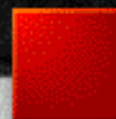


Nephi's Tree of Life



Nephi's Cultural Assumptions of the Tree of Life

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Unfortunately for an understanding of the cultural symbolism of the Tree of Life, it is explicitly mentioned only twice in the Bible, in the first book of the Old Testament and the last book of the New Testament. Even though in between it slips from the explicit text of scripture, it nevertheless is a constant cultural undercurrent, and at times aspects of the symbol complex associated with the Tree of Life can be seen rising in the stream of scripture. To understand the way in which the Tree of Life symbolism influenced cultural thought, it is important to remember that in ancient Israel tradition consisted of two parts, the written and the oral. While both were transmitted from generation to generation, and both had a profound influence on the development of religious thought, the oral traditions were not committed to writing (and are therefore not readily available to us) until approximately 135 C.E. ("Folklore" *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Jerusalem: Macmillan Company, 1971, 6:1376).

To understand the complex set of associated ideas which surrounded the Tree of Life, we need to have a basic understanding of the symbol in the ancient Near East, and then examine the Biblical text and later written oral tradition for the continuation of such themes. The seminal study of the Tree of Life symbolism in that area is Geo Widengren's *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near East Religion* (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1951). Widengren finds a tree of life in Babylonian religious art and myth. The Babylonian tree of life is found in the midst of a garden paradise, as indicated in an inscription from the first Babylonian dynasty which dates from the "year in which the garden of the gods was made" (Widengren p. 17). It is always associated with the primordial waters, the Apsu, and the original tree is located over the Deep (Widengren p. 8).

The representations and sanctuaries explicitly reconstructed this mythical model, and the sanctuaries constituted "a temple grove with the Tree of Life growing in the sanctuary as in a fine garden" (Widengren pl. 10). The garden is tended by a gardener, who is associated with the King. The King is not only the guardian of the Tree of Life, but also posses a twig from the Tree of Life which is his scepter (Widengren p. 20). The person of the King becomes tied up with the image of the tree in symbol, so that the tree is the King, and the King is the Tree (see Widengren p. 42). The possession of a twig from the Tree represents the King's right to bestow

the benefits of the Tree.

Perhaps the most significant reason that the King should be intimately associated with the Tree of Life is that he becomes the dispenser of its benefits, which, according to the obvious implications of its name, is life itself. In the epic of Gilgamesh the hero fashions two instruments from a mythic tree which he intends to use to recall the dead. This conceptual use of a tree to provide life is the quintessential theme of the Tree of Life. In the developing symbolism, the tree itself holds symbol power, but it is the fruit or the associated liquid of the Tree which provide the life-giving benefits. According to Babylonian texts, "both the Plant of Life and the water of life are partaken together, in order that man might be revived" (Widengren p. 35).

The life-giving context of the Tree of Life is clearly the important context in the Genesis account, and continues to be a part of the oral tradition associated with the tree. In a folk legend collected after the commitment of the oral tradition to text, "Adam bade Eve go with Seth to the gates of Paradise and entreat God to have mercy upon him, and send His angel to catch up some of the oil of life flowing from the tree of his mercy and give it to his messengers. The ointment would bring him rest, and banish the pain consuming him" (Ginzberg, Louis. The Legends of the Jews. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909, 1:93).

In spite of this however, the life-giving context appears to have been more of an oral tradition than a scriptural one. Of all the symbolic associations surrounding the Tree of Life in the ancient Near Eastern homeland of Israel, the symbolic connection which most often surfaces in the Old Testament text is the association with the King.

Widengren finds the symbolic connection between the Tree of Life and the King in the associated visual symbols which were used in Hebrew art:

"Tradition differs as to the botanical species of the Tree of Life in the Israelitic Paradise. Some of the rabbis held it to be a date palm, others the olive, and even the fig tree had its advocates. Presumably the vine too must have been held to be this tree, for only then do we understand that the sceptre from the

Tree of Paradise may be either a twig from the olive or the vine. That the vine generally holds the place as the Tree of Life would seem to be natural, if we judge from the association between the vine and the King of Israel" (Widengren p. 38).

Barlow finds the date palm to be an important decorative element in the temple of Solomon, without explicitly connecting it to the Tree of Life or to the King (Barlow, H.C. Essays on Symbolism. London: Williams and Norgate, 1866, pp. 68-69. See I Kings 6:29,32,; 7:36). Understanding the association of the date palm with the Tree of Life provides a powerful context for the visual imagery.

Thus the Tree of Life as Nephi would have known it from his Israelite cultural heritage was a multi-faceted symbol. The symbol complex consisted of at least the following:

1. A tree (of indeterminate botanical species, sometimes the olive, date palm, or grape vine)
2. Water in close connection with the Tree
3. An associated fruit (date, olive, or grape)
4. An associated liquid (the nearby stream, or the liquid derived from the fruit - date palm wine, olive oil, or grape wine.
5. A symbolic association with, or personfication of either the King, or of the state (where the King is the representation of the state).

Into such a cultural heritage, Nephi places the information he hears from his father about the vision of the Tree of Life. While many of the symbols are clearly similar, there are significant differences. The easiest to understand is the shift in the connection between the healing, temporal effects of partaking of the issue of the Tree in cultural terms, and the eternal effects implied in Lehi's dream.

I suggest that it is this very dissonance with the expected symbology that moved Nephi to ask for his own experience with the dream.

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