant. They will be like a small growth emerging from a stump.

Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And he answered,  
"Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant,  
Houses are without people  
And the land is utterly desolate,  
The Lord has removed men far away,  
And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.  
Yet there will be a tenth portion in it,  
And it will again be subject to burning,  
Like a terebinth or an oak  
Whose stump remains when it is felled.  
**The holy seed is its stump."**

ISAIAH 6:11-13

The rest of the book of Isaiah develops this image of the new seed/growth that God will sprout in the new Jerusalem on the other side of the exile. Particularly vivid tree imagery occurs in connection with a coming messianic king.

Behold, the Lord, the God of hosts, will lop off the **boughs**  
with a terrible crash;  
Those also who are **tall in stature** will be cut down  
And those who are lofty will be abased.  
He will cut down the **thickets of the forest** with an iron axe,  
And **Lebanon** will fall by the mighty one.

Then a **shoot** will spring **from the stem of Jesse**,  
And a **branch** from his **roots** will **bear fruit**.  
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him,  
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
The spirit of counsel and strength,  
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord...

But with righteousness he will judge the poor,  
And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth;  
And he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
And with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,  
And the leopard will lie down with the young goat,  
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;  
And a little boy will lead them.  
Also the cow and the bear will graze,  
Their young will lie down together,  
And the lion will eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra,  
And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy in all **my holy mountain**,  
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
As the waters cover the sea.

Then in that day  
The nations will resort to **the root of Jesse**,  
Who will stand as a signal for the peoples;  
And his resting place will be glorious.

ISAIAH 10:33-11:10

Who has believed our message?  
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?  
For he **grew** up before him **like a tender shoot**,  
And like a **root** out of parched ground;  
He has no stately form or majesty  
That we should look upon him,  
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to him.

ISAIAH 53:1-2

Based on the imagery from these passages, we could derive the nickname “branch-man” for this coming messianic king. Corresponding to this messianic branch-man, God will grow a new people who are consistently portrayed as new plants and trees in the language of Eden. Take a look at the following passages:

In the days to come Jacob will **take root**,  
Israel will **blossom and sprout**,  
And they will **fill** the whole world with **fruit**.

ISAIAH 27:6

Then this shall be the sign for you: you will eat this year what grows of itself, in the second year what **springs** from the same, and in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

The **surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root downward and bear fruit upward**.

For out of Jerusalem will go forth a remnant and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

ISAIAH 37:30-32

The **afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none**,

And their tongue is parched with thirst;  
I, the Lord, will answer them myself,  
As the God of Israel I will not forsake them.

**I will open rivers on the bare heights**  
And springs in the midst of the valleys;

**I will make the wilderness a pool of water**  
And the dry land fountains of water.

**I will** put the **cedar** in the wilderness,  
The **acacia and the myrtle** and the olive tree;

**I will** place the **juniper** in the desert  
Together with **the box tree and the cypress**,

That they may see and recognize,  
And consider and gain insight as well,  
That the hand of the Lord has done this,  
And the holy one of Israel has created it.

ISAIAH 41:17-20

For **I will pour out water on the thirsty land**  
And streams on the dry ground;  
**I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring**  
And my blessing on your **seed**;  
And they will **spring up** among the grass  
**Like poplar trees by streams of water.**  
This one will say, "I am the Lord's;"  
And that one will call on the name of Jacob;  
And another will write on his hand, "Belonging  
to the Lord,"  
And will name Israel's name with honor.

ISAIAH 44:3-5

Then **all your people will be righteous**;  
They **will possess the land** forever,  
The **branch** of my **planting**,  
The work of my hands,  
That I may be glorified.

ISAIAH 60:21

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
Because the Lord has anointed me  
To bring good news to the afflicted;  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to captives  
And freedom to prisoners;  
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord  
And the day of vengeance of our God;  
To comfort all who mourn,  
To grant those who mourn in Zion,  
Giving them a garland instead of ashes,  
The oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting.  
So **they will be called oaks of righteousness,**  
**The planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified...**

For as **the earth brings forth its sprouts,**  
And as **a garden causes the things seeded in it to**  
**sprout up,**  
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
To **sprout up** before all the nations.

ISAIAH 61:4,11

Matching the branch-man and the new growth of people is the imagery of a new Eden-temple growing in the desert.

*The wilderness and the desert will be glad,  
And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom;  
Like the crocus  
It will blossom profusely  
And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy.  
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,  
The majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They will see the glory of the Lord,  
The majesty of our God.*

ISAIAH 35:1-2

The imagery of a desert wilderness blossoming into a garden is an Eden image. Lebanon/Carmel/Sharon refers to trees and settings associated with the temple, another Eden image.

## The Tree of Life in Ezekiel

Ezekiel—a prophet during the time of exile—receives a vision of a renewed tree of life.

*Then he brought me back to the door of the house; and behold, water was flowing from under the threshold of the house toward the east, for the house faced east. And the water was flowing down from under, from the right side of the house, from south of the altar.*

*He brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate by way of the gate that faces east. And behold, water was trickling from the south side.*

*When the man went out toward the east with a line in his hand, he measured a thousand cubits, and he led me through the water, water reaching the ankles.*

*Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water, water reaching the knees. Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water, water reaching the loins.*

*Again he measured a thousand; and it was a river that I could not ford, for the water had risen, enough water to swim in, a river that could not be forded.*

*He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" Then he brought me back to the bank of the river.*

*Now when I had returned, behold, on the bank of the river there were very many trees on the one side and on the other.*

*Then he said to me, "These waters go out toward the eastern region and go down into the Arabah; then they go toward the sea, being made to flow into the sea, and the waters of the sea become fresh...By the river on its bank, on one side and on the other, will grow **all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither and their fruit will not fail. They will bear every month** because their water flows from the sanctuary, and **their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.**"*

EZEKIEL 47:1-12

The image of the tree of life remained a symbol for the restoration of God's people, even in the midst of the tragic exile.

# The Tree of Life in the Psalms and Wisdom Literature

Humans as trees is a frequent metaphor found in Israel's poetry and wisdom literature. For example, the Psalms scroll begins by introducing a righteous royal figure who becomes a tree of life by meditating on the Scriptures. The author is clearly building upon previous ideas found in Deuteronomy and Joshua. Take a look at the similarities:

<p><i>How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!</i> <b>But his delight is in the Torah of Yahweh, And in his Torah he meditates day and night.</b> <i>He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.</i></p> <p>PSALM 1:1-3</p>	<p><i>When [your king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, he will write for himself a copy of this <b>Torah on a scroll...</b> and <b>he shall read it all the days of his life.</b></i></p> <p>DEUTERONOMY 17:18</p>	<p><i>Be careful to do according to all the <b>Torah</b> which Moses my servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. <b>This scroll of the Torah</b> shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall <b>meditate on it day and night</b>, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; <b>for then you will make your way prosperous</b>, and then you will have success.</i></p> <p>JOSHUA 1:7-8</p>
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Proverbs 3 presents Lady Wisdom as a tree of life for the sons of David.

*How blessed is the man who finds wisdom  
And the man who gains understanding.  
For her profit is better than the profit of silver  
And her gain better than fine gold.  
She is more precious than jewels;  
And nothing you desire compares with her.  
Long life is in her right hand;  
In her left hand are riches and honor.  
Her ways are pleasant ways  
And all her paths are peace.  
**She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her,**  
And happy are all who hold her fast.*

PROVERBS 3:13-18

Song of Songs chapter 8 portrays the union of the two lovers underneath an Eden-tree, celebrating their love that overcomes death. It's portrayed as an inversion of the Genesis 3 story.

Who is this coming up from the wilderness  
Leaning on her beloved?

**Beneath the apple tree** I awakened you;  
There your mother was in labor with you,  
There she was in labor and gave you birth.  
Put me like a seal over your heart,  
Like a seal on your arm.

For **love is as strong as death**,  
Jealousy is as severe as Sheol;  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
The very **flame of the Lord**.

SONG OF SONGS 8:5-6

## Tree Imagery in the Gospel Accounts

When Jesus arrives on the scene, he announces that the reign and rule of God has arrived through him. This should transport readers back to God's intention of ruling the world with human partners in Genesis 1. Since then, humans have continued to fail in the high places and take from the wrong tree. So God himself comes to earth to become the partners we were created—but failed—to be. It should come as no surprise that Jesus' most decisive actions and teachings involve tree imagery. Let's look at a few incidences in the following pages.

### Trees and Plants in Jesus' Parables of the Kingdom

The parables are Jesus' most expansive and creative teachings on the coming Kingdom of God. These parables are also full of garden and tree imagery. On one level, Jesus grew up in an agricultural society, so using plants and seeds as metaphors makes sense. But if we follow the leading of the Gospel authors, we'll see the deep connections back to the imagery in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here are a few examples.

**A farmer went out to sow his seed.** As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still **other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.** Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: **When anyone hears the word (λογος) of the Kingdom** and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. **But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.**

MATTHEW 13:3B-9, 18-23

Jesus told them another parable: **“The Kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.** But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

MATTHEW 13:24-30

He told them another parable: “The **Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,** which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet **when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.**”

MATTHEW 13:31-32

**I am the true vine,** and my Father is the vinedresser.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me. **I am the vine, you are the branches;** he who abides in me and I in him, **he bears much fruit,** for apart from me you can do nothing.

JOHN 15:1, 4-5

These parables all fit into the larger tree imagery pattern found in the Bible. Jesus is talking about the Kingdom as a garden that is growing new, surprisingly large amounts of plants and fruits. He is now inviting people to be planted in this garden. John 15 reveals Jesus himself as the source of life we need to connect ourselves to.

## Jesus and the Cursed Fig Tree

The cursing of the fig tree in Mark 11 is one of Jesus’ more mysterious actions. However, we find clarity when we look at the passage in light of its prophetic intertexts. This passage includes a potent combination of claims about Jesus’ messianic identity and his prophetic authority to announce the destruction of the temple. Here’s an overview of the narrative sequence:

A	11:1-11: Jesus’ royal entry into Jerusalem [key intertext: Psalm 118:26]
B	11:12-14: Jesus curses the fig tree: first time
A’	11:15-18: Jesus’ prophetic sign act in the temple courts [key intertexts: Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7]
B’	11:19-26: Jesus curses the fig tree: second time [key intertexts: Jeremiah 8:13 and Micah 7:1-4]



Let's zoom in closer to several of these sections and view their prophetic intertexts alongside them.

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE	PROPHETIC INTERTEXTS
<p>And he entered <b>the temple</b> and began to drive out those who were <b>buying and selling in the temple</b>, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves;</p> <p>and he would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple.</p>	<p>Also the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, To minister to him, and to love the name of the Lord...</p> <p><b>For my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">ISAIAH 56:6-7</p>
<p>And he taught and said to them, "Is it not written, '<b>My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?</b>' But <b>you have made it a robbers' den.</b>"</p> <p style="text-align: right;">MARK 11:15-17</p>	<p><b>"Has this house</b>, which is called by my name, <b>become a den of robbers</b> in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," declares the Lord.</p> <p>"But go now to my place which was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">JEREMIAH 7:11-12</p>
	<p>In that day there will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the Lord." And the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the bowls before the altar. Every cooking pot in Jerusalem and in Judah will be holy to the Lord of hosts; and all who sacrifice will come and take of them and boil in them. <b>And there will no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts in that day.</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">ZECHARIAH 14:20-21</p>

JESUS AND THE FIG TREE	PROPHETIC INTERTEXTS
<p>Seeing at a distance <b>a fig tree</b> in leaf, he went to see if perhaps he would find anything on it; and when he came to it, he <b>found nothing but leaves</b>, for it was not the time for figs.</p> <p>He said to it, "<b>May no one ever eat fruit from you again!</b>"</p> <p style="text-align: right;">MARK 11:13-14</p> <p><b>11:15-18, the temple incident</b></p>	<p>"At <b>the time of their punishment</b> they shall be brought down," Says the Lord.</p> <p>"I will surely snatch them away," declares the Lord; "There will be no grapes on the vine And <b>no figs on the fig tree</b>, And <b>the leaf will wither</b>; And what I have given them will pass away."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">JEREMIAH 8:12-13</p>
<p>When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, <b>they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.</b></p> <p>Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! <b>The fig tree you cursed has withered!</b>"</p> <p>"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to <b>this mountain</b>, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">MARK 11:19-24</p>	<p>What misery is mine! <b>I am like one who gathers summer fruit</b> at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, <b>none of the early figs that I crave.</b> The faithful have been swept from the land; not one upright person remains.... The day when you post your watchmen, <b>Your punishment will come.</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">MICAH 7:1-2, 4</p>

What does it all mean? Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is a prophetic sign act, and the parabolic meaning is connected to his actions in the temple. The cursing and withering of the fig tree is an image of the destruction of Jerusalem planned by God because of its many sins and violation of the covenant. Jesus' warning that he is praying for "this mountain" to be thrown into the sea is an analogue to the withering fig tree.

## Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane

Nearing his death and resurrection, Jesus goes to a garden with his disciples. The location is called by various titles in the Gospel accounts.

*Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called **Gethsemane**.*

MATTHEW 26:36

*They went to a place called **Gethsemane**...*

MARK 14:32

*Jesus went out as usual to the **Mount of Olives**...*

LUKE 22:39

*When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a **garden**, and he and his disciples went into it. Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples.*

JOHN 18:1-2

The word "gethsemane," found in Matthew and Mark's account, may not be a familiar term. The word is a transliteration of the Hebrew/Aramaic word "gat šěmenê" ("oil press"), presumably used here to refer to the site of an oil press in an olive grove on the slope of the Mount of Olives (see Luke's account). John speaks of a garden across the Kidron Valley from the city of Jerusalem (J.B. Green, "Gethsemane").

In the garden, Jesus struggles and prays for deliverance, and then he submits himself to the divine plan. This is Jesus' and the disciples' "test" among the garden trees, in analogy to Adam and Eve's test in the garden. Take a look at Matthew's account of this event.

*Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called **Gethsemane**, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death [Psalm 42:5, 11] Stay here and keep watch with me."*

*Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."*

*Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray **so that you will not enter into a test**. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the **Son of Humanity** is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

MATTHEW 26:36-45

## Golgotha Hill and Jesus' Execution "On the Tree"

If you're familiar with the Gospel accounts, you've heard of Jesus' death taking place on the cross. But have you ever made the connection with the cross being a tree? Let's take a look at the significance found in this part of the story.

So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own **cross**, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called **Golgotha**). There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

JOHN 19:16-18

Every Gospel account makes a special note about where this event took place. So what is the meaning of the location Golgotha? Scholar Rainer Riesner expands on the definition.

*The "Garden Tomb" north of the Damascus gate at the alleged hill of Golgotha is a place where one may envision the Easter events. But its origins are pious speculations of the nineteenth century, excluded by the archeological data that demonstrate a pre-exilic tomb. Recent investigations (GBL 1.480–82) show rather that the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre actually lay a bit outside the city wall (cf. Mt 28:11; Jn 19:17–42) in the vicinity of a gate (Heb 13:12; cf. Josephus, J.W. 5.146 [Gennath- (i.e., garden) gate]) and a busy street (Mt 27:39). Remains of the temple of Aphrodite have also been found, which Hadrian in a.d. 135 erected to displace a Jewish Christian worship site (ELS 619ff.). Golgotha was a rock formation that took shape as a result of quarrying activity. It rose as high as twelve meters and owed its Aramaic name gûlgultââ' or Hebrew name gulgôlet (Gk. Golgotha), "the skull" (Lk 23:33; cf. Mt 27:33; Mk 15:22; Jn 19:17), to its shape.*

R. RIESNER, "ARCHEOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY," ED. JOEL B. GREEN, JEANNINE K. BROWN, AND NICHOLAS PERRIN, DICTIONARY OF JESUS AND THE GOSPELS, SECOND EDITION (DOWNS GROVE, IL; NOTTINGHAM, ENGLAND: IVP ACADEMIC; IVP, 2013), 55.

The Gospel authors want us to see Jesus carrying a tree to the top of a man-made hill, right outside the city that has become another man-made tree of life (the Jerusalem temple). It's an interesting detail for the authors to draw our attention to.

## The Cross = The Tree

There is a Greek word for “cross,” however, the New Testament authors rarely use it. Rather, the Roman cross of Jesus’ execution is regularly called “the tree” (ξύλον). This intention is likely linked to the imagery found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

*The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by **hanging him on a tree**. He is the one whom God exalted to his right hand as ruler and deliverer.*

ACTS 5:30

*You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses of all the things he did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put him to death by **hanging him on a tree**. God raised him up on the third day...*

ACTS 10:38-40

*And though they found no ground for putting him to death, they asked Pilate that he be executed. When they had carried out all that was written concerning him, they **took him down from the tree** and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead.*

ACTS 13:28-30

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “**Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree**”—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

GALATIANS 3:13-14

*If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you **hang him on a tree**, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day, **for he who is hanged is cursed by God**, so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance.*

DEUTERONOMY 21:22-23

*For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps,*

*who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth;*

*and while being reviled, he did not revile in return; while suffering, he uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously;*

*and he himself **carried our sins in his body on the tree**, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by his wounds you were healed.*

*For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*

1 PETER 2:21-25

# The Tree of Life in the Revelation

In the book of Revelation, John receives a vision of Jesus enthroned as king over heaven and earth. As a result of his encounter, he offers encouragement and warning to seven churches following Jesus in Asia Minor. In the conclusion of his letter to the Ephesians, John states:

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the **tree of life** which is in the **Paradise of God (garden of God)**.*

REVELATION 2:7

Following Jesus means eating from the tree of life now, to a degree. However, John points to the future, complete experience of eating from the tree of life in the new Eden. Jesus himself hints at this truth, saying that the Kingdom of God is here, but it's small like a mustard seed for now. The rest of the book of Revelation reveals how Jesus' followers should live in this now and not yet reality. In the epic conclusion of the Bible, we see a picture of the renewed heavens and earth tying together all the tree imagery that's come before.

*Then I saw a **new heaven and a new earth**; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.*

*And I saw the holy city, **new Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.*

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the **tabernacle of God** is among men, and he will **dwelt among them**, and they shall be his people, and **God himself will be among them.**"*

*And he carried me away in the Spirit to **a great and high mountain**, and showed me **the holy city**, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper.*

*Then he showed me **a river of the water of life**, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. **On either side of the river was the tree of life**, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and **the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.***

*"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."*

*Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to **the tree of life**, and may enter by the gates into the city.*

REVELATION 21:1-3, 10-11; 22:1-2, 13-14

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