

The Tree of Life

The tree of life is one of the most crucial symbols in the Bible, mainly appearing in the second and last chapters of the Bible. Its significance, however, spans the divine revelation of the entire Scriptures. In Genesis 2 the tree of life is in the midst of the garden of Eden; in Revelation 22 the tree of life is in the center of the holy city, New Jerusalem. Between these two ends of the Bible we see the growth and enlargement of the tree of life. This article seeks to examine the significance of the tree of life, especially in the reopening of the way to the tree of life through redemption after the fall of man, the growth of the tree of life, and its ultimate consummation in the New Jerusalem.

The Significance of the Tree of Life in Genesis

The Bible employs many symbols to signify divine and mystical realities. One of the first and most striking symbols is the tree of life in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9). The two parts of the expression, *tree* and *life*, are significant by themselves, and the entire phrase *tree of life* has additional significance.

Tree signifies a life created by God with outstanding characteristics displayed in its growth, reproduction, and longevity. "Trees reveal a remarkable power of annual or periodic renewal and persistent revivification which may appear to be of almost endless duration" (James 247).¹ The Bible often draws attention to the features of the tree life. The growth and expansion of trees are more striking than that of animals (e.g., a vine branching out over obstacles, Gen. 49:22). Trees can grow again after being cut down (Job 14:7); parts of some trees can be grafted into other trees (Rom. 11:16-17, 24); and the fruit and seeds of trees (and of plants in general) must fall into the ground (and die) in order to reproduce themselves, even in a prolific manner. Such characteristics of trees testify to the reality of the resurrection life (cf. John 12:24). The evergreen tree symbolizes God in His unchangeableness and eternal newness (Hosea 14:8).

Life signifies the divine, uncreated, incorruptible, indestructible, immortal, eternal life of God (1 Tim. 6:16; Heb. 7:16; John 3:16). This is indicated by the fact that the tree of life has the property of bestowing eternal or everlasting life. Access to the tree of life was forbidden

after Adam and the woman partook of the tree of knowledge lest they eat of the tree of life and live forever (Gen. 3:22-24). The Hebrew word for *life*, *ḥayyim*, is an abstract plural noun which generally refers to the physical life (e.g., referring to the days of someone's life) as well as to a blessed, happy, or spiritual life. Occasionally, *ḥayyim* occurs in conjunction with the words *forever* and *eternal* (Psa. 133:3; Dan. 12:2). God is considered as the source or fountain of life (Psa. 36:9) as well as a being of life (as indicated by numerous occurrences of the expression *as the Lord lives*, using the adjective form *ḥay*). The Septuagint translators mainly translated *ḥayyim* with the Greek word ζωή, which is used in the New Testament to refer to the eternal, divine life of God (occurring at least forty-three times with the word αἰώνιος, *eternal*). The New Testament reveals that Christ is the embodiment of this life to dispense this life to humanity (Col. 2:9; John 1:4; 11:25; 14:6; 10:10).

The tree of life can be viewed as signifying the joining or mingling of something created (a tree) with the uncreated, divine, immortal life of God. Human beings could never partake of the life of God by itself. God dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16). However, because this life has been made available to human beings, being mediated in the form of the tree of life, the life of God can be received by human beings. This symbolic mingling of the life of the Creator with His creation anticipates God's economy and His plan to dispense and mingle Himself as life with humanity. When God then placed human beings before the tree, He confirmed His purpose that humans partake of the divine life and become constituted with it to become mingled with Himself as life. The very act of eating causes the elements of what is eaten to be assimilated into or mingled with the being of the eaters. The eaters become what they eat, at least in constitution. Hence, the goal of the partaking of the tree of life is that the partakers would become parts of the enlarged tree of life consisting of divinity mingled with humanity. This notion is developed in John 15 and consummated in Revelation 22.

Due to the fall of man, which resulted from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of death,² humanity became corrupted, mingled with the sinful nature of Satan; they were constituted sinners, and death

was the issue (Rom. 5:19; 6:23). As a result, the way to the tree of life was closed. This precluded the possibility of the mingling of divinity with humanity, apart from redemption.

Israel as a Tree

Israel is depicted as a vine (Psa. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; 5:10; 6:9; 8:13; Ezek. 15:6; 17:6-8; 19:10; Hosea 10:1; 14:7; Joel 1:7; cf. Matt. 21:33-46), a fig tree (Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7; Matt. 21:19; cf. 24:32), and an olive tree (Hosea 14:6; Rom. 11:17-24), which failed to produce the proper fruit. The law given at Sinai was unable to give life (Gal. 3:21, lit., to make alive or produce life), so all Israel brought forth was thorns and thistles (Isa. 5:6; Ezek. 2:6). As a result of its failures, Israel was cut down (Psa. 80:16). This is the destiny of every tree that does not produce good fruit (Matt. 3:10; 7:19). The devastation of Israel by the empires of Assyria, Babylon, and Rome cut Israel down to the ground (Hosea 9:16; cf. Jer. 5:10; Ezek. 17:9; Rom. 11:17-19). However, a tree is able to grow again after severe pruning or cutting down. Job 14:7-9 states, "There is hope for a tree: / If it is cut down, it will sprout again, / And its tender shoot will not cease. / Though its root grows old in the earth, / And its trunk dies in the dirt, / At the scent of water it will bud / And will produce branches like a new plant." The return from exile was considered as a sprouting forth (2 Kings 19:30; Isa. 27:6; 60:21; Ezek. 17:23; Matt. 24:32; Rom. 11:17-19). However, the returnees also failed to produce proper fruit, and it was left to a descendant of David from whom the proper fruit-bearing vine would come.

Although the royal family of David was devastated, God promised that a descendant of David, as the Messiah or Christ, would come as the shoot (Heb. *ḥoṭer*) sprouting forth or branching (Heb. *nēšer*) out of the tree from the root or stump (Heb. *gēza'*) of the Davidic royal line (Isa. 11:1). Christ is the root (Heb. *šoreš*) of Jesse (v. 10; Rom. 15:12; cf. Isa. 53:2) and root (Rev. 5:5; 22:16) and branch or shoot (Heb. *šemah*—Jer. 23:5; 33:15; cf. Isa. 4:2; Zech. 3:8; 6:12) of David. The sprouting forth of Christ can be considered as the sprouting forth of the true vine, which has been enlarged in John 15 to include the believers in Christ.³

Redemption and the Tree of Life

The reopening of the way to the tree of life required redemption with the termination of the sinful nature. The

accomplishment of redemption required the incarnation and death of Christ. Through incarnation the divine life was mingled with the human life to produce the first God-man. He joined Himself to humanity in the likeness of the flesh of sin, but without sin (Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 John 3:5). Through His death on the cross He condemned sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:3), the issue of the mingling of the satanic element with the human element that had shut the way to the tree of life. His death was accomplished by crucifixion, by hanging on a tree (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; 1 Pet. 2:24; cf. Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23). The tree of the cross opens the way to the tree of life. We could even say, along with early Christian tradition, that the tree of life is the cross,⁴ although (perhaps it is more accurate to say) the crucified Christ is the tree of life (cf. John 15:1). His death on the cross, which dealt with our sinful nature, opened the way to the tree of life. In His resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit. In the compound term *tree of life*, *tree* signifies Christ's death on the tree (the cross) and *life* signifies His becoming the life-giving Spirit through His resurrection.

The connection between the tree of life and the cross is also reinforced by the use of the same Greek word ξύλον for the tree of life and the tree (cross). There are two different Greek words used for tree, ξύλον and δένδρον. Δένδρον refers to a living tree (cf. the English word *rhododendron*, i.e., rose tree); whereas ξύλον refers to both a living tree and wood from a tree (cf. the English word *xylophone*, i.e., wood sound), with the meaning of *wood* for ξύλον much more common than *tree* in classical Greek. This distinction is preserved in the New Testament, where ξύλον almost always refers to wood or timber. It is used nine times to refer to various objects of wood, five times to the cross (as a tree—Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24). It is used five times to refer to the tree of life (Rev. 2:7; 22:2 [twice], 14, 19). The only other time ξύλον refers to a tree is when it is applied figuratively to Christ comparing Himself to the Jewish people before His crucifixion (Luke 23:31).⁵ Otherwise, δένδρον is always used when living trees are mentioned (e.g., Matt. 3:10; 7:17; Luke 13:19; 21:29; Rev. 7:3). The Septuagint translators also used the word ξύλον rather than δένδρον to refer to the tree of life in Genesis.⁶

Access to the tree of life comes from being united to the crucified and resurrected Christ, the life-giving Spirit, who is the tree of life. By believing and being baptized into Him, a human being is united with Him and has access to the tree of life.

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The Vine in John 15

The vine in John 15 is the most striking presentation of the tree of life in terms of what the believers become through their incorporation in Christ. The Lord Jesus declared that He is life (1:4; 11:25; 14:6), and in particular, He revealed Himself as the vine tree and the believers as the branches in the vine (15:1, 5). Hence, He is the tree of life, and the believers as the branches are His enlargement. Christ as the vine and the believers as the branches mutually indwell each other by virtue of their organic union. The vine signifies Christ as the center of God's economy, the organism of the Triune God, a divine-human incorporation, the Father's house, the Body of Christ, and a sign of Christ's universal spreading (Kangas 21-23). The emphasis in John 15 is on the increase and multiplication of life through fruit-bearing. Fruit-bearing is the goal of the pruning (or cleansing—the Greek words are related, v. 2); it is the goal and issue of the mutual abiding (vv. 4-5); it glorifies the Father (v. 8); and it is the purpose for setting the believers as branches in the vine—that they would go forth and bear fruit and that this fruit would remain or abide (the same Greek word μένω is used for both English words, v. 16).

This vine is the true vine, bringing forth the proper fruit. This is in contrast to Israel, which failed to produce the proper fruit. Through bearing fruit, the vine is enlarged and expanded.

The Lampstand(s) in Revelation

An additional symbol of the tree of life is the golden lampstand or *menorah*. Observers were struck by the resemblance of this piece of furniture to a tree. This can be seen in a number of representations of *menorahs* in ancient synagogues that more closely resemble a tree than the stylized *menorahs* in today's synagogues.⁷ While the golden lampstand was not organic in nature, being made out of gold, it was organic in design, with branches, calyxes, buds, and blossoms, etc. (Exo. 25:31-40). This description even gives the idea of growth. "Blossoming indicates growth....The lampstand is a growing tree" (Lee, *Exodus* 1082).

What then is the significance of the lampstand as it relates to the tree of life? The lampstand is made out of gold, which signifies the unchangeable, incorruptible nature of God. This gold is embodied in the shape of a tree, which typifies Christ who is the embodiment of God (Col. 2:9). The blossoming of this tree is actually the shining of the light from the lamps that are shaped as almond blossoms. The seven lamps signify the Spirit or the seven Spirits (Zech. 4:1-10; Rev. 4:5). Just as the tree of life is the embodiment of the life of God in Christ, who is expressed as the life-giving Spirit, so also

the lampstand signifies the Triune God embodied in Christ and expressed as the Spirit. In Revelation 1 there are seven golden lampstands (v. 12). One lampstand has been reproduced and multiplied into seven. These lampstands signify the seven local churches in Asia (v. 20). Eventually, the many local churches as golden lampstands consummate in a universal, eternal, aggregate lampstand—the New Jerusalem. The nature of the New Jerusalem is pure gold, just like the lampstand, and it shines forth the light of God (22:5) through the lamp of the Lamb (21:23), which is diffused through the jasper wall of the city to the whole inhabited earth.

The Tree of Life in Revelation

The verses that mention the tree of life in Revelation underscore both the aspect of supply and what those who are supplied by its fruit become. The overcomers are rewarded by being able to eat the tree of life in the Paradise of God during the millennial kingdom (2:7). The tree of life is unveiled in Revelation 22:2 as the consummation of the vine of John 15 in the New Jerusalem. The tree of life grows on both sides of the river (like a vine). Now the vine tree is an integral part of the holy city, the mutual habitation of God and humanity. This enlarged vine tree includes all the believers. Not only does it represent God mingled with humanity in Christ but the enlargement of that mingling in His believers.

The tree of life growing alongside the river of life in the city of God is the ultimate consummation of a number of references in which individuals are likened to trees, either beside water (Jer. 17:7-8; cf. Isa. 44:4; Ezek. 47:7, 12) or planted in the house of God; e.g., the righteous man who is like a palm tree and like a cedar planted in the house of Jehovah (Psa. 92:12-14), and one who trusts in God is likened to a flourishing olive tree in the house of God (52:8).

The tree of life bears twelve kinds of fruit for each month of the year, signifying its richness in variety and newness. Its fruit signifies God as the supply to His redeemed and regenerated elect for eternity. Its leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2; cf. Ezek. 47:12; Exo. 15:25), signifying the deeds of Christ guiding and regulating the nations outwardly that they may live a proper human life forever.

Access to the tree is the right of those who have washed their robes (Rev. 22:14). The washing of robes refers to the believers' acceptance through Christ's judicial redemption by the shedding of His blood. The right to the tree of life refers to the enjoyment of the divine life in Christ's organic salvation. The believers' having the right to partake of the tree is in keeping with their being part of the vine tree, the tree of life. The notion

of partaking of and being a part of the tree of life is confirmed by the use of the Greek word μέρος in verse 19. The word μέρος means a part or portion due or assigned to one, as well as a constituent part of the whole. The word is a strong confirmation of the believers' twofold status regarding the tree of life. It refers both to the share and portion that the believers have in enjoying the fruit of the tree of life as well as their participation as a constituent part of the tree of life. The tree of life along with the holy city constitutes the believers' eternal blessing.

Conclusion

The placing of human beings before the tree of life at the center of the garden signifies God's intention for man to partake of and be constituted with Him as life. The partakers of the life of God become the same as He is in life and nature but not in the Godhead (2 Pet. 1:4; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Rom. 12:5; John 15:5). The symbol of the tree is used in conjunction with the notion of life to indicate God's purpose to dispense Himself as life to be mingled with His creatures. The characteristics of a tree convey this notion—it produces an edible fruit for man to partake of, and it is a growing organism that spreads, increases, and multiplies through its fruit-bearing activity. As a result of the divine dispensing, the believers, the partakers of God's divine life and nature, become the members of the Body of Christ—branches of the universal vine, which encompasses the entire earth.

In Genesis human beings fell by partaking of the tree of death, human nature was corrupted, and God closed the way to the tree of life. Eventually, through incarnation He came in the form of a man and crucified the fallen sinful nature of man on a tree, the cross. Through His death and resurrection as the life-giving Spirit, He made the life of God available to mankind. By enjoying Him as the tree of life, human beings are brought back to the Triune God to partake of Him. This issues in their becoming parts of the corporate tree of life, branches of the true vine, and members of the Body of Christ. This organism consummates in the New Jerusalem as the ultimate consummation of the tree of life, which eternally supplies to the believers the divine life and which constitutes them the organic parts of the tree of life, through their organic union with Christ.

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Notes

¹James goes on to say, with reference to the tree of life, "When the secret of life was sought in nature the Sacred Tree was the perfect symbol of its mystery, with its leaves and blossoms and fruit; either shedding its verdure in the autumn only to bring forth afresh its shoots and buds in the spring, or if remaining ever green to typify life everlasting" (268).

²See James: "The potency of the Tree of Knowledge was such that to partake of its fruit had fatal consequences, death being the result of eating thereof. Therefore, it was virtually a tree of death" (221).

³The same imagery of the cutting down of a tree to its root and stump and its restoration is also applied to Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom (Dan. 4:14-15, 20-23; cf. Ezek. 31:3-14, referring to Assyria as a cedar tree).

⁴Christian tradition has long associated the cross with the tree of life, as can be seen in early Christian art.

⁵Some commentators even understand this use of ξύλον as "wood," with Jesus referring to the Jewish people as dry wood and Himself as sappy wood, which is not so easily burned as dry (cf. J. Schneider 38).

⁶It is interesting to note that in the four places in the Old Testament outside of Genesis where the tree of life is mentioned in the Old Testament (Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4), the Septuagint translator uses ξύλον for the first occurrence, which refers to Wisdom, which in certain portions of Proverbs is personified. "This personification of God's

wisdom is the second of the Trinity, the Son of God. Christ is the personified wisdom of God" (Lee, *Proverbs* 10). The translator uses δένδρον for the others, which refer to the fruit of the righteous man, what is desired, and a soothing tongue.

⁷Referenced in Widengren, pages 64-67.

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