

In the beginning

Part 5 – How trees explain God’s plan too

Trees rate pretty highly in Genesis. They feature first of all as fruit-bearing trees on the third day of creation in Genesis 1:11-12, then as a source of food for humans provided by God himself in verse 29, and they get a mention yet again in the garden God planted in Eden in **Genesis 2:8-9**, in which he “made all kinds of trees to grow out of the ground - trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.” And it’s also in **Genesis 2:9** that “the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” are first mentioned too.

Anyone reading the first two chapters of Genesis, then, would soon pick up on how important trees are to God. It was God who designed trees, and God who put juicy fruits on them, with seeds in the fruits so the trees would keep on producing their fruit too. It was God who made tree fruit and nuts as perfect food for humans, and God who made trees beautiful to look at. The writer of Genesis, therefore, makes it very clear that God is especially fond of trees, even to the point of making two trees the central feature in our own story as humans.

To us moderns in the twenty first century it might seem a bit quaint and odd, however, that trees should rate so highly in an introduction to who God is and why he created humans. But to the Israelites in Moses’ day - to whom the book of Genesis was originally written, of course - the significance of trees was huge.

Trees took on special meaning for the Israelites, because they’d grown up in a nation that revered and worshipped trees. Ever since Jacob, the father of Israel, had moved his family to Egypt hundreds of years before Genesis was written, the Israelites had been exposed to the Egyptian belief that everything in nature was filled with the divine. But it was trees that were especially sacred to the Egyptians, because the branches of trees reached up to the heavens and their roots went deep down into the netherworld, connecting the upper and lower realms of the divine together. Trees, therefore, were like a portal to the divine, giving people access to the gods and their divine knowledge and power. This is what the Egyptians saw in trees, and the Israelites had grown up in such a world, so the mention of a tree in Genesis 2:9 as a source of divine knowledge would have been familiar territory for them.

Trees meant a lot more to the Israelites than they do to us, therefore, because in Egypt the gods lived in trees. The Egyptian mother goddess Hathor, for instance, one of the most popular deities at the time, was known as “The Mistress of the Date Palm” or “The Lady of the Sycamore.” She’s pictured in Egyptian art as supplying food and water to dead humans from a sacred tree so they could be reborn. To an Israelite of that time, therefore, it would be no surprise at all reading in Genesis about a **tree of life**, when the Israelites had grown up for years already with Egyptian goddesses dispensing new life and sustenance to the dead - from a tree.

The Egyptians also had an **actual** tree of life too, housed in an open courtyard in the Sun Temple of Ra, the supreme god of the Egyptians, in the city of Heliopolis. The fruit of this tree provided knowledge of the divine plan and eternal life to the Pharaohs. The trunk of the tree, meanwhile, was the centre of the universe, a World Pillar or Axis Mundi, around which the entire universe revolved. And at the foot of the tree were four rivers providing water for the world, which again would have been familiar to the Israelites when reading about the four rivers flowing out from Eden in Genesis 2:10-14.

What we’ve got in Genesis, therefore, is more than just a cute story with pretty pictures to read to children in Sunday school. It has deep and very real connections to the ancient world of the Egyptians, among whom the Israelites had lived and worked for centuries, and it was written with them in mind.

Moses was writing to people in terms **they** understood, using concepts they were totally familiar with, and Moses was a master of his art. **Acts 7:22** tells us that Moses was “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” which paid off greatly in his writing of Genesis, because he was able to take what the Egyptians believed and the Israelites had grown up with, and weave it all into a revelation of God and his divine plan for creation in terms his readers would immediately grasp. Moses was a very skillful storyteller, trained by the best in Pharaoh’s court at the time, and then, inspired by the Holy Spirit as well, he became the first and greatest teacher of God’s wisdom. And notice how succinctly and simply he writes in Genesis to get the point across, rather than waffling in complicated language like academics do today.

So here’s a great clue in how to understand Genesis, that we read it through the eyes of an Israelite growing up in Egypt, saturated like Moses in all the ways of the Egyptians - and in particular their view of trees.

It's noticeable, for instance, in many Egyptian wall and tomb paintings where sacred trees and gods and goddesses are pictured together, that there's a serpent or snake in the picture too. That's because serpents were believed to have divine powers as well, and they lurked around sacred trees because the trees acted as a conduit for their powers. Pharaohs had serpents sticking out the front of their headdresses as well, as a sign of their own divine power. The tree serpent, therefore, along with the sacred tree and the god or goddess of the sacred tree, came as a divine threesome, like an Egyptian version of the trinity.

With all this in mind, the command to avoid a tree in Genesis would surely leap off the pages with huge meaning for the Israelites, because they'd grown up with the belief in Egypt that divine power and wisdom came from sacred trees. But here's Moses, who knows everything there is to know about Egyptian beliefs, telling them that God created a tree that should be avoided at all costs **BECAUSE OF** its promise of divine power and wisdom. The message would be clear to the Israelites in terms they could easily understand, therefore, that God had something very different in mind **for them** when it came to **their** source of divine power and wisdom.

And Genesis could not be more clear on that point, because right from the opening sentence in chapter one the focus is on **the one Creator God being the source of everything**, and several times in Genesis 1 and 2 Moses specifically mentions trees being created by God too, so the real source of divine power and wisdom was God, not trees. Genesis also makes it clear that God made trees to provide physical food, and nothing more than that. There is no mention in those two chapters that trees should be made into something sacred or divine.

Right off the bat, therefore, Genesis is putting an end to depending on anything other than God. It's the obvious point in Genesis, so why, then, would God create the temptation to look to a tree for divine power and wisdom instead of him? Well, put ourselves in the shoes of the Israelites reading this story, because here they were in Egypt, several thousand years after God made that tree and told Adam and Eve not to eat off it, and what had happened? The Egyptians, despite being the most advanced people in the world, were **STILL** looking to trees for divine power and wisdom, not God. Nothing had changed, in other words, from Adam and Eve on. Right off the bat again, therefore, Genesis is making it clear where our human problem lies, and what has caused all our problems since: **We do not like to depend on God**. We'll grab anything offering wisdom instead of him, including trees, and even forbidden trees too.

The point being, then, that WITH all this clear proof and hindsight of how stupid we humans can be, would **the Israelites** now get the point as to what the tree of knowledge of good and evil was all about? Or would they, just like Eve and the Egyptians, prefer A TREE rather than God as “desirable for gaining wisdom” (Genesis 3:6)? And would they also believe, just like Eve and the Egyptians, that a serpent could dispense wisdom as well? Would they? This was the challenge, and it was written in terms the Israelites could easily understand to get the message into their heads that wisdom only comes from trusting the one true Creator God, not from sacred trees, tree goddesses or tree serpents.

And notice how the emphasis in Genesis is on the tree of knowledge, not on the tree of life. The first and only command from God to humans in **Genesis 2:17** is “you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” There is no command to eat off the tree of life instead, or even strong encouragement from God to eat off it either, because the test at this point is on where the Israelites will look for wisdom in fulfilling their role as God’s image-bearers.

And that’s the key for all humans who bear the image of God. It’s not eternal life that matters most of all, it’s trusting God. The Israelites, just like Adam and Eve, were about to embark on an amazing journey never travelled by any human before, and they had no idea what it was all about, or how to go about it. It was crucial, therefore, that they look to God for guidance, not leap out on their own thinking they knew best. And Genesis also makes it clear that God is not in a hurry. He starts off slowly, by giving Adam and Eve a garden to care for first of all, just like an employer starts off a new employee with little jobs first.

God was not dispensing his wisdom all at once. The serpent, however, offered Adam and Eve an excuse to grab “THE” knowledge of good and evil, meaning ALL of it all at once so they could be like God immediately, just like Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world all at once, without Jesus having to go through the tough process in **Hebrews 5:8** of “learning obedience” and “being made perfect” that God meant for him to go through first.

The result for Adam and Eve was an overload of knowledge they simply weren’t ready for yet, as we see in their immediate reaction to being naked. In their child-like innocence the sudden awareness of their sexual differences created the same reaction in them as it does in children watching their parents kiss. “Oo, yuk” and embarrassed snickering is a child’s usual reaction, because children have no concept in their brains yet what sex and sexuality is all about.

But it's not supposed to be in their brains yet, because God designed all that for later on in life. And that's how God in his wisdom built us, that we humans go through **stages** of learning and awareness - and none of them in a hurry. And right off the bat in Genesis he made that clear too, by creating a tree that offered all the knowledge of good and evil all at once, and then banning it, as a clear indication it **wasn't** the way to go to fulfill their role as image-bearers.

Which brings us to WHAT knowledge God wanted Adam and Eve to learn at that specific stage in their lives. So far in Genesis it was nothing more than learning how to "work the ground" (2:5) and how to "work and take care" of the garden God had planted (2:15) - and that was it. The only wisdom and knowledge they needed **at this stage of their lives** as God's image-bearers, therefore, was learning the secrets of the soil so they could turn the garden into a beautiful and productive place to live in, and then take those secrets they'd learned out into the world beyond the garden, as pictured by the four rivers flowing out of Eden.

It seems like an odd way of starting off their amazing calling as God's image-bearers, but that was the challenge: Would Adam and Eve trust in God's slow-release wisdom, or try to speed things up by getting all their wisdom all at once from a tree? And the same challenge faced the Israelites as they ventured into the wilderness: Trekking out into the desert would also seem like a strange way of starting out as God's chosen people, so, would they trust God through the long, slow grind in the wilderness, or would they too jump the gun like Adam and Eve and look to the Egyptian gods for a quick solution instead?

Well, we know what the Israelites did. They built a typical Egyptian cow god and claimed IT had rescued them from Egypt (Exodus 32:4). In other words, they were still looking to the sacred gods of the Egyptians for divine help and wisdom, not God - despite God inflicting all those devastating plagues for the specific purpose of "bringing judgment on all the gods of Egypt" in **Exodus 12:12**.

"Judgment" meant God was making it absolutely clear that the Egyptians gods had nothing - and he meant nothing - to offer. So, dear Israelites, eradicate all thoughts from your Israelite minds from this moment on, that there is anything divine, sacred or spiritual in the gods and goddesses, sacred trees and serpents of Egypt. Chuck the whole lot on the garbage heap and leave them there.

So, did they? Did the Israelites get the point that they should leave the dispensing of divine knowledge and wisdom to God alone, and no other?

No, they didn't. Instead, they preserved their tree goddess and sacred tree worship in what were often referred to in Scripture as **Asherah poles**. These Asherah poles are first mentioned in **Exodus 34:13** in a command to Israel, that when they came up against the pagan religions of Canaan they should "break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles."

The Asherah pole was a sacred tree or a limbless tree trunk planted in the ground and carved to represent the Canaanite version of the mother goddess Hathor, whom they called Asherah, or Ashtoreth, who along with El, the father god, gave birth to all the other gods, including Baal. But instead of cutting these Asherah trees and poles down, **Judges 2:13**, "The Israelites forsook God and served Baal and the Ashtoreths," and again in **Judges 3:7** "they served the Baals and Asherahs." Gideon's father in **Judges 6:25** actually built an altar to Baal with an Asherah pole beside it, which Gideon had to cut down and burn.

And from then on Israel's history is littered with kings putting Asherah poles up and other kings chopping them down. King Manasseh, for instance, erected an Asherah pole in the temple (2 Kings 21:7), which King Josiah then removed and ground into powder. So again, Genesis was right on target talking to Israel about not looking to a sacred tree for divine power and wisdom, because sacred trees and tree goddesses would plague Israel for many centuries to come.

That's why God told Israel to eradicate the Canaanite religion, because it took their minds off trusting him. The tribal peoples of Canaan believed that Baal and Asherah were the divine providers of life, fertility and the rain, and it was those two gods, not God, who controlled the productivity of the soil and crops and the well-being of the livestock. And how important was that to people whose lives and survival revolved around living off the land and needing rain in due season?

But in Genesis God had **already** sorted that out by equipping Adam and Eve to take care of the soil and the production of crops, and HE would provide the rain. It didn't have the appeal, though, of a goddess on a sacred pole or tree that you could see, and especially when those trees were made into impressive sacred groves and placed on the highest points all over the land with the promise of magic spells and healing - and sex and prostitution. It was a challenge, therefore, for the Israelites to keep looking to God to provide for them. It was the same challenge Adam and Eve faced too, and so do we all. Will we humans in any age look to God for divine wisdom and power, or be taken in by the highly appealing and very convincing gods of the culture we're living in?

Well, here we are now, 3,500 years after all this was written in Genesis to Israel, and we too can clearly see what happens when we choose the gods of the culture, because we haven't even got started yet in what God gave Adam and Eve to do. Instead of turning the Earth into a productive and beautiful garden from learning the secrets of the soil from God, we're turning it into a garbage dump. Some might object strongly to that statement, pointing to all the wonderful things that Science has given us, but they all become rather pointless if the soil cannot cope anymore with our ignorance and abuse of it.

God made us participants in his creation, which began the day he told Adam and Eve to work the ground. At that point a whole new arrangement began requiring the careful, gentle and wise management of the greatest non-renewable resource we've got on this planet - soil. That, in GOD'S wisdom, was the first and most crucial key to the flourishing of life on this planet. But that's far too primitive for the likes of our science saturated know-it-alls today, who are totally convinced we can meet every problem and need we've got without ever consulting or including God.

And there's no doubt huge advances have been made - **but at what expense to the soil?** To support our lifestyle on this planet we're causing massive soil erosion, salinization, desertification, and pollution of ground water from nitrate fertilizers - and we're sacrificing much of what good soil there still is to our ever-expanding cities, which in turn requires ever more desperate methods of farming to produce the food required, which in turn deplete the soil.

Despite the clear evidence, then, that we haven't got a clue when it comes to the importance of soil management for the survival of our species, science still promotes itself as the god of all solutions. And science is very appealing, just like the sacred tree gods of Egypt and Canaan, and especially when it means we can carry on living whatever lifestyle we like, including, of course, our fixation with sex. But no problem, the gods of science, medicine, government, economics and retirement pensions will keep us fed and watered. So who needs God? And our culture is becoming so bold now in not needing God that scientists are openly stating they will prove the universe began without God too - which is all very fascinating BUT, in the meantime, the soil is constantly eroding.

But the soil eroding illustrates the point of Genesis perfectly, because in our choice not to look to God for our purpose in life and the source of divine power and wisdom to fulfill that purpose our planet is suffering.

How we look after the soil, therefore, has become the perfect gauge of how well we are fulfilling our role as God's image-bearers. And clearly we're not fulfilling it, and for exactly the same reason Adam and Eve blew their role as God's image-bearers, and so did Israel. We, like they, have exchanged God's wisdom - revealed at **his** pace and timing - for our own version of sacred trees, tree goddesses and tree serpents making us think we've got all the knowledge and wisdom we need tucked away in our own heads as well.

Well, fortunately for us humans God provided another couple of trees to solve that problem, and here we go again with the importance of trees to God. The first tree he provided, ironically, was just like the dead, limbless tree trunk stuck in the ground that the ancients lifted up to the mother goddess Asherah. How fitting that what people looked to in a dead tree trunk also became the place where Jesus died to put an end to that entire era of looking to other gods as the source of divine power and wisdom.

It's a pity that people don't realize, therefore, that God has **already** taken care of the damage caused by humans eating off the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - by the "tree" that Jesus was crucified on (and it's called a tree in Acts 5:30, 13:29, 1 Peter 2:24). And SINCE Jesus' death God has also been replacing that old damaged creation with a brand new creation, pictured, again ironically, by a tree of life - just like the tree of life the Egyptians set up in the temple of the sun god in Heliopolis as the centre of the universe.

God not only used trees to define our human problem, therefore, he also uses trees to picture his solution, because the purpose of the tree of life in **Revelation 22:2** is to provide "the healing of the nations." God's focus is on healing the damage caused on all nations by eating off the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And God is in that process of healing through the tree of life right now. We gather that from **Revelation 21:22**, where it says "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple," and when did Jesus become the temple? According to John 2:19-21 it was at his resurrection. Ever since Jesus' resurrection, therefore, he's been pouring out healing to the nations.

But HOW is God going about healing the nations when it looks like the world is getting worse, not better, and where is the clear and obvious evidence? Well, the entire message of Scripture, pictured by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis is: "To whom do we turn for our source of divine power or wisdom - God, or the gods of our own creation?"

The healing going on, therefore, can be clearly seen in those who believe it's the God of Genesis who provides us with all the divine power and wisdom we need to complete our role as his image-bearers, no matter what our health or age or circumstances are. It's to him we look to lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil. That's what salvation means; it means 'deliverance', but deliverance from what, pray tell? It's deliverance from the stupidity of depending on anything for the role God has given us other than him. And that's the healing the resurrected Jesus now provides through the tree of life to all nations.

The focus of the tree of life, therefore, is not about immortality and living forever - it's about healing and deliverance from the one thing that God clearly said in the beginning would kill us, kill off his plan for this planet, and would kill off his plan for us as his image-bearers. He warned us right off the bat in a tree what would wreck everything, and when we blew it he then solved it for us by providing healing and deliverance in trees too, starting with the tree Jesus was crucified on, and now continuing through the tree of life, which Paul describes as the life of Christ himself that he's now living in us through his Spirit.

So what kind of life did Christ live? It's clearly stated in **Hebrews 5:7**, that "during the days of his life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions...to the one who could **save him from death.**" All during his human life Jesus totally trusted in God's divine power and wisdom to save him from death - meaning the death of trusting in his **own** power and wisdom, pictured by the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And notice what that did for him. It trained him perfectly for the "eternal salvation," deliverance and healing of others (verse 9). And that's what we're now being trained for every day too, as we too face the temptation to think and act like the world does, or resort to the gods of the culture for solutions. We learn, as we trust in the slow and steady healing power of Christ's mind in us, that this is what delivers and frees us humans from the damaging thoughts we've picked up from a world still eating off the wrong tree.

What a fantastic situation we are in, then, when we understand this, because we know from the book of Genesis what's happening to us and why. Yes, we're being tested, just as Adam and Eve were, so was Israel, and so was Jesus, the test being to see where we look for divine power and wisdom, but in the process we're being equipped by God, just as Jesus was (and Adam and Eve could have been) to be what he made us to be in the first place, his image-bearers, bringing his healing touch to this world wherever we are, just like the tree of life will one day bring his healing touch to the whole world, as he originally intended - and it was all explained for us by that master storyteller Moses, in the beginning.