

# The Tree of Life

PAUL WATSON

Institute for Christian Studies  
Austin, Texas

In the Genesis account of the origins of humanity, a "tree of life" is found growing in the garden of Eden both when man is placed there (Gen. 2:9) and when he is driven out (Gen. 3:22-24). Along with so many other figures in the narrative--the great river, the serpent, the cherubim and flaming sword, and of course the other tree ("the tree of the knowledge of good and evil")--this tree of life intrigues us and leads us to ask a number of questions: What exactly is it? How does it fit into the larger story of Genesis 2-3? Did Adam and Eve have access to it before they were expelled from Paradise? What happened to the tree after their departure?

The scope of this exegesis precludes a consideration of the Creation and Fall in any detail. It is hoped that this more limited investigation of one particular motif in that story will contribute to an understanding and appropriation of the whole.

## *Historical Background and Development*

As commentaries uniformly note, the concept of life-giving substances used by both gods and mortals is found throughout the ancient world. The "tree of life" is one such substance. Similar substances include other types of plants; bread; and water.<sup>1</sup> Outside the Fertile Crescent one finds in the mythology of India a heavenly tree from which the deities obtain a life-giving drink called "soma" in Sanskrit. From Greece we know, of course, of ambrosia and nectar.

Within Israel's own sphere we find more than one deity in Egypt associated with a sacred tree.

<sup>1</sup> B. Childs, "Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life," *IDB* 4 (1962), 695. Cf. H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), p. 108.

Hathor and Nut dwelt in the great tree of heaven and supplied the souls of the dead with celestial food, while Nut appears in a vignette of the Book of the Dead in a sycamore. The olive-tree was the abode of Horus and the date-palm that of Nut designed on a Nineteenth Dynasty relief with human arms and breasts holding a jar from which two streams of water emerge and a tray of food.<sup>2</sup>

In Sumerian mythology the *gishkin* tree in the temple of Enki at Eridu "may well represent a tree of life."<sup>3</sup> As for the Babylonian and Assyrian literature,

Strangely enough the term "the tree of life" does not occur in any Akkadian text . . . . On the other hand, pictorial representations are found of the king carrying out certain rites with a stylized tree, which in modern literature on the subject is often described as the tree of life.<sup>4</sup>

However, if no tree of life *per se* is found in the literature, notice should be taken both of the Gilgamesh epic and the Adapa creation myth.

In the latter story Adapa, following the orders of his father Ea, unwittingly refuses the "bread of death" and "water of death" offered to him by the gatekeepers of heaven, not knowing that had he accepted their offer he would thereby have gained immortality. The epic of Gilgamesh is even more instructive. In it the Noah-like figure Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of a magical, life-renewing plant at the bottom of the sea and says, "If thy hands obtain the plant (thou wilt find new life)." Gilgamesh does a bit of deep-sea diving, secures the plant, and tells Urshanabi, his boatman, "Its name shall be 'Man Becomes Young in Old Age.' I myself shall eat (it) and thus return to the state of my youth." Gilgamesh's plans are thwarted, however, by a serpent(!) who steals the plant while Gilgamesh is taking a bath.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the concept of a life-giving tree in the garden of Eden would not have been strange at all to Israel, given the time and place in which

<sup>2</sup> E. O. James, *The Tree of Life* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> So Childs, p. 695. Geo. Widengren (*The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion* [Uppsala Universitets Arsskrift 1951:4; Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistka, 1951] 6) says, "That this *kiskanu*-tree, in the Sumerian text *gis-kin*, is identical with the tree of life is perfectly clear."

<sup>4</sup> Ringgren, pp. 78, 79. So also Childs, p. 695. For examples of the art, see Widengren, pp. 61-63.

<sup>5</sup> See the translation by E. A. Speiser in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, edited by J. B. Pritchard, (2nd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University, 1955) pp. 101, 102.

<sup>6</sup> Again the translation is by Speiser, in Pritchard, *ANET*, p. 96.

she lived. What is a bit surprising is the fact that relatively few subsequent references to the tree of life are found in the Bible. Four times it appears in Proverbs (3:18, 11:30, 13:12, and 15:4); and many scholars think the prophet Ezekiel at least alludes to the tree of life in such passages as Ezekiel 31:3-9 and 47:12. Beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 4:10-12, there is a growing use of the tree-of-life motif in the apocalyptic literature, as evidenced by such passages as 1 Enoch 24:4; 2 Enoch 8:3, 5, 8; 9:1; 2 Esdras 8:52; and T. 12 Patriarch 18:10-14. Christian apocalyptic also utilizes the motif, as illustrated by the four references to the tree of life in the book of Revelation (2:7 and 22:2, 14, 19).

### *Literary Considerations*

Having established the fact that the concept of a life-giving tree was quite plausible to Israel, we must now turn to the two specific passages in Genesis 2-3 in which the tree is mentioned.<sup>7</sup> In the first passage (Gen. 2:9) we find trees, trees, and more trees:

And out of the ground God Yahweh caused to grow various trees that were a delight to the eye and good for eating, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.<sup>8</sup>

The concluding verses of the narrative (Gen. 3:22-24) focus only on the tree of life:

And God Yahweh said, "Now that the man has become like one of us in discerning good from bad, what if he should put out his hand and taste also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever!" So God Yahweh banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. Having expelled the man, he stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

Even at a glance both passages present us with problems. (1) The syntax of Genesis 2:9 is very awkward, suggesting to some commentators either that the original text mentioned only one tree,<sup>9</sup> or that we are dealing with two originally separate accounts, each having a different

<sup>7</sup> I regret that I did not have access to J. L. McKenzie, "The Literary Characteristics of Genesis 2-3," *TS* 15 (1954) 541-572.

<sup>8</sup> The translations of both Gen. 2:9 and 3:22-24 are those of E. A. Speiser as found in *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 14, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Speiser, 20.

tree.<sup>10</sup> (The syntax of the phrase "and (the) tree of the-to-know good and bad" and the vexed question of what this "knowledge of good and bad" in fact was cannot be considered here.)<sup>11</sup> (2) The syntax of Genesis 3:22 is also more difficult than Speiser's rendering of it would indicate.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, verses 23 and 24 are taken by some to be a doublet, thus giving another indication of more than one source.<sup>13</sup> (3) The very fact that the tree of life is introduced in Genesis 2:9 and not mentioned again until Genesis 3:22-24 seems strange. It is the other tree-the tree of knowledge-that is at the heart of the story (Gen. 2:17, 3:5, 6).<sup>14</sup>

What are we to make of all this? Do we in fact have two originally separate accounts now rather clumsily glued together? More recent scholarship generally agrees that this is not the case:

It is recognized today that the architectonic structure of the pentateuchal narratives, and particularly of Genesis, cannot be the result of chance or of a 'scissors-and-paste' method of compilation, but represents a religious and literary achievement of the highest order.<sup>15</sup>

If, then, the narrative is to be considered in its present integrity, how are we to hear it? What is being said about the origins of humanity; and precisely how does the tree of life fit into the story?

The key to the interpretation of the story lies in taking Genesis 2:9 as the conclusion to the larger unit of verses 4b-9. In this unit we are told that man became a living being when he was formed by God from the earth and when God breathed his own life-giving breath into man. Thus the ultimate source of life for man was God.

<sup>10</sup> G. von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL 1; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 76-77. Cf. J. Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC 1; 2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930) 52-53, 58; and C. A. Simpson, "Genesis," *IDB* 1 (1952) 496.

<sup>11</sup> For a convenient summary of the various interpretations of the phrase "good and evil", see Childs, 696. Significant recent articles are by B. Reicke, "The Knowledge Hidden in the Tree of Paradise," *JSS* 1 (1956) 193ff.; and R. Gordis, "The Knowledge of Good and Evil in the OT and the Qumran Scrolls," *JBL* 76 (1957) 123ff.

<sup>12</sup> See the comments by Speiser, 24, on the words rendered in the RSV "Behold" (Heb *hen*) and "and now" (Heb *we`atta*).

<sup>13</sup> Thus Skinner, 88-89. On the cherubim and flaming sword, see Speiser, 24-25, and von Rad, 94-95.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the tree of knowledge is said to be "in the middle of the garden" in Gen. 3:3; but it is the tree of life that is "in the middle of the garden" in Gen. 2:9.

<sup>15</sup> Gordis, 129. Cf. also Childs, 696.

Having given man life, God next gives man an environment—a garden (more nearly a park) filled with trees, at a time when the rest of the earth had neither plants nor herbs (Gen. 2:5). And we are told specifically that two trees—one of life, the other of knowledge—are included in this Park of Paradise.

After inserting a geographical interlude dealing with the great river which watered Eden and went on in four tributaries to encompass the world, the narrator quickly returns to his main theme and focuses attention on the last tree mentioned in Genesis 2:9, namely, the tree of knowledge. Of every other tree in the garden man may freely eat; but of this one he may not, on penalty of death. Verse 17 leaves the narrator's listeners asking themselves, "What will man do? Will he eat of that tree or not? Will he obey or disobey?"

The answer is postponed until a new theme can be introduced, that of woman as a partner for man (Gen. 2:18-25). With Genesis 3 both strands of the narrative are picked up and woven together in the story of the Fall. And in the middle of both the story and the garden stands the tree of knowledge. It stands for the tragic disobedience of both man and woman; it is a mute witness of their unfaith.

But the narrator has not forgotten (nor, one would suspect, has his audience) the other tree, the tree of life. Can disobedient man remain in the garden and still live forever by eating of its fruit, thus escaping his sentence of death? By no means. Man should not have eaten of the tree of knowledge; now he cannot eat of the tree of life. He is banished—absolutely, permanently—from Paradise.

Thus the narrative functions as a harmonious whole: Of all the trees in the garden, two are singled out for special notice. One becomes the symbol of the decisive choice man must make in response to the divine command. Once man makes his decision, the other tree becomes the symbol of all man's shattered aspirations, his dreams of what might have been, forever in his memory but always out of his reach.

### *Theological Significance*

We may introduce our final considerations of the tree of life and how it functions theologically in Genesis 2 and 3 with this question: If Adam and Eve had access to the tree while they were still in the Garden, and, if they had eaten of it, would it not have been too late for God to cast them out? Would they not already be immortal? Some have taken the position that eating of the tree of life was not a once-for-all event, but rather a matter of regular eating. This interpretation, which cites many parallels in comparative religions,

takes the Hebrew word *gam* in Genesis 3:22 as "again" rather than "also." But such an interpretation misses the urgency of verse 22 and the decisiveness of verse 24. Whatever logical difficulties it may present to the modern reader, the clear implication of verse 22 is that man has in some sense already become like God by having eaten of the tree of knowledge. But of the tree of life he has not eaten; nor will he eat.

How then are we to understand God's act of denying man access to this tree? One interpretation suggests that God was, in effect, doing man a favor, since eternal life coupled with a knowledge of good and evil would be intolerable.<sup>16</sup> However, the clear implication of verses 22-24 is that a punishment is being carried out and not that a favor is being shown.<sup>17</sup> Another interpretation suggests that the tree of life somehow represents a false substitute for the genuine life offered by God and defined as a harmonious coexistence with him.<sup>18</sup> But again, the tree of life as it first appears in Genesis 2:9 does not seem to be a mythical and ultimately unsatisfactory substitute for real life, but rather the symbol of it.

As has been observed, Genesis 2:4-9 pulsates with life itself. God creates man and infuses him with life. God then prepares the perfect environment for life in the form of a beautiful park at the very center of which is nothing less than the tree of life. Man may thus anticipate living indefinitely, with God, in Paradise.

But is man willing to live such a life in such a place on God's terms? That is the unavoidable question put to man in the form of the tree of knowledge and God's restriction concerning it. To his everlasting regret, man is not content with God's arrangements and must have "knowledge." "Knowledge" man acquires; but in the process he loses "life."

At this point some of the observations of Dietrich Bonhoeffer seem particularly cogent. In commenting on Genesis 3:22-24, he says,

The whole story finally comes to a climax in these verses. The significance of the tree of life, of which so remarkably little had been said earlier, is only really comprehensible here. Indeed, it is now obvious that the whole story has really been about this tree. . . . Adam only reaches out for the fruit of the tree of life after he

<sup>16</sup> J. Willis, *Genesis* (Living Word Commentary; Austin: Sweet, 1979) 135-136.

<sup>17</sup> Von Rad, 98, says: "All in all, it (the narrative) closes in profound sadness."

<sup>18</sup> B. Childs, 696-697.

has fallen prey to death.... Adam has eaten of the tree of knowledge, but the thirst for the tree of life, which this fruit has given him, remains unquenched. . . . The tree of life is guarded by the power of death; it remains untouchable, divinely unapproachable. But Adam's life before the gate is a continuous attack upon the realm from which he is excluded. It is a flight and a search upon the cursed ground to find what he has lost, and then a repeated, desperate rage against the power with the flaming sword. That this sword of the guard cuts, that it is sharp--this the biblical writer says, not without reason; Adam knows this, he feels it himself time and again: but the gate remains shut.<sup>19</sup>

As dismal as the concluding verses of Genesis 3 are, however, they are not the final word of God. Even before they are separated from the tree of life, Adam and Eve anticipate the procreation and thus the continuation of human life; and God himself provides for them the clothes they will need outside the Garden (Gen. 3:20, 21). Try as he will, Adam cannot regain access to life on his own; witness the pathetic efforts of Adam's descendants at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). But God, who provided life initially and who sponsors the continuation of that life even if it is now life-in-death, can and will himself bring man back to life--life that is once more abundant (John 10:10) and eternal (John 3:16). Man shall in fact have access to the tree of life once again, not by overcoming the cherubim who guard it but by being allowed to share in heaven's victory over death:

To him who is victorious I will give the right to eat from the tree of life that stands in the Garden of God. . . . Happy are those who wash their robes clean! They will have the right to the tree of life ..." (Rev. 2:7; 22:14).

<sup>19</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (London: SCM, 1966) 89-92.

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