

The Tree of Life
as a Symbol
of Jesus Christ

By
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A symbol is generally defined as something that stands for something else. Carol Meyers, in her dissertation, The Tabernacle Menorah, notes that, "to man, everything is symbolic. The employment of symbolism is what makes us human."¹ The very nature of a symbol, as described by Lurker, is "to direct the individual away from the superficial concerns of life towards the centre of existence-the center of the world."² Also, a symbol directs man's attention "beyond the here and now for it is a signpost to another world."³ Mircea Eliade states that "symbols awaken individual experience and transmute it into a spiritual act" and that "societies can attain to the highest spirituality" by understanding symbols.⁴ He further states that ordinary stones and trees become hierophanies to some people because they represent the sacred, the ganz andere.⁵ He goes on to say that the tree came to represent everything that religious man regarded as pre-eminently real and sacred.⁶ E.O. James states: "The sacredness of trees and plants is so firmly and deeply rooted in almost every phase and aspect of religious and magicoreligious

¹Carol Meyers, The Tabernacle Menorah. ASOR Dissertation Series, 2 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), p.5.

²Manfred Lurker, The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p.9.

³Ibid. p.9.

⁴Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1959), pp.211-212.

⁵Ibid. pp.11-12.

⁶Ibid. p.149.

phenomena that it has become an integral and a recurrent feature in one form or another at all times and in most states of culture, ranging from the Tree of Life to the Maypole."⁷

Kristensen has noted that "the tree of life is almost universal and proves to be deeply grounded in man's feelings..."⁸ Langdon states, "It is a well known fact that the Tree of Life plays an important role in ancient Mesopotamian myth and ritual."⁹

One cannot read statements such as these without recalling the words of the Lord as recorded in the Book of Moses: "Behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me..." (Moses 6:63).

It is my intent in this paper to show that trees are used symbolically, that anciently trees were associated with deities, and that tree symbolism is found in many parts of the world. I shall further discuss how the Tree of Life represents the center of the world, the navel, the omphalos of the universe, the pillar that supports the universe and upon which everything centers. Finally, I shall show that second, third, and fourth century

⁷E.O. James, The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), p.1.

⁸ Brede Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), p.114:

⁹Stephen Langdon, Semitic Mythology (Boston: Archaeological Institute of America, Marshall Jones Company, 1931), pp.152, 179, 184, 226.

Christians often associated the Tree of Life with Jesus Christ and the cross.

The Tree of Life Represents the Center of the World

A belief in the center of the earth is found throughout the world: in Egypt and the Near East, in India, and in Palestine. It is also a strong religious concept in South and Central America. Varro found the concept in Italy and, as Graves demonstrates, it also existed beyond doubt in Greece.¹⁰

The Jews have longed to gather to Israel for generations because of this belief in a center of the earth. For them, Palestine was the center of the earth. This is illustrated by the following quotation from the Midrash:

Just as the navel is found at the center of a human being, so the land of Israel is found at the center of the world...and it is the foundation of the world. Jerusalem is at the center of the land of Israel, the Temple is at the center of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies is at the center of the temple, the ark is at the center of the Holy of Holies, and the Foundation Stone is in front of the ark, which spot is the foundation of the world.¹¹

Temples then became associated with the center of the universe, the place where heaven, earth, and the underworld

¹⁰Jennifer Graves, The Greek Omphalos: Its Symbolism and Significance. Thesis Brigham Young University (Provo: 1984), pp.2-3.

¹¹Midrash Tanhuma, Kedoshim 10, quoted in Jonathan Z. Smith, Map is not Territory. Vol.23 of Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), p.112.

meet,¹² the umbilical cord, the navel of the earth, the pillar or sacred pole supporting the earth.¹³

Lundquist, in his study of temple typology, includes the Tree of Life as a common feature in temples.¹⁴ Thus, we can include the Tree of Life as one of the symbols of the center of the world. Butterworth notes, "The sacred tree was situated at the center of the earth."¹⁵ This sacred tree was considered to be the first living thing to grow from the primeval hill at the beginning of time when the waters of the great abyss first gave way to land.¹⁶ Similarly, the peoples of the Altai mountains tell of a gigantic fir-tree which grows in the navel of the earth, in the central point, the highest of all the trees on earth.¹⁷

In the early Mayan Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, the Yax Cheel Cab, or "Tree of Life," is spoken of in one place as the

¹²A.J. Wensinck, The Navel of the Earth (Amsterdam: Johannes Muller, 1916), p.23.

¹³ Smith, Map is, not Territory, p.118.

¹⁴John Lundquist, "The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East," in The Temple in Antiquity, ed. Truman G. Madsen, Religious Studies Center Monograph Series (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1984), p.57.

¹⁵E.A.S. Butterworth, The Tree at the Navel of the Earth (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970), p.7.

¹⁶F.B.J. Kuiper, "Cosmogony and Conception: A Query," History of Religion, vol.10(1970), pp.91-138.

¹⁷Uno Holmberg, Der Baum des Lebens (Helsingfors: Toimituskissa, 1922), p.51. Cited in Butterworth, The Tree at the Navel of the Earth, p.2.

Iran and India, as well as in Crete and the Aegean, in Greece, and Rome, in Syria, and in Judaeo-Christian iconography.

Literary evidence of the sacred tree exists in Japan, China, among the Mayans, in Egypt, Palestine, Ugarit, and Scandanavia, where the great ash tree Yggdrasil sat at the center of the universe.²⁵

Black Elk, a modern Indian of the Oglala Sioux, includes in his autobiography a vision in which he saw a tree.

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of the many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight and in the centre grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.

And the angel shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was....the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruits every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nation.²⁶

²⁵Jennifer Graves, The Greek Omphalos, p.25.

²⁶Neihardt, John, Black Elk Speaks (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1932), as quoted in Roger Cook, The Tree of Life (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), pp.7-8.

Yax Imix Che, or "Green Tree of Abundance" that "was set up in the Center of the World."¹⁸ Moreover, the modern Maya believe that the Yax Cheel Cab or "Tree of Life" (held to have been a giant ceiba-tree) grew in the exact center of the earth.¹⁹

Granet mentions that every Oriental city was situated at the center of the world. The capital of the Chinese sovereign is, in effect, at the center of the universe, close to the miraculous tree (Kien-mu), at the meeting place of the three cosmic zones: heaven, earth, and hell.²⁰ Widengren uses the following Old Testament reference to support this idea of the tree being in the center of the earth.

I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth; and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were fair and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it and the birds of the air dwelt in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. (Daniel 4:10-13)²¹

Eliade mentions that this tree at the center of the earth is

¹⁸The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, ed. and trans. by Ralph L. Roys (Carnegie Institution of Washington, Pub. No. 438), 1933, pp.32, 100.

¹⁹Alfred M. Tozzer, A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandones (New York: Pub. for the Archaeological Institute of America by the Macmillan Company, 1907), p.154.

²⁰Marcel Granet, La Pensee Chinoise (Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 1934), p.324. Cited in Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return, p.14.

²¹Geo Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion. King and Saviour IV; (Uppsala: A.B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1951), p.57.

synonymous with the Cosmic Axis or pillar of the world.²²

The center, then, is pre-eminently the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality. Similarly, all the other symbols of absolute reality (tree of life.....) are also situated at the center.²³

The Tree of Life Symbol throughout the World

It has been established that the Tree of Life is found at the symbolic center of the earth. Specific examples will now be cited of the Tree of Life symbol found in many parts of the earth. Tree worship dates from a very early period. Perhaps the most ancient mention of the sacred tree is found from a Sumerian source:

In Eridu there is a black kiskanu-tree, growing in a pure place, its appearance is lapis-lazuli, erected on the Apsu. Enki, when walking there, filleth Eridu with abundance. In the foundation thereof is the place of the underworld, in the resting place is the chamber of Nammu. In its holy temple there is a grove, casting its shadow, therein no man goeth to enter. In the midst are the Sun god and the Sovereign of heaven, in between the river with the two mouths.²⁴

The sacred tree is attested archaeologically, and evidence has been found in the ancient Near East, the Fertile Crescent,

²²Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (New York: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp.259-274.

²³Eliade, Myth of the Eternal Return (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp.17-18.

²⁴Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum XVI pl.46:183-47:198= Thompson, Devils and Evil Spirits I p.200: 183ff. As cited in Geo Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion. King and Saviour IV; (Uppsala: A.B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1951), pp.5-6.

It was around a sacred tree or pole that the North American Indians performed many of their rituals to strengthen relations with the sacred world. The most famous of these was the sun dance. Black Elk gives an account of this rite among the Sioux in his book The Sacred Pipe, in which he tells of the sacred origin of the rite; how it came to one of the braves in a vision, and how it was first performed.

In an elaborate ritual a sacred cottonwood tree is felled and brought ceremonially into the camp. This tree becomes the centre pole for the sacred sun dance lodge. Twenty-eight poles radiate from it; these represent the twenty-eight phases of the lunar month. 'We are really making the universe in a likeness,' says Black Elk, 'for the whole circle is the entire creation, and the one tree at the centre upon which the twenty-eight poles rest is Wakan-Tanka--the Great Spirit, who is the centre of everything.'

After the construction of this cosmic house, eight of the bravest warriors are chosen and painted with sacred symbols; the circle, the cross, the sun and moon and morning star. They then put on rabbit skins to make them docile and to help them accept their sufferings in a spirit of humility--'a quality we must all possess when we go to the centre of the world.' Then, after more prayers and sacred vows, they circumambulate the sacred lodge in a sunwise direction, crying out; 'O Wakan-Tanka, be merciful to me, that my people may live! It is for this that I am sacrificing myself.'

The breast of each dancer is then pierced in two places by wooden pegs, which are attached to a leather thong, which is tied to the upper part of the centre pole. When the dance begins, each warrior in turn leans back upon the thongs, which represent 'rays of light from Wakan-Tanka,' and dances around the pole until the pegs break loose from his flesh. The ritual ends with each of the dancers placing a piece of his severed flesh at the base of the tree, while the following prayer is addressed to the Great Spirit. 'These eight people have offered their

bodies and souls to you; in suffering they have sent their voices to you; they have even offered to you a piece of their flesh, which is now at the foot of this sacred tree. The favour that they ask of you is that their people may walk in holy path of life and that they may increase in sacred manner.²⁷

Probably the largest representation of the Tree of Life ever discovered was found on a mountainside overlooking the Bay of Paracas on the south coast of Peru. It measures more than 600 feet from base to tip, is 12 feet wide and 9 feet deep. The huge carving is locally called the "Tree of Life," although some call it the "Three Crosses" or the "Candelabrum." Some suppose it was made by a Catholic priest--to serve as a warning to fisherman. Others believe the symbol was carved on the mountainside by pirates at a time when they deposited some rich treasure in the vicinity. On the opposite side of the mountain of this Paracas Tree of Life is a cemetery. According to V. Garth Norman, formerly of Brigham Young University, the Tree of Life symbol combined with a cemetery symbolizes eternal life for those who were buried there. He also mentions that the Israelite Tree of Life (menorah) was used as a symbol of eternal life in tomb carvings, at least during the Hellenistic period and thereafter.²⁸

Eliade explains another interesting myth:

²⁷Cook, The Tree of Life, p.22. Also, see Black Elk, The Sacred Pipe (Lincoln, Neb. and London: 1973).

²⁸Ross T. Christensen, "The 'Tree of Life' in South America and other Topics of Andean Archaeology," The University Archaeological Society. U.A.S. Newsletter, No. 92, Brigham Young University, (Provo: 1964), p.1.

According to a myth of the Achilpa, an Australian tribe, in the beginning the Holy Being, Numbakula, 'cosmicized' their future territory, created their ancestor, and established their institutions. Numbakula fashioned a sacred stake from the trunk of a gum tree and, having first anointed it with blood, climbed it and disappeared into the heavens. This stake represents a cosmic axis, for the territory surrounding it became inhabitable and consequently transformed into a 'world.' For this reason the ritual role of the sacred stake is a considerable one; the Achilpa take it with them during their peregrinations, and they decide which direction to take according to the way the stake inclines. This allows the Achilpa, despite continuous travess, always to find themselves in 'their world' and also to remain in communication with the heavens, where Numbakula had disappeared. If the stake is broken, catastrophe ensues; in a way, it is the 'end of the world'--regression into chaos. Spencer and Gillen relate a legend in which the sacred stake was once broken and the entire tribe fell prey to anguish; it's members wandered aimlessly for a while and finally sat on the ground and allowed themselves to die.²⁹

The Maya and Aztecs also worshipped representations of the Tree of Life (Maya Yax Cheel Cab, Aztec Tonacaquahuitl).³⁰

Tree of Life Myths related to events in the the Old Testament

There are many myths and legends that relate the tree of life to the events of the Old Testament. Widengren quotes the following from the Testament of Levi 8:8-9: "The fifth gave me a branch of rich olive, the sixth put a crown upon my head." He

²⁹Eliade, "The Prestige of the Cosmogonic Myth," Diogenes, vol.23(1958), pp.1-13. Also see Sir B. Spencer and F.J. Gillen, The Arunta (London: Macmillan and Co., 1927), I, pp.374,386.

³⁰M. Wells Jakeman, The Complex "Tree of Life" Carving on Izapa Stela 5 (Provo: Brigham Young University Publications in Archaeology and Early History, 1958), p.2.

then states that for the correct interpretation of this scene it is important to note that according to Christian traditions the rod of Moses was nothing but a branch from one of the two forbidden trees in paradise. According to this legend, Adam used a staff his entire life that he had cut off as a branch from the sacred tree before leaving the garden of Eden. Adam passed it on to Seth, who passed it on to Noah. From Noah it was passed to Shem, who gave it to Abraham. An angel of the Lord took it from Abraham and placed it in the Cave of Treasures in the Mount of Moab until Midian was built. Jethro, being a righteous man, was led to the cave where he found this rod or branch of the Tree of Life. Jethro then passed this rod to Moses who used the rod to show forth the power of God to the Pharaoh.³¹ Moses continued to use this rod to bring forth water from a rock, to divide the Red Sea, and then he hung a brazen serpent on it so that all who beheld it were delivered from the plague of the snakes. Moses passed the rod to Aaron and it was passed from hand to hand to King David, who transplanted it to Jerusalem. King Solomon tried to convert it into the main pillar for his palace, but it shot up and pierced the roof. Upset at this, King Solomon cast it into a brook, where it was used as a crossing and was trodden underfoot. Solomon finally buried it and later dug a pool on the same spot. This pool acquired miraculous healing qualities so that

³¹E.A.W. Budge, Ed. The Book of the Bee. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), p.50. cf. Preuschen, Adamschriften. p.46. As cited in Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life, p.38.

the sick and afflicted came to bathe in it and were made whole.

As the crucifixion of the Savior approached, this wooden beam floated to the top of the pool, where the Roman soldiers found it and used it to form the cross on which Christ was crucified. This cross was set up in the precise spot, the navel of the world, where Adam was created and died. The blood of Christ fell upon the skull of Adam at the base of the cross, thus baptizing the father of mankind and redeeming the sins of Adam's posterity.³²

Other Biblical events are also associated with the Tree of Life. Firmicus Maternus, A.D. 325, wrote the following:

From the deluge man was saved by a wooden ark; upon the shoulders of his only son, Abraham laid wood; the people of God, returning from Egypt, were protected by a wooded rod; the bitter waters were made sweet by wood; the healing water was drawn forth from the lifeless rock by a wooden rod; and the law of God was committed to a wooden ark; by all which, as by particular steps, the salvation of man reached to the wood of the cross.³³

Association of the Tree of Life with the cross was origina-

³²From Illustrations from the Legendary History of the Cross...from a Dutch Book Published by Veldener 1483, ed. John Ashton, (New York: A.C. Armstrong, 1887). As cited in Cook, The Tree of Life, p.122. This popular mediæval legend exists in many different versions and the story's complex origins in ancient Mesopotamian mythology and in Jewish Apocalyptic writings have been studied by E.C. Quinn, The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

³³From Firmicus Maternus, De enore profanarum religionum. chap.27. C.S.E.L., Vol.II, pp.121-122. Cited in Reno, The Sacred Tree, pp.165-166.

lly ascribed to St. Augustine, but is now generally considered to be the work of his disciple, Bishop Quodvultdeus of Carthage, A.D. 400, where he says the cross is the same rod, the very shoot, which grew from the root of Jesse.³⁴

It has been shown that both archaeological and literary evidence of the Tree of Life symbol exist in many parts of the world. Examples will now be cited of trees being the abode of Deities from various locations throughout the world.

Trees as Abodes for Deities

One of the most important forms of the sacred tree is that of the tree as the personification of the deity. This may take the form of an actual identification of the tree with the god or goddess; or of the tree itself or some part thereof being regarded as the embodiment of a symbol for some power or dignity of the deity.³⁵

J.H. Philpot states, "There is little doubt that most if not all races, at some period of their development, have regarded the tree as the home, haunt, or embodiment of a spiritual essence..."³⁶ He goes on: "There is, indeed, scarcely a country in the world where the tree has not at one time or another been approached with reverence or with fear, as being

³⁴D. Frances, Die Werke des Hl. Quodvultdeus (Munich: 1920), pp.32-33,78-79. Cited in Reno, The Sacred Tree, p.155.

³⁵C.J. Gadd, Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient Near East (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p.91.

³⁶J.H. Philpot, The Sacred Tree. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), p.1.

closely connected with some spiritual potency."³⁷ Eliade adds, "The close association of divinity with tree is a frequently expressed theme in the plastic art of the Ancient Near East, throughout the whole 'Indo-Mesopotamo-Egypto-Aegean' area."³⁸

Robertson Smith states that in ritual, the tree was spoken of and treated as the god himself; it was not merely his symbol, but his embodiment. He goes on to say that the tree was adored as divine in every part of the Semitic area and that in no country in the world was the tree more ardently worshipped than it was in Ancient Palestine.³⁹

Evidence of the sacred tree in Mesopotamia can be found in glyptic art, stone reliefs, bowls, cylinders, brick edifices, and fabrics.⁴⁰ In the earliest examples of the Elamites, animals are depicted flanking a tree.⁴¹ Divine figures and human figures in worshipful positions have also been found.⁴² In the Akkadian period, the anthropomorphic deity of vegetation is found with

³⁷Ibid. p.1.

³⁸Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, trans. Rosemary Sheed. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p.278.

³⁹Robertson Smith, Religion of the Semites (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p.185,195.

⁴⁰Meyers, The Tabernacle Menorah, p.104.

⁴¹Nell Perrot, "Les representations de l'arbre sacre sur les monuments de Mesopotamie et de l'Elam," Babyloniaca XVII (1937), pp.23-24.

⁴²William Hayes Ward, Seal Cylinders of Western Asia (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1910), p.38.

branches sprouting from the body of the god.⁴³

In Egypt, the sacred tree took the form of stone columns arranged in rows and rows of the great Egyptian temples. Columns, no doubt, originated structurally as poles or bundles of reeds, with lotus or papyrus flowers tied to the top, used to support the thatching of the earliest huts. Columns were also fertility emblems to the Egyptians as was the god Osiris. Osiris became associated with columns, or the so called Djed column. The Djed symbol then represents the transformation of a tree to a sacred post.⁴⁴ Osiris and the Djed are not the only theomorphic expressions of vegetative life in Egypt. The goddesses, Nut, Hathor, and Isis stretch out their arms from the midst of the branches of a tree.⁴⁵

According to the Pyramid Texts, Atum emerged from the lotus, Nut and Hathor from the sycamore tree, Re from the persea tree, and Horus from the love tree.⁴⁶ The great historian Eusebius adds, "the first men consecrated the plants shooting out of the

⁴³Edith Porada, Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections. I. Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library (Bollingen Series, XIV). (Washington: Pantheon Books, 1948), p.26.

⁴⁴James Henry Breasted, Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt (Harper Torchbook, TB 57). (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1959), pp.18-28.

⁴⁵Marie-Louise Buhl, "The Goddesses of the Egyptian Tree Cult," Journal of Near Eastern Studies, vol.6 (1947), pp.96-97.

⁴⁶R.O. Faulkner, The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts (Oxford: 1969), P.T., 1466, in vol.1, p.226. Also, Siegfried Morenz, Egyptian Religion (London: Methuen, 1973), pp.179-181.

earth, and judged them gods, and worshipped them, and made meat and drink offerings to them."⁴⁷

Frazer and Mannhardt contend that the deities Tammuz in Babylon, Adonis in Syria, Attis in Phrygia, and Dionysius in Crete and Greece were all tree gods.⁴⁸ In Buddhism, the asvattha or pippala-tree Ficus Religiosa, was identified with the supreme deity, Brahma.⁴⁹ In Finland, the oak is still called "God's tree," and to this day the birch and the mountain-ash are held sacred by the peasants and planted beside their cottages with every sign of reverence.⁵⁰ The Russians have a legend, derived from Byzantium, of an iron-tree, the root of which is the power of God, while its head sustains the three worlds, the heavenly ocean of air, the earth, and hell with its burning fire and brimstone.⁵¹ The Tree of Life among the Ngaju Dayak was looked upon as the personification of the godhead, i.e., the symbol of the union of Mahatala and Jata, of the upperworld and underworld.⁵²

⁴⁷Eusebius, Praepar. Evang. lib. I, cap.10. Cited in Philpot, The Sacred Tree, p.8.

⁴⁸J. Frazer, The Golden Bough. London: Vol.1(1890), p.307. Also see Walter F. Otto, Dionysius: Myth and Cult (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp.155-159.

⁴⁹R. Folkard, Plant-Lore, Legends, and Lyrics. (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1892), p.4.

⁵⁰Philpot, The Sacred Tree. 1897, p.19.

⁵¹De Gubernatis, Mythologie des Plantes. Vol.1, p.102.

⁵²Hans Scharer, Ngaju Religion: A Conception of God among a South Borneo People (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1963), pp.81-83.

The Old Testament also includes many examples of trees associated with dieties. The Lord appeared to Abraham at Shechem under the great oak of Moreh (Gen.12:6-7), and Abraham experienced a revelation of God at the oak of Mamre (Gen.18:1). Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba and called upon the name of the Lord and invoked his presence (Gen.21:33). Jacob built an altar and later a pillar at Bethel because God had revealed himself to Jacob there (Gen.35:7,14). Deborah was buried under the oak of Bethel (Gen.35:8), the Prophetess Deborah sat under a palm tree to judge Israel (Judges 4:5), and the Lord appeared to Gideon at the oak of Ophrah (Judges 6:11,12,19,21, 24). Saul often located himself near trees to draw himself near to the divine presence which was associated with them (I Sam. 14:2, 22:6, 31:13). David, too, experienced God's presence in conjunction with a location at a certain group of trees (II Sam. 5: 22-25). Elijah sat down and slept under a broom tree where the angel of the Lord appeared to him and reappeared a second time (I Kings 19:4,5,7). And, of course, God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-3).

Thus, it has been shown that the ideas of trees being the abode of Gods can be seen in many parts of the world.

The Tree of Life is a Symbol for Jesus Christ

The final point of this paper will be that the Tree of Life is, for second, third, and fourth century Christians, a symbol for the center of the universe, Jesus Christ and the cross. All

of the previous points discussed in this paper, i.e., that the tree is, in fact, used as a symbol, that it exists at the center of the world or the navel of the earth, that the Tree of Life symbol exists in many parts of the world both archaeologically and literarily, and that trees acted as homes for deities, all prepare for our consideration whether for second, third, and fourth century Christians, the Tree of Life represents Jesus Christ and the cross. Statements, quotes, legends, and the Holy Scriptures, will be used to illustrate this point.

The Russian ethnographer, A.A. Popov, recorded the initiatory dream of a Samoyed shaman, and this is one of the examples cited by Eliade in his book on shamanism. This shaman dreamt that his soul was carried off to a great sea, in the middle of which was an island, and in the center of the island a huge tree. Among the branches of this tree (which is, of course, the Tree of the World) he saw the shaman ancestors of many different nations. He then heard voices telling him that he was to have a drum made from a branch of this tree. From the Lord of the Tree, who emerged in human form, he received his branch, along with all the other shamans in the tree. The Lord of the Tree then said, "One branch only I give not to the shamans, for I keep it for the rest of mankind. They can make dwellings from it and so use it for their needs. I am the Tree that gives life to all men." ⁵³

Eusebius of Caesarea, A.D. 265-339, states:

⁵³Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (New York: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp.38-40, 272.

He who, through his whole life and at all times, night and day, observes the divine law, may be likened to a tree whose roots are situated near the waters from which streams he is completely watered by spiritual things. For indeed, blessed is he who, having drunk and been watered by divine discipline, yields his fruit at the proper time. Because the Son of God is the tree of life, according to Solomon who confessed such in (saying): 'She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her...' ⁵⁴

Asterius, A.D. 341, states, "The Word is the tree planted by the water's edge which the Father has begotten without intermediate, laden with fruit, flourishing, tall, fair-branched...It was of this tree that Adam refused the fruit and fell victim to its opposite. Christ is the tree of life, the devil, the tree of death." ⁵⁵ He adds in another place, "Christ is the tree of life, the devil the tree of death. The one drives man from Paradise; the other introduces the thief into Paradise. It has the apostles for branches, those who are being saved for fruit, works for leaves, baptism for root, the Father as gardener." ⁵⁶

Justin Martyr says, "Now gentlemen, I want you to understand how he whom the Scriptures announce as about to return in glory after the crucifixion was symbolized both by the tree of life which is said to have been planted in Paradise, and by the events

⁵⁴Eusebius of Caesarea, Commentaria in Psalms. I:3, in Migne, P.G., Vol.27, p.77.

⁵⁵Asterius, Commentary on the Psalms. I:4-5, ed. by M. Richard, Commentariorum in Psalmos quae supersunt, accedunt aliquot homiliae anonymae, in series Symbolae Osloenses, Supplement Vol.16, Oslo: 1956, p.2.

⁵⁶Asterius, Commentary or Homilies on the Psalms. I:8, M. Richard, Ibid, p.2.

which were to happen to all the just." ⁵⁷ He goes on to say, "When I had said this I added, 'Learn also that He whom the Scriptures show as about to come again in glory after being crucified, had the type of the tree of life, which it was said was planted in Paradise, and also of the events that are to happen to all the righteous.'" ⁵⁸

Alexander Tille even associates the Christmas tree with the Tree of Life as a symbol of Jesus Christ.

Amongst the other absurdities, with which men are often more busied at Christmas than with the Word of God, there is also the Christmas or fir-tree, which they erect in their houses, hang it with dolls and sweetmeats, and then shake it and cause it to shed its flowers. I know not the origin of the custom, it is a child's game... Far better were it to lead the children to the spiritual cedar, Christ Jesus. ⁵⁹

Second, third and fourth century Christians believed that the tree of life was a symbol of Jesus Christ and the cross. Silvanus simply states, "For the tree of life is Christ" and an early Syriac text reads, "Emmanuel himself...is the tree of life." ⁶⁰ Also, "The cross is a figuration of Christ as the tree of life: Our Savior typified his body in the tree. The one from which Adam did not taste because he sinned." Later on he adds,

⁵⁷Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho the Jew. 86:1. Cited in Reno, The Sacred Tree, p.106.

⁵⁸Ibid. pp.199-200. Cited in Reno, The Sacred Tree, p.167.

⁵⁹Alexander Tille, Die Geschichte der Deutschen Weihnacht (Leipzig: E. Keil, 1893), p.259. Cited in Philpot, The Sacred Tree, pp.169-170.

⁶⁰Erwin R. Goodenough, Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), Vol.7, p.120.

"That Christ was the tree is expressed: The tree of life which was hidden in paradise grew up in Marjam (Mary) and sprang forth from her, and in its shade, creation hath repose, and it spreadeth its fruits over those far and near."⁶¹

Widengren compiled a chapter entitled "The King is the Tree or Plant of Life." Various Biblical references are discussed to show the king symbolically as the "Branch" of a tree i.e., the tree of life.⁶²

There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.

Isa. 11:1-2.

Lo, days are coming, oracle of Yahweh, when I shall cause to arise to David a righteous Branch. He shall rule as a king and be successful and execute judgement and righteousness on earth.

Jer. 23:5

In those days and at that time I shall cause the Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David, and he shall execute judgment and righteousness on earth.

Jer. 33:15

In that day shall the branch of the Lord be beautiful and glorious.

Isa. 4:2

For, behold, I will bring forth my servant the Branch.

Zech. 3:8

Behold the man whose name is The Branch; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord;

Zech. 6:12

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground:...

⁶¹Erwin Goodenough, Jewish Symbols, Vol.7, p.120.

⁶²Geo Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion. King and Saviour IV; (Uppsala: A.B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1951), chap.3.

Isa. 53:2

O Ephraim, what have I to do any more with idols? I was depressed, but I looked upon him. I am like a green cypress, from me thy fruit will be found.

Hos. 14:9

And lo, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and waxed strong, and its height reached unto heaven, and the view of it to the whole earth's end. The leafage of it fair, and its fruit much, and food in it for all. Under it the wild beasts taking shade, and its branches lodging the birds of the sky, and from it feeding all flesh.

Dan. 4:7-9

The Breath of our noses, the Anointed of Yahweh, caught in their pits! We had said: "In his shadow we shall live among the peoples!"

Lamentations 4:20

Widengren also mentions that non-canonical books also associate the King with the Tree of Life.

This branch of God the Most High, and this fountain giving life unto all. Then shall the sceptre of my kingdom shine forth and from your root shall arise a stem; And from it shall grow a rod of righteousness to the peoples, to judge and to save all that call upon the Lord.

Test. of Judah 24:4-6

Widengren quotes and explains in detail the above mentioned scriptures equating Jesus with the Tree of Life.⁶³ The scriptures and some apocryphal books then refer to the Messiah as "a tender plant" (Isa. 53:2), a "Branch" (Isa. 11:1), a "root out of a dry ground" (Isa. 53:2), and "the true vine" (John 15:1).

The Tree of Life symbolism can also be carried to represent the sacrament. Lundquist states, "Generally speaking, the tree of life grows up out of the primordial waters of the abyss, and thus there is an intimate mythological and cultic connection

⁶³The reader is encouraged to read Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life, chap.3.

between the tree and the waters of life." 64

In John 4:14 Jesus said, "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst..." In John 6:35 Jesus said, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." John 6 where the "Bread of Life" sermon is given, though not directly related to the tree of life, again deals with eternal life and the overcoming of death as offered in a food. The bread is symbolic, and represents Christ. Christ would be the tree, and the bread essentially the fruit.

Widengren thinks that all this was behind the celebration of the Eucharist so early that it was a sacramental, and not merely an eschatological allusion when it is said even in the Apocalypse: "To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Also, in a Eucharistic prayer, "Grant me...that I may find eternal life when I partake of the tree of life, and the everlasting light with all your saints." And most explicitly, another Syriac text says, "The altar signifies to us Emmanuel himself, who is the tree of life. The bread and wine which are upon it signify the body of God the Word, wherein was blood also, and are the fruits of the tree of life." 65

Origen states, "This daily bread appears to me to have been

⁶⁴Lundquist, "The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East," p.68.

⁶⁵Goodenough, Jewish Symbols, p.120.

called by another name in Scripture, namely, 'tree of life,' upon which whoever puts forth his hand and takes of it shall live forever."⁶⁶

In John 15 is found the notion that Jesus is the vine: "I am the vine, and my Father is the husbandman." Hippolytus of Rome, A.D. 236, commented on this by saying:

The spiritual vine was the Saviour. The shoots and vine-branches are his saints, those who believe in him. The bunches of grapes are his martyrs; the trees which are joined with the vine show forth his Passion; the vintagers are the angels; the baskets full of grapes are the apostles; the winepress is the Church; and the wine is the power of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷

Conclusions

This paper has established that trees are definitely used as symbols and that trees are often associated with deities in many parts of the world. It has also shown that the sacred tree, i.e. the Tree of Life, is believed to be at the center of the earth; it is the navel or omphalos of the world, the pillar that supports the universe. Finally, it has shown that for Christians of the second, third, and fourth centuries, this tree at the center of the world, this navel, this omphalos or pillar that

⁶⁶Origen, De Oratione. XXVII:10, in G.C.S., Vol.3, p.359; Also Migne, P.G., Vol.XI:513. Cited in Reno, The Sacred Tree, p.108.

⁶⁷Hippolytus of Rome, on the Benedictions of Isaac, Jacob and Moses, XXV. in L amaries, Hippolyte de Rome: Sur les benedictions d'Isaac, de Jacob et de Moise. Series: Col. d'etudes anciennes, (Paris: 1935) and Migne, Patrologia Orientalis, Vol.27, pp.98-99. Cited in Reno, The Sacred Tree, p.119.

supports the universe, is often associated with Jesus Christ and the cross.

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