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# TREE OF LIFE

Article · February 2016

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Northern Baptist Theological Seminary

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**TREE OF LIFE** (יֵצֶבֶד דִּי־חַיִּים, *hachayyim ets*; ξύλον ζωής, *xylon zōēs*). A tree that represents immortality, divine presence, wisdom, and righteousness as a path of life and an eschatological promise.

## Introduction

The opening and closing chapters of the Bible contain references to the tree of life (Gen 2–3; Rev 22). In the Bible, the tree of life symbolizes the fullness of life and immortality available in God. The tree of life is introduced in Gen 2, where God causes it and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to grow in the midst of the garden of Eden (Gen 2:9). The menorah and other decorations of the temple and tabernacle contain symbolic representations of the tree of life, representing God’s presence in the holy place. In Proverbs, the tree of life is associated with the life-generating properties of wisdom, righteousness, and hope (Prov 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4).

## Tree of Life in the Old Testament

“Tree of life” symbolism appears throughout the Old Testament. Genesis 2–3 contains three references to the tree of life, and Proverbs contains four references to it.

### *Creation Account*

In Genesis, the tree of life symbolizes God’s life-giving presence in the garden of Eden, as well as His role as the source of all goodness. Scripture depicts the garden of Eden as God’s sanctuary and cosmic dwelling place. He placed humanity within the garden to serve and protect it and to represent Him in the physical universe (Dalley, “Temple Building,” 239–51; Levenson, “Temple and the World,” 288). The opening verses of Gen 2 describe God’s efforts to provide a sacred space filled with abundant provision, beauty, and harmony for a spiritually connected humanity.

In addition to raising up “every tree that was pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:9 LEB), God caused the “tree of life ... along with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (LEB) to grow in the garden of Eden. He specified that Adam and Eve could eat from any of the trees except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, explaining, “In the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17 LEB). Adam and Eve’s choice to disobey this command and eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil caused their eyes to be “opened” (Gen 3:7) and initiated the process of death and curses (Gen 3:10–19). Adam and Eve were subsequently expelled from the garden of Eden, and God placed the cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life, “lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Gen 3:22 ESV). Their expulsion was thus both a consequence of disobedience and a protection to prevent humanity from eating from the tree of life and living forever in their corrupted state.

Bonhoeffer emphasizes the tree of life’s centrality to the creation account by stating, “The whole story moves toward its end in these verses (Gen 3:22–24).... Indeed it becomes plain that the whole story has really been about this tree” (Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 141). Genesis 3:23 specifies that God “sent [Adam] out from the Garden of Eden, to till (לַעבֹד, *la’avod*) the ground from which he was taken” (LEB). This description recalls Gen 2:5, which states that prior

to creation, “there was no human being to cultivate the ground” (LEB). In a reversal of God’s twofold responsibilities for Adam in Gen 2:15—“work” (עבד, *'bd*) and “keep” (שמר, *shmr*) the garden—God now sends away the humans to “work” (*'bd*; Gen 3:23) the ground east of the garden and positions angelic beings to “protect” (*shmr*) the garden (Gen 3:24).

### *Life and Death in the Pentateuch*

Outside Genesis 2–3 in the Old Testament, the tree of life becomes “a simile for things from which the power of life flows” (Cassuto, *Genesis*, 109–10). In Hebrew, the term “life” (חַיִּים, *chayim*) can refer to both physical life and a quality of life that incorporates the ideas of life, good, and blessing in contrast to death, evil, and curse. In the creation narrative, the imagery of the tree of life is connected to life characterized by abundance, fullness, and provision. Moberly, pointing to the use of death and life language in other parts of the Pentateuch (e.g., Deut 30:15–20), argues that the first humans had the choice between the path of life or the path of death, stating: “The linkage of life with prosperity and blessings, and of death with adversity and curses, makes clear that what is envisaged is metaphorical, to do primarily with *the kind of life* that Israel will live” (Moberly, *Theology*, 84). The curses listed in Deut 28:15–68 provide further insight into the meaning of death, especially when viewed in contrast to the blessings that precede them.

The rest of Scripture moves toward the hope and promise that God will provide the means for humanity to once again gain access to His presence and blessing, and the source of life in all its fullness.

### *Wisdom Tradition and the Tree of Life*

Wisdom texts associate the attainment of wisdom (חֵכֶם, *chokhmah*) with the tree of life (Prov 3:13–18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4). For example, Proverbs 3:18 states, “She [wisdom] is a tree of life for those who seize her; those who take hold of her are considered happy” (LEB). Although consuming the fruit of the tree of knowledge did not provide humans with the hoped for wisdom, the effect of the Torah (law) is to make the simple wise, bringing about true wisdom. Wisdom texts emphasize that although knowledge without wisdom produces death, knowledge with wisdom as mediated through the Torah becomes a source of renewal of life and rejoicing of the heart (see also Psa 37:30–31; Ezra 7:25). Thus, in Jewish tradition, the Torah becomes the remedy for the fall (Altmann, “Homo Imago Dei,” 249).

Rabbinic tradition has long recognized abundance in the Torah as the restorative promise of the tree of life (Schorsch, “Trees for Life,” 243–44; Schneersohn, *The Tree of Life*). Proverbs 3:18 provides support for this interpretation by portraying the Torah as embodying wisdom. This correspondence is reaffirmed by the quotation of Prov 3:18 after a public reading of the Torah. Likewise, the seven-branched, tree-shaped menorah is symbolic of the Torah as the tree of life, as well as the light-giving presence of God. In rabbinic expression, heresy and disobedience of the Torah are likened to the destruction of trees (Schorsch, “Trees for Life,” 244; Beale, *Revelation*, 235). This sense of the sacredness of creation is meant to be a reflection of faith in the Creator: The way a person lives, in reverent honor of God and His creation, is to be a continual affirmation of life, with God as the ultimate source of all life.

The tree of life appears elsewhere in Wisdom literature as well:

- Proverbs 11:30 states, “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life” (ESV). Zevit offers the following paraphrase of this verse: “The acts of a person who acts within the law, are like such a tree” (Zevit, *What Really Happened*, 255).
- Proverbs 15:4 states, “A gentle tongue is a tree of life” (Zevit, *What Really Happened*, 255).
- Psalm 1:3 does not use the phrase “tree of life,” but it incorporates the imagery of a lush, leafy tree as representing a discerning person. The reference to “a tree planted by streams of water, which gives fruit in season, whose leaves do not shrivel” refers to a good and blessed one who eschews evil and takes delight in the law of the Lord.

A distinction is sometimes made between references to wisdom and righteousness as “a tree of life” in Proverbs and *the* tree of life in Gen 2–3. The use of the definite article in Gen 2–3 communicates that the author refers to a specific, miraculous tree known to the readers that endows eternal life.

### *Temple Imagery and the Tree of Life*

The walls and doors of Solomon’s temple contained images of trees and cherubim reminiscent of the garden of Eden, representing the sacred space of God’s presence with humanity (1 Kgs 6:23–35). Also, as mentioned above, the menorah stands as a metaphor for the tree of life, shedding the light of God. Ezekiel indicates that sacred trees are also present in the future temple (Ezek 41:17–18). Trees do not appear in the holy of holies, where God’s presence is understood to dwell and where God Himself is “the source of all life and blessing” (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 39).

Ezekiel 47:12 recalls the garden of Eden in its description of a river, which flows from the temple and is lined with trees bearing fruit for food and leaves for healing. Revelation 22:2 draws on this passage, reversing the sentence of death in Gen 3 through the cross (tree) of Christ and restoring access to the tree of life and paradise (Rev 2:7; 22:14, 19).

### **Tree of Life in the New Testament**

The New Testament contains four references to the tree of life, all of which appear in Rev 2 and Rev 22. In this eschatological context, the tree of life functions as a future source of healing and immortality for the faithful.

In Revelation 2:7 and 11, the saints who emerge victorious in Christ through testing are promised the tree of life (Rev 2:7) and deliverance from the second death (Rev 2:11). Osborne argues that in this context, the tree of life symbolizes the cross, which makes access to God and eternal life possible (Osborne, *Revelation*, 124, 563). Similar imagery is attested elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Gal 3:13). Tree of life imagery also serves as a polemic against the Greek Artemis fertility cult of Ephesus, where her temple was a “tree shrine” in which she symbolized life (Osborne, *Revelation*, 124).

The final chapter of Revelation ties the tree of life back to the garden of Eden as “a picture of forgiveness and consequent experience of God’s intimate presence.” This chapter uses language and imagery of early Jewish literature (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 234–35).

### **Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Literature and Inscriptions**

In the ancient Near East, a tree of life is a common motif representing humanity's quest for immortality. The ancient readers of the book of Genesis would have likely understood the tree of life to be associated with some form of eternal or perpetual life.

Seals, artwork, and early Sumerian and Akkadian texts contain frequent depictions of and references to sacred or royal gardens (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 11; Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*). Bread, plants, and water are also associated with life in ancient literature (Watson, "The Tree of life," 232). Although the biblical texts seem to show familiarity with the narratives of the surrounding cultures, Lanfer believes arguments that the Genesis narrative was derived from Mesopotamian or other earlier sources are "less than compelling" (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 11).

The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh (second millennium BC) contains the oldest surviving reference to a life-granting plant: "If you yourself can win that plant, you will find [rejuvenation (?)].... I too shall eat [it] and turn into the young man that I once was" (Gilgamesh Tablets XI, 6:7, 15–16; from Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 118–19). The plant in this text rejuvenates but does not offer immortality. It thus differs from the tree in Gen 3:22, whose fruit is said to enable the consumer to "live forever." When Gilgamesh fails to attain the plant of life, he is encouraged to seek wisdom. In contrast, in the Bible, when Adam and Eve seek to gain illicit knowledge from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they lose access to the perpetual life offered by the tree of life. In the Gilgamesh epic, the source of life is intended only for the gods, but in the biblical account the tree of life seems freely given to the humans (Vogels, "Like One of Us").

A Babylonian fragment found among the Tell el-Amarna tablets, the Myth of Adapa (second millennium BC), tells of the wisdom god En (An) creating the first man, Adapa. En endowed Adapa with wisdom and intelligence but not immortality. Through apparent trickery, Adapa was deprived of consuming the food and drink of immortality and lived out his life as a mortal man (Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 122–27, 147–53).

In Canaanite religion, the goddess of life and fertility, Asherah, is represented by a wooden pole also known as an Asherah. Other ancient Near Eastern goddesses associated with fertility are also associated with a wooden pole or tree. Deuteronomy 12:2 condemns sacred trees such as the Asherah, but these trees nevertheless become interspersed with worship of Yahweh as various Israelite and Judahite kings began practicing pluralistic worship and idolatry (e.g., 2 Kgs 21:7; Isa 1:29).

Within Egyptian literature, the deities Hathor and Nut are both recorded as supplying souls of the dead with divine food to sustain them (James, *The Tree of life*, 41). In New Kingdom Egypt, the goddess Hathor, generally represented by a cow, is described as a tree nourishing the king. Isis was also depicted as a tree providing nourishment to the king. The tree image's association with a woman, fertility, and life-giving functions bears some resemblances to the imagery of the Genesis trees (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 35–36).

In Assyrian iconography, the sacred tree represents the presence of the deity and also serves as a symbolic source of life. For example, an inscription found in Ashurnasirpal's palace depicts a tree standing between two winged creatures under a winged disk, with the king picking its fruit. The king bears the title "vice regent of Aššur" (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden* 38–39).

## **Tree of Life in the Intertestamental and Early Christian Literature**

The intertestamental period contains extensive references to the tree of life, largely as typologic representations of the presence of God and immortality for the faithful (e.g., 1 Enoch 24:3–25:6; 2 Enoch 8:3–7; 2 Esdras [4 Ezra] 2:1–13; 8:50–52; Psalms of Solomon 14:2–3; *Apocalypse of Moses* 28:2–4; *Testament of Levi* 18:9–12; *Testament of Dan* 5:12; see Osborne, *Revelation*, 122; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 235).

In the Greek-speaking Jewish community, the tree of life also seemed to symbolize hope, restoration from exile, and an idealization of Israel (especially Jerusalem) as their sought-after paradise (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 41–58).

### *Tree of Life in the Septuagint and Targums*

The Septuagint and Targums occasionally expand the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible by adding Edenic imagery. For example, consider these translations of Isa 65:22:

#### **Hebrew Bible**

“For the days of my people *shall be* like the days of *a tree*” (LEB).

#### **Septuagint and Targum Jonathan**

“the days of my people will be like the days of the tree of life.”

The Targum Neofiti translation of Genesis, which originated in Palestine between the first and third centuries AD, usually offers a quite literal Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew. However, this translation expands considerably on Gen 3:22 by linking Adam to nationhood and linking Torah obedience to the tree of life—so that keeping the Torah is an alternate path to obtain life (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 45). Targum Neofiti also expands on Gen 3:24 by placing the Torah rather than the cherubim as guard over the garden of Eden. The text explains, “Because the Torah is a tree of life to all who study it and [those who] keep its decrees will life. He will stand like a tree of life for the world that is to come. It is as good to study the Torah in this world as the fruit of the Tree of life” (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 46). This understanding of the Torah as the path of life is reflected elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example, Exodus 18:20 describes it as “the way in which they must walk” (LEB), 2 Chr 6:27 refers to the law as “the good way” (LEB), and Psa 1:6 describes it as “the way of the righteous” (LEB).

Targum Jonathan Psalm 1:3 translates the Hebrew phrase “he will be like a tree” into Aramaic as “he will be like a Tree of life.” This translation again equates Torah righteousness with the tree of life and a route of return to the garden of Eden.

### *Tree of Life in Extrabiblical Literature*

In early Jewish and Christian literature, the tree of life symbolizes immortality and the presence of God. Intertestamental writings reflect the book of Proverbs in referring to wisdom, righteousness, and obedience to the Torah as “a tree of life.” This association implies that wisdom, righteousness, and Torah obedience serve as alternate, life-giving sources.

Other texts from the intertestamental period idealize Israel and describe the promised land and Jerusalem using Edenic imagery. For example, the Letter of Aristeas (ca. 200 BC) describes Jerusalem and the temple using imagery of paradise and the garden of Eden. This text also depicts Israel as an abundant land filled with fruit trees and underground springs, which supply the temple (*Letter of Aristeas*, 112–17; 88–89).

The deuterocanonical book of 2 Esdras uses the tree of life in the sense of a paradise. For example, in 2 Esdras 2:10–12, God declares, “Tell my people that I will give them the kingdom of Jerusalem.... The tree of life shall give them fragrant perfume, and they shall neither toil nor become weary” (NRSV). Second Esdras 8:51–54 associates the tree of life with paradise, plenty, rest, goodness, and perfection in the age to come before stating, “The root of evil is sealed up from you, illness is banished from you, and death is hidden; Hades has fled and corruption has been forgotten; sorrows have passed away, and in the end the treasure of immortality is made manifest” (NRSV).

In the *Life of Adam and Eve* (or *Apocalypse of Moses*, first to third century AD), the tree of life is associated with the throne of God (*Life of Adam and Eve* 22:4). Here, after expelling Adam and Eve from the garden, God promises them they can have resurrection and eternal life through the tree of life if they keep themselves “from every evil” (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 55, 187n79). This text seems to indicate the belief that Adam and the woman had attained immortality in the garden (see also the midrash of *Genesis Rabbah* 21:7 and 2 Esdras 2:11: “the man *has been* like one of us”). Thus the fall is interpreted as humanity abandoning eternal life with God for independent “foolish” pursuit of wisdom” (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 99). This is a reversal of the Babylonian Adapa myth. Wisdom of Solomon also communicates the belief that God intended humanity to be immortal. In this text, the serpent, identified as the devil, is held accountable for the entrance of death: “God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it” (Wisdom of Solomon 2:24; Ska, “Genesis 2–3,” 19).

Many other Jewish and early Christian texts expand on these various themes. Lanfer argues that these texts use sacred tree and garden motifs as “dynamic representations of the temple, the faithful, the future Jerusalem and the presence of God.” He further notes that these texts consistently connect the tree of life to God, “either as the representation of him, an extension of his will or the place where he makes himself present.” He goes on to state, “In this atmosphere of eschatological expectation, the tree of life and the mythology of Eden consistently combine to establish the presence or enthronement of God and the promise of immortality” (Lanfer, “Allusion to and Expansion,” 96–108).

Intertestamental literature frequently describes the righteous or faithful as trees of life, similar to Psa 1 (e.g., Psalms of Solomon 14:3; *Hodayot* from the Dead Sea Scrolls 1QH 14:14–19; 10:25–26; *Odes of Solomon* 11:16; *Gospel of Truth* 36; and the Targum Onqelos to Psa 1:3). Additionally, early Jewish writings contain many references or allusions to the tree of life as representative of God’s presence in the world, divine blessing, hope for Israel, and Torah obedience as the path of life. These writings understand the first Eden as a sanctuary and portray the temple as functioning as the former garden of Eden.

## **Critical Issues**

### *Immortality*

One topic of debate concerning the tree of life is whether God created Adam to be immortal or mortal. Rabbinic writings display the belief that sin is the cause of death, but the righteous can attain immortality and enter paradise without death, as did Enoch and Elijah (Schmid, “Loss of

Immortality?” 58–59). *1 Enoch* 69:11 and the midrash *Pesikta Rabbati* 42:1 state that God created Adam to live forever, like the angels.

The first canon of the Council of Carthage (ca. AD 418) states that God intended humans to be immortal, but their immortality was cut off due to sin, resulting in death: “If any man says that Adam, the first man, was created mortal, so that whether he sinned or not he would have died, not as the wages of sin, but through the necessity of nature, let him be *anathema*.” The Protestant position since the Reformation has maintained the same doctrine.

However, an examination of the overall structure of Gen 2–3 (especially Gen 2:7) seems to indicate that God intended for humans upon the present earth to be mortal. The substance from which He created the first man, “dust” (Gen 2:7; 3:19), is also connected with morality and transience in Genesis and in the rest of the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 18:27; Job 10:9; 17:16; 21:26; Psa 22:15, 29; Eccl 3:20; 12:7).

Genesis 3:22 implies that even though Adam and Eve had committed a transgression, they could still achieve immortality if they could access the tree of life (Schmid, “Loss of Immortality?” 62–62). In Romans 5, Paul writes that access to eternal life is made possible only through Christ, not Adam. In 1 Corinthians 15:47, Paul similarly states that the first man, Adam, was “from the earth” (i.e., dust), implying that he was created to be mortal. He contrasts Adam with the “second man ... from heaven,” Christ, who is immortal. Through faith in Christ, humans “of dust” are able to put on immortality and gain victory over death (1 Cor 15:48–54).

### *Gnostic Influence*

As Gnosticism developed, with its emphasis on the preeminence of knowledge and supremacy of wisdom, the narratives of the two trees in the garden were rewritten and reversed. For example, the Nag Hammadi codices (fourth century AD) and the Apocalypse of Sedrach speak of a ban from eating of the tree of life but portray the tree of knowledge as offering the idealized fruit that leads to wisdom, maturity, and freedom (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 57–58). In the Apocryphon of John, the tree of life becomes a tree of death and evil, but the tree of knowledge (or tree of *gnosis*) brings freedom and the light of understanding.

### *Relationship between Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life*

In modern times, Gen 2–3 has been interpreted as an Israelite narrative about the achievement of moral discernment and wisdom, which is accomplished by conflating the two trees into one tree in the middle of the garden (Wyatt, “Interpreting the Creation,” 15–17; Krispenz, “Wie viele Bäume” 304). This reasoning derives from Gen 3:1–6, which refers to only the tree of knowledge as standing in the middle of the garden, compared to Gen 2:9, which speaks of both the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. In Zevit’s view, the wisdom traditions fused the two trees in the garden narrative into one through the eisegesis of the *waw* in Gen 2:9 (as a *waw explicativum*, “that is [to say]”). In other words, conflating the two trees in Gen 2:9 requires interpreting the passage as, “and a Tree of life in the middle of the garden, *that is*, a Tree of Knowing proper/good and improper/bad” (Zevit, *What Really Happened*, 254).

The Aramaic Targum Neofiti clarifies the predominant Jewish understanding that there were two trees in the middle of the garden by adding to Gen 2:9 that the tree of life was “in the innermost parts of the garden” or “in the midst of the midst.” The Syriac Peshitta also adds this clarification (Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 44, 51).



Arguments that the tree of life and the tree of knowledge are in fact the same tree seem to be a stretch of interpretive and source-critical endeavors. Ska points out that it would be superfluous and distracting to refer to the tree of life in Gen 3:1–6 when only the tree of knowledge is in focus. The tree of life reenters at the end of the narrative in Gen 3:22–24, when it is important to the story. Here, expulsion is required to prevent Adam and Eve from attaining divine status (Ska, “Genesis 2–3,” 11–12).

Assuming that the tree of knowledge is superior to the tree of life and using a model of *economic man* (“an economic, rational choice interpretation and the application of a self-interested decision calculus”), Wagner-Tsukamoto argues that there was an implied ban on consuming from the tree of life, despite no such ban being mentioned in the text. He reasons that in order to become divine, Adam and Eve would have had to eat from both the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. Therefore, God must have banned both trees from the beginning (Wagner-Tsukamoto, “Tree of Life,” 108–09).

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INGRID FARO<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ingrid Faro, "[Tree of Life](#)," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).