Tree of Life E2 Final

Trees of the Ancients

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Jon: Hey, this is Jon at The Bible Project. Last week, we began a new conversation with my friend and scholar Dr. Tim Mackie, about the theme of trees in the Bible. Now, I'm a city boy I didn't grow up on land. I went camping every once in a while, I've grown a couple tomato plants in my day, but in general, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about trees.

Tim: The ancient peoples from the remote Western world of Egypt to the eastern river marshes of Babylonia lived in the land not simply on it. They were all agrarian cultures whose livelihood was found and maintained among the shade, fruit, shelter, and beauty of trees. There can be little doubt that this lifestyle had a significant effect on these ancient cultures and the way they perceived the world. Trees were some of the most sacred elements in Ancient Near Eastern civilization.

Jon: The biblical authors love to talk about trees. And there's one tree in particular that stands out. It's on page two of the Bible, and it's at the very end of the Bible. It's crucial to the entire narrative of the biblical story. And that's the tree of life.

Tim: Why a tree of life? We're going to make a cultural step here. In the ancient Near East, the tree of life is a thing. It's a thing and Egypt. It's a thing in Babylon. It's a thing in Canaanite culture. The biblical authors are using a known image but giving it a unique biblical meaning in light of the Yahweh story in biblical faith.

Jon: So today, Tim and I discuss the tree of life as an ancient icon in Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Egyptian culture. And we compare and contrast that with the biblical portrait. And in doing so, we'll find a new appreciation for the role of this mystical tree found on the second page of the Bible. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

Let's talk about trees.

Tim: Yes, we're going to talk about trees, shall we?

Jon: We're having a conversation so we can make a video on a biblical theme, which is?

Tim: I think I'm going to steer us towards the tree of life. There are two trees in Eden in Genesis 2. They're really important. We'll talk about them both. But I think zeroing in on one of them, the tree of life, is a really cool theme that's rewarding. It illuminates so much of what's going on in the Bible. I think the theme is steered towards the tree of life.

Jon: We're going to talk specifically about tree life right now, but in the last episode, we set the table and showed how in the Bible there's this metaphorical scheme that people are like trees. In the biblical imagination, people and trees are like rhyming pairs of ideas. And so you

can talk about people producing fruit and being cut off from other people. To be fertile is to be rooted in the ground. To be unfertile is to be unrooted. All these metaphors spin out of that scheme. And that's important to understand the very fundamental level. In the biblical imagination, this is an idea that's saturated.

Tim: Correct. People are like trees in general. Page two of Genesis, Genesis 2, it zeroes in to talk about two specific kinds of trees in the garden that have important plot significance. I'm also now prepared to say, "Oh, here's two specific trees. As I learn about these trees, I'm also going to be learning about people. I'm also going to meet people in the story who are like these two trees.

Jon: In a tangential way. Because the point of the tree of knowledge of good and the tree of life isn't to just you about people.

Tim: No, no.

Jon: It's got no deeper significance.

Tim: But a significant choice before the first human characters in the story. And that choice is paradigmatic. It's a paradigm. It sets the whole biblical story in motion so that later characters will also face their own garden of Eden tree moment. But very often it won't be in front of a tree, it will be in front of another person who represents a tree of life or a tree of knowing good and bad type of story before them.

Let's first just talk about the trees. We're talking about the people are like the tree of life and the tree of knowing good and bad. Let's talk about these trees and what they mean.

[00:05:15]

Tim: So we're introduced to trees. This is in Genesis 2:9. "Yahweh God caused to sprout every tree from the ground."

Jon: This is the same viets.

Tim: This is viets mach. "...every tree from the ground that is pleasing to the eyes, good for eating. And the tree of life was in the middle of the garden and the tree of knowing good and bad." It's ordering the mention of the trees and the ordering of like the plot significance.

Jon: Yeah, you can picture the camera like moving over. "Here are some beautiful trees that are good to look at. Oh, look at some fruit trees. You can eat those." And then "Whoa, what's this guy?" "Tree of life." "Oh, awesome." Yeah. And then ba ba bam.

Tim: It does seem like the author wants us to see both of these special trees in the middle. But he just says that of the tree of life. The tree of life is in the middle and the tree of knowing good bad. Point is is they're next to each other. And we've actually talked recently about the tree of knowing good and bad at length.

Jon: Yes, we have many times.

Tim: So many times. Let's talk about tree of life first, then of the pair. That's the first one mentioned. At baseline, what is this tree of life? Well, in Genesis 3:22, God says something about that tree. This is after the humans rebel. He says, "Oh, look, the human has become like one of us, knowing good and bad. And now he might stretch out his hand and take from the tree of life and eat and live forever." So the tree of life imparts what...It's pretty intuitive. It imparts life eternal. That's significant. Humans in this narrative don't have inherent within themselves ongoing immortal life. That's something humans have to receive as a gift from outside from God in the narrative through the conduit of this tree. Humans are not created as on day six as eternal, immortal beings. If they're going to be immortal, they have to be given that as a gift. And that's the gift they forfeit.

Jon: I don't want to get bogged down but this is a bit of a, I don't know. Not debate but just a really interesting thing to say that humans in and themselves do not have some sort of eternal quality.

Tim: Well, I don't know I'd say quality. Because the assumption is if humans could be given eternal life, they could experience it. It's that they don't have within themselves the capacity to live forever. That has to be a capacity power or energy given to them.

Jon: In the tradition I grew up in, you took it as a given that humans in some form, my consciousness, psyche, whatever would live forever regardless. That was just kind of like baseline. I never always thought of it in my body, but that in some way I would live forever. And then it would be in a good place or a bad place.

Tim: So underneath that, but probably not mentioned is to live forever has to be a gift of God sustaining life. It's not something built into the human being. It has to be a gift given from God. So I understand that too. When I first started following Jesus, same, that was the idea of eternal life I was introduced to. I'm sorry, I'll just say that humans live forever. But what wasn't as explicitly mentioned is for humans to do that is condition. It's contingent. It's something that comes from outside ourselves as a gift from God. And that's clearly the narrative implication here. God makes it creature, "if you trust me, here's this tree that's my gift of eternal life. If you don't trust me, you don't get the tree, which means no eternal life."

Jon: It means death.

Tim: It means death. And then it turns out that there are different layers of meaning to the word "death." The day you eat of it you will die. And then they eat of it, and they don't die. What they are is exiled where they eventually die. But then it creates a multiple layers of death. You can be alive physically, but be dead in terms of your covenant relationship with your Creator. Which is why Paul can use the phrase "you were dead in your sins and transgressions in Ephesians 2. So Paul knows about physical death, but he also has another kind of death in his theology, which is covenantal, relational death with your creator.

Jon: Or a death to a way of being?

Tim: Oh, yes. Well, the way of being is being...

[crosstalk 00:10:09]

Jon: Dead to sin.

Tim: Dead to sin. Oh, right, which is being alive to God. Yeah, he can flip it. That's right. I'll quote a biblical scholar. This is Bruce Waltke, towering figure in Old Testament studies. He has a fat book that represents 50 years' worth of teaching and lecturing to the whole Hebrew Bible. It's called "An Old Testament Theology." Awesome book. He talks about the tree of life this way. He says, "The tree of life represents life that is beyond the original life that God breathed into the human. The first human by nature is susceptible to death." Because if you don't eat from that tree, you're going to die. That's why God puts it next to the tree so they can eat from it. Back to Waltke. He says, "Nevertheless, continued eating from that tree could renew life and prevent death." That's the narrative logic. "Apart from disobedience to God's command mortals had access to this tree. The tree of life allows humanity to transcend its mortality to the state in which it was created on the sixth day, so it can move to a higher dimension to eternal life and immortality. As one partakes of this fruit by faith, one participates in this eternal life. This highest potency of life was available in the garden and becomes once again available to us as we reenter the temple garden through the second Adam and look forward to the resurrection of our bodies."

Here he's reading the garden narrative in light of Paul the Apostles reflection on it in 1 Corinthians 15. He talks about how the first human was of the dust and mortal and forfeited the opportunity of eternal life. And so that's what the second Adam, Jesus, crucified and risen, that's what he secures for us. That's just a helpful clarifying image. The tree on a narrative level represents a gift of God's own eternal life to the humans, if they will trust God and not take of the tree that's right next to

the tree of life, which is the other one. But that's just worth meditating on what the tree of life means.

Jon: Tree of life means that eternal life is not innate to us.

Tim: To the dirt creature.

Jon: To the dirt creature. But it is something we can attain and it's a gift from God.

Tim: Or something we can receive.

Jon: Something we can receive?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: As a gift?

Tim: Yeah, yeah, there you go.

Jon: I like how he says the tree of life allows me to transcend its mortality to the state in which was created to stay and move to a higher dimension to eternal life and immortality.

Tim: We've talked about this. In other words, even in Genesis 1 and 2, you're introduced to others humanity but then there's humanity next level. And that's a humanity fully in tune with God, participating in God's own eternal life. And that's a version of humanity that is never realized in the story until the resurrection of Jesus. We've talked about...

Jon: And then we're like in sci-fi world, you're like, "What is that?"

Tim: "What is that new humanity?"

Jon: "What does it mean to have eternal life?"

[00:14:27]

Tim: One thing Paul does say in 1 Corinthians 15 is that flesh and blood, our current mode of human existence isn't capable of existing in that way. And then he says it has to undergo...he uses the verb metamorpho. Metamorphosis cause a resurrection and the transformation into resurrection existence as a metamorphosis.

Jon: So in his imagination, do you think he thought that's what Adam and Eve would happen to them, to eat as a tree of life and enter to a cocoon and then come out?

Tim: Yes. Because that's what he says about the second Adam. What he says is the second Adam, Jesus is actually doing what the first Adam never attained, never achieved. So presumably, what was possible for first Adam is what was possible for Jesus. But Jesus is the one who did it. I think in his mind, that's how it would work.

Jon: But Jesus didn't come from the adama, come from the dirt, right?

Tim: He came from the womb of a woman, but he was also the seed of heaven. Right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: The seed of the Spirit. He's both of us. Now we're to incarnation. But the point is that Jesus is both heaven and earth united in one person.

Jon: So Adam and Eve, in a hypothetical world where they ate of the tree, this is all conjecture at this point.

Tim: No. Genesis 3:22, "Lest he stretch out his hand and take from the tree of life and eat and live forever." God says that's what will happen if the human eats from the tree of life.

Jon: But then we go to Paul and Paul's like, "Well, look, the way our bodies exist now, there has to be some sort of metamorphosis.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: So then we can go back and read this and go, "Oh, well, Adam and Eve, we're going to have to go through some sort of metamorphosis in the garden."

Tim: If they ate from the tree of life and live forever, that would involve some ramping up.

Jon: That's cool. I mean, we've talked about before how, in a previous episode, I don't remember what the topic was, but that was supposed to see Adam and Eve as kind of like children or like....

Tim: Correct. Yes, that's that. That's right. Not knowing good and bad is a phrase used to describe children.

Jon: So it was in the wisdom conversation. And that they're supposed to gain wisdom through this relationship with God and eating of the tree of life and this is all connected. So you get this picture of humanity in its infancy with the call to become more. What really interesting is I like to think about future stuff - futurism.

Tim: I like that about you.

Jon: And a lot of people who get geeky about futurism, some people talk about this idea of becoming trans human. There's a whole like transhumanist subculture. And I've never really liked that word because it makes me feel like, oh, we're losing humanity. But the whole idea behind it is like, look, because of medical progress and technological progress, which is connected, we can foresee a time when what it means to be human becomes so different than what it has meant to be human. By using the word "human" doesn't get us there anymore. We've become something more. And so these Christian transhumanists, to think about that, and they think about technology, and they think about all this stuff and they try to connect it to the biblical narrative.

Tim: Correct. What does it mean to think about that within a biblical narrative frame of mind?

Jon: Which I think is really fascinating. Yes, thought experiment, especially as we're going to in the next decades of human civilization deal with things we just never had to deal with before in terms of what it means to be human.

Tim: Totally. There's a similar narrative resemblance between that and the biblical story of God upgrading humanity into resurrection life that Jesus experienced. I mean, if you believe in the resurrection of Jesus that Jesus experiences right now. And the way that Jesus exists in his body is very different than the way I exist in my body. For starters, I cannot see him. He exists in a way that I cannot perceive. But sometimes people do perceive him. He's appeared bodily to the whole first generation and many people throughout history. I haven't had that experience. I often wish. I think that I wish I could. There are other times where I wonder if that's how I would feel about it if it actually happened, but that's another matter. So yeah, there's a resemblance to humanity being metamorphosis. I mean, that's the word Paul uses. Metamorphosis. In the blink of an eye, we shall be metamorphosis," he says, "into the next mode of existence."

Jon: And "trans" means beyond.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Trans human - beyond dirt.

Tim: Yeah. Or like Paul goes, beyond flesh and blood. The current physical mode, which doesn't mean into non-physical - into the next level of physical.

Jon: Which might be fleshy and bloody.

Tim: Well, it have some kind of physical makeup because Jesus appears to people with...

Jon: And he ate food and he...

Tim: But it's a different kind of physicality.

Jon: Different kind of physicality.

Tim: Again, I don't know anything about quantum physics, but reality is much stranger than our eyes and ears and taste and smell lets us perceive it to be. There are things that are real that cannot be perceived through our bodily senses, but that are real. They're called quarks and dark matter. There are all kinds of things.

Jon: So at the base of the biblical narrative is humans are called to be more, and that more is connected to eternal life. And whatever it is, no one but Jesus in the whole biblical story attains it.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: But we are told that those who follow and believe will have this resurrected life.

Tim: That he did for others what they couldn't do for themselves so that his life could become a gift to them as their own life. That's the nature of Jesus as our representative or substitute. He goes into our kind of mortal death so that he can emerge out the other side. It's all connected to those route (pun intended) ideas in the Garden of Eden. Humans are cut off from the opportunity for eternal life because of our inclination towards selfishness and self-destruction.

Jon: There's also something really interesting here. In Genesis 3:21, God says, "We got to kick them out. He might stretch out his hand take from the tree of life and live forever." It's almost like a mercy. It's kind of like, now that you are going to self-destruct, at least don't do it forever. Let's put an end to it. Let's make sure that doesn't last forever because you self-destructing forever, that's horrible and cruel.

Tim: That's right. That's a curse.

Jon: So it's a mercy to saying correct, "I'm going to keep you away from eternal life." It's really fascinating.

Tim: "So that I can get you back there in one way or another."

Jon: Well, yeah. And then that's how the story continues.

Tim: And the way that you're going to get back there in Genesis 3 is through a seed.

Jon: Ah, that's right

Tim: In Genesis 3:15, there will be a seed, a descendant who comes who will undo what has been done in Eden. This is Genesis 3:15. That's the tree of life. It's a gift of God's own life through the vehicle of a tree. The tree is the image of something that translates God's life to me. Trees are people. So people can become conduits of God's life and blessing to me. Now, we're introduced into why people can be called trees of life in the book of Proverbs.

Jon: So tree of life can be people, but the tree of life is bigger than just people.

Tim: People can be like the tree of life.

Jon: But this idea of the tree of life, now, this is a narrative, this is not poetry, but it seems like a poetic image of sorts.

Tim: Yeah, it's a narrative image of God's own energy and life being what...given to me, transported.

Jon: Where do you get that?

Tim: Well, because trees are not God. God gave the trees the gift of self-perpetuating life on page one. So, a tree that imparts life isn't like a magical tree imparting its own life to me. It's imparting the life of God to me. And trees are like God in having a kind of perpetual life. God is the author of all life in self-regeneration, and trees in Genesis 1 are like an image of that.

Jon: So God creates an avocado tree, I eat the avocado, it nourishes my body so I can live longer.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: The life that came from the avocado, God is the originator of that.

Tim: Originator of it. I mean, we're talking about actually pretty nuanced way of thinking about God's causality in the world. So we're talking about God is ultimate cause with kinds of trillions of stages of other contingent causes that cause the development of biological life trees and all this, leading up to that avocado that...

Jon: So that kind of schema in mind, then you can say, "Cool, there's this other type of tree, the tree of life. It doesn't produce fruit that you eat

and nourishes your body in as much as it produces a fruit that you eat, and lets you live forever and transcend a mortality. You're saying that tree, there isn't like just some like magic tree thing that just kind of exists. You're saying it represents God's own life.

Tim: It's a narrative image of God's life being carried over to me through the vehicle of this tree. And so then we're to the next step which is why a tree of life. Why a tree of life? Now we're going to make a cultural step here. In the ancient Near East, the tree of life is a thing. It's a thing in Egypt thing. It's a thing Babylon. It's a thing in Canaanite culture. The biblical authors are using a known image from their cultural context. They're giving it a unique biblical meaning in light of the Yahweh's story in biblical faith. So want to take few minutes in the tree of life in Ancient Near Eastern?

Jon: Yeah.

[00:26:31]

Tim: Lots of resources here. I'll just name two. One is a helpful book by William Osborne called "Trees and Kings: A Comparative Analysis of Tree Imagery in Israel's Prophetic Tradition and the Ancient Near East.

Jon: It sounds like a book title that's going to be hard to read.

Tim: It's academic volume. It's really, really insightful That's one way to start. Another one I forgot to list here in the notes, so I'll just tell you about it, it's by scholar Terje Stordalen called "Echoes of Eden Genesis 2-3 and Eden Symbolism in Biblical Hebrew Literature." It's the most comprehensive study on the Garden of Eden that's ever been done. It's almost 600 pages. It's encyclopedic. It's like reference work. But a whole section of the book is on garden, Eden, tree of life imagery in Ancient Near Eastern cultures. So these are kind of go-to resources for all of this.

Let's go back to Osborne. He has a great introductory chapter. He has a huge long chapter on tree of life in Ancient Near Eastern cultures. He has a great way of introducing it. He says, "As any astute tourist quickly observes the landscape of much of the Near East is predominantly stark and barren, the land is comprised of innumerable shades of brown with only brief interjections of green and blue."

Jon: What's blue?

Tim: Trees and water. "The higher in elevation one goes to greener the picture becomes. Consequently, mountains and rivers along with the forest that adorns them seem to be natural focal points for anyone who lives or travels in these lands. The ancient peoples from the remote Western

world of Egypt to the eastern river marshes of Babylonia lived in the land, not simply on it. They were all agrarian cultures (meaning farming cultures) whose livelihood was found and maintained among the shade, fruit, shelter, and beauty of trees. As a result, there can be little doubt that this lifestyle had a significant effect on these ancient cultures in the way they perceived the world. Trees were some of the most sacred elements in Ancient Near Eastern civilization." Let's just start on that register.

Jon: Sacred trees.

Tim: This is hard for me having grown up in the Pacific Northwest.

Jon: Yeah, just full of tree.

Tim: Imagine living in a land where trees are unique and big, flourishing green trees and marshes, and wet ponds with all kinds of life. Those are unique. You would view them in a totally different way.

Jon: Because there's big stamp on them that says like, "There's life here."

Tim: Life. Life. "Where's that water coming from down there? It must be connected to some deep source of life down there, where all this tree and life and fruit is such a gift. It's a divine gift. And I noticed that the higher I go in elevation, the more of that green is up there, especially at the top of thing." That's what he's saying. High places and trees and pools and rivers are charged with divine life meaning in all of these cultures in Israelite culture where it was birthed and came up in.

Jon: Especially in the land that has a lot of wilderness or desert, high desert, trees really stand out.

Tim: Quick survey here. We could nerd out for a long time, but quick survey. "In ancient Egypt," William Osborne has a whole section, "There are multiple Gods but one in particular - this is interesting - Nut, who is the sky goddess..." There's a lot of famous Egyptian depictions of the cosmos depicting a female goddess whose toes and fingers represent the blue sky dome above us. And sometimes she's raining milk from her breasts like nursing, giving image of rain.

Jon: This is Nut?

Tim: This is Nut. She's the Egyptian sky goddess who sustains the order of the skies. Nut is sometimes portrayed as standing in the middle of a tree, giving fruit and water and food to people standing and giving honor to her. So that sounds like a contradiction in our mind.

Jon: Yeah. The sky is now down here ...

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Tim: But if you think about it, the sky gives water. And once the water hits the ground, what happens? It births vegetation and trees. And so the trees are like a gift of Nut in the Egyptian world. So Nut is in the sky, but she's also the author of the fruit in the tree too, because she provides the rain that grows there. The whole point is, there's all these famous scenes in Egyptian. In the Book of the Dead, one of the most famous Egyptian texts, you'll find Nut in the middle of the tree offering fruit life to her worshipers. Significant. William Osborne also notes that kings are often portrayed as trees. So you have a goddess as a tree...

Jon: In Egypt?

Tim: This is in Egypt. In Egypt, you also have kings depicted as trees. So he does highlight a few. I have one picture here from the Temple of Karnak, where an Egyptian king Seti I from the 1200 BC, the depiction of his like coronation. And he's standing in a tree or as a tree. And he's being given a scepter by I think it's the god. Let me see. Thoth. Thoth is also with one hand giving the scepter, with the other hand Thoth is writing Seti's name in the leaves of the tree. It's really interesting. So the god is giving the power of fertility and life over to the king. Now the king is the one responsible. Because in Egyptian belief systems, the king is the incarnation of the gods. So the gods are among us in the person of the king. As a tree of life, he's the one now providing.

Osborne's observation is just the trees are a gift of the gods, and then the human king who is the embodiment of the God is in control of the produce and maintaining order so the tree can produce. That's Egypt. In Assyria and Babylon, for the most part, these cultures did not view their kings as incarnation of the gods so but as appointed by the gods. So still like they control what the gods give you and that kind of thing.

Jon: Middlemen.

Tim: Middlemen. Yeah, middle management. But sacred trees and gardens are a huge thing. Oh, yeah, you looked this up once. The gardens of Babylon. It's a famous thing. If you just Google like a "theory or Babylon garden," you'll get all these famous ancient drawings. So I've got a couple pictures of Ashurbanipal, a famous Assyrian king. And there's either depictions of him in the center of a garden feasting with the gods. It's a wall carving that depicts him in his castle up in...it looks like the Garden of Eden. And there's a river coming out of the royal sacred garden and then it divides outside of it to water the rest of the land. Just like the river.

In row propaganda - you know, the kings will write these descriptions - the gardens are a little microcosm symbol of the whole empire. So he maintains the royal gardens as the image of his control and maintenance of the whole empire. So he controls the fertility of the garden, he controls

the fertility of them. This in an inscription of another Assyrian king, Sennacherib. He says, "By the will of gods, vines, fruit trees, all of trees, aromatic trees flourished in my garden. Cypress trees grew tall, sending out shoot. I created a marsh for the flow of the water for the gardens. The birds of the heavens, the herons, the boars, and the deer gave birth and abundance." But notice he's saying, "I created." This is my making.

Jon: This royal garden, this is an image familiar to an ancient thinker.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: So for Adam and Eve to be put in this garden they're thinking, "Royal garden."

Tim: Correct. Yeah, exactly. Royal garden. Correct. The next step just real briefly here, is particularly of the concept of a particular tree that gives the gift of divine life to those who eat it. This is a thing. Seems like this motif originated like the earliest drawings and descriptions of it are from ancient Mesopotamia even pre Babylon. So in Samaria and so on. But they have developed this motif image of this beautiful fruitful tree in the middle of a garden with two goats eating from it or to cherubim, like winged animal, human-like creatures eating from it. And so the heavenly beings, when you have cherubim around, it's guarded by the gods. When you have goats eating from it, it's the idea of accessible to the creatures of the earth. But that all of the fertility of the earth comes as a gift from God symbolized in the sacred tree. This is kind of like a stock image that...you know, we have these in many cultures. It's a stock icon. It's an icon. It's an ancient iconic brand.

Jon: Yeah, totally.

Tim: It's the gods' brand.

Jon: Yeah, their mark. If you're going to talk about gift of the gods that sustains and creates life, and you wanted one image, that would be a tree.

Tim: A tree either guarded by the heavenly creatures or accessed by earthly creatures. Particularly goats and gazelles were the main variations of the motif. So I just have a bunch of pictures of it. You can just see different variations of it. One of which was found on a broken pot shirred with a bunch of Semitic inscriptions on it in the Sinai Peninsula called Kuntillet Ajrud from the 8th to 9th century BC when Israelite monarchy is just up north. This is an image that has...its pre-Israelite and have a long afterlife even into the Israelite period.

Here's Osborne's conclusions. Tree imagery has three interwoven layers of significance. One, abundance and prosperity comes from the gods and

that is depicted with lush garden, tree field forests. That's a way of talking about the gods have given life to the barren land. Second, deities and their powers to give fertility are often associated with tree symbolism. So you can just be abundance in general - is comes from the gods - and forests and gardens represent that. Particular gods who give fertility can be depicted as trees. We saw that with Nut. There was a Canaanite goddess, who we'll talk about later because we meet her in the biblical story called either Asherah or Ashtoreth. Her idol image is of a tree planted in the garden. And people perform rituals sex in front of the tree. This was a thing in Canaanite culture. There you go. She's the deity.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: Third is kings who mediate the power of the gods can be symbolized as trees. In other words, kings who grow gardens or are caretakers of it can be described and depicted as trees. We saw that in Egypt, where you had the king...

Jon: They are also portrayed as taking care of the trees.

Tim: Caretakers of the trees. But then like in that Egyptian Temple of Karnak, you have Seti, who's in the tree, whose name is being trigonometry and he's receiving a scepter. So the king becomes the tree of life as the embodiment of the gods. They are interwoven. Trees are the gift of the gods. Specific gods can be depicted as trees, and humans whom the gods have appointed to care and help cultivate fertility, they can be trees as well.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: So contrast and compare all of this with Genesis 1 and 2. You have God as the giver of fertility and life in Genesis 1. He's the one behind the trees. He's not identified as a tree, but the tree can be a conduit of his life through its fruit. In Genesis 1 and 2, humanity is given the royal kingly task of caring for the royal sacred garden. Not just one king, but all humanity is depicted. These are images of God conversation.

Jon: Can I ask you about that?

Tim: Sure.

Jon: Because I love that image, that all humanity are the kings and queens. I want to understand how we get there. Because it says that male and female, so it could just mean that the first two humans were the image of God. How do we then draw the inference that "and all their offspring"?

Tim: Oh, got it. The genealogy in Genesis 5 talks about human that is male and female being made in the image of God. And then Seth who they

gave birth to is in the image of adam. So the image is resembled. And then the image of God is mentioned in Genesis 9 with the prohibition of murder.

Jon: All right.

Tim: Because are made in the image.

Jon: It's clearly everyone. So while in the ancients, imagination, there is a king who is the image of God who rules on God's behalf. He's like a tree, takes care of the trees, has the power of the gods for life and fertility. In Genesis, it's humanity all together is that is the image of God.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Cool.

Tim: That's a similarity, but also a difference. The same with the tree itself. In the ancient Near East, the trees are symbols of specific gods.

Jon: Oh, really?

Tim: Hmm. We saw that with Nut, the sky goddess in Egypt or with Asherah in Canaanite culture. And granted, it's a symbol but an idol is a physical manifestation. In Genesis 1, humans are the idols of God, not a tree. Humans are the image of God, not trees or animals. However, there is a tree that conveys the life of God to the image of God. And that's what the tree of life represents.

Jon: Conveys. Why did you choose that word?

Tim: Conveys. Oh, I've actually been looking for that word multiple times earlier. It transports. It carries. But I think the biblical authors what are careful, they don't want us to conclude that the tree has its own deified magical powers.

Jon: And how are they careful?

Tim: Ah, by depicting the trees as something God created. A type of creature that God gives life to and then He designates this one tree to...Again, it's in the middle of the garden. That's really important. That's temple imagery. You have the middle, then the garden, then Eden around that. Eden is a region, within Eden is a garden, with the garden in the middle. And that three-part...

Jon: Maps on the temple.

Tim: ...is precise mapping on to the design pattern of the temple.

Trees of the Ancients

Jon: Outer courts, inner courts...

Tim: Yeah, courtyard, the holy place, and then the Holy of holies. So the tree of life is in the spot of the ark of the covenant, which is Yahweh's throne. That's one thing. The second thing is when Moses goes up onto Mount Sinai into the cloud, where there's that bush up there, that bush tree, the burning bush tree is up there, and we're told that he is shown a vision of God's heavenly temple. Of course, that's what Eden is. Eden is the overlap of heaven and earth. So the tree of life is the hotspot of God's presence. And so to eat from the tree is this image of being in God's own life presence that gives you eternal life. So I just know, because this happened to me, the thing about the tree became a distraction from the meaning of the idea, which is proximity to God's presence, His life being given to me and I receive it.

Jon: That's helpful in connecting it to temple imagery.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So where you would expect the center of the temple, which represents where God Himself sits and it's a very holy place. And in the narrative where that would be is where this tree is.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. And in the temple, all the paneling around you is cherubim and pomegranate trees surrounding you woven into it.

Jon: And so with that image in mind, the tree of life is about your proximity and connection to God Himself.

Tim: Correct. You got it.

Jon: So when God says "eat of the tree of life," He's saying, "Be in my presence and live life with me."

Tim: And in doing so, the ingesting of God's life is a powerful image of union.

Jon: Yeah. It's a very intimate image of not just walking with me, which is another image of in Genesis, but of consuming.

Tim: Consuming God's life. We're very close. This is the seedbed (pun intended) of the Christian concept of communion of the Eucharist, the bread and the cup, ingesting the gift of divine life.

Jon: That's cool. But it's bread, not a fruit.

Tim: In Hebrew, bread can just mean food. Food - general. But they're separate things. One step at a time. The tree of life in is both a portrait that was rendered recognizable to ancient readers but also...

Jon: Has its own biblical place.

Tim: Biblical authors they're throwing some elbows with their Egyptian and Babylonian neighbor as they portray the tree not as a god but as...

Jon: They're taking a familiar idea and they're using that idea to convey a very Hebrew idea...

Tim: Yeah, it's been soaked in the biblical conviction.

Jon: ...about the nature of their God and the nature of the story that they believe humanity is living in relationship to the Creator God.

Tim: Correct. Think big picture now with me to kind of close this part of the conversation. The main plot conflict of the biblical story is humans through their rebellion, evil, violence forfeiting the chance to eat of the tree of life. This is how plots work. When you introduce a plot conflict, the way that you resolve it is somehow circling back to that first thing that caused the conflict. If there's a movie about you and me getting into a fight, and going our two ways throughout a decade, the way that plot conflict will be resolved is us coming back to that fight...

Jon: Coming back to the fight.

Tim: ...and having to resolve the thing that started at all. And so in a similar way, Genesis 3 sets you up to be however this conflict is going to be resolved, it's going to have to come back to a tree on high place where disobedient, selfish, short, sighted humans deal with that problem that got created by the tree on the high place. And so the authors of the gospels are all very, very, very tuned into this when they depict the trial and the crucifixion of Jesus. They know what they're doing. As we'll see, they use vocabulary and imagery that's tuned in to the tree in the garden.

Jon: Okay, we'll get there.

Tim: We'll get there eventually, but just saying it's worth really...

Jon: Big questions for me, but we'll get there. But I do like and I kind of want to land back at this image of proximity with God, the tree of life, in that going back to this idea of humans in their infancy and having to metamorph. And then how? It's through this connection intimacy with God that is about proximity. But it's also about this kind of conservation, this partaking of God and adjusting of His life, and it will transform you. And that's the picture of kind of the ideal is being in this state of a relational proximity in which you're transformed through God's life inside of you.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: And so whatever happens in this story, we're trying to get back to that state.

Tim: Yeah, we're trying to get to a place where God's own life is ingested - it becomes internal to humans. And in so doing, it transforms them into a new mode of existence. That is called in Genesis 3:22 eternal life.

Jon: Eternal life.

Tim: It's not a common phrase in biblical Hebrew. There's a phrase "length of days," having long days in the land, but the phrase "lamb forever" is not that common of a phrase. When we made it in the New Testament, it's coming from Genesis 3. Eternal life.

Jon: And we'll get to that too.

Tim: Yeah. John 17 "This is eternal life, knowing the father and the one whom He sent, Jesus the Messiah." That's eternal life.

Jon: Well, that makes sense. If eternal life comes from this relational proximity, then the call eternal life knowing God makes sense.

Tim: Yeah, correct. Knowing in a relational, experiential way.

[00:51:05]

Tim: There's a philosopher named Charles Taylor who wrote a really important book that I have yet to finish because it's so long. It's called "The Secular Age." In the opening, he tries to find a word that in the book will stand for human experience of the transcendent of the ultimate good. And he chooses the word fullness. Then he has a little section defining it, but he describes "fullness" as a state of peace harmony, relational harmony.

Jon: Kind of feels like connected to this idea of the seven.

Tim: Oh yeah, full and completeness. And it's both related to our physical needs. When your stomach is full, there's a peace. It is temporary, but there's a peace of like, "I don't need anything right now."

Jon: The peace that leads to a nap.

Tim: When I have fullness of relationship I feel secure and cared for. I don't feel a need or lack. So there's something about food and relationships that are these physical experiences of completeness, fullness. Then he begins to talk about existential fullness through work and vocation and sense of meaning and purpose. He talks about the history of fullness in

the Christian tradition was very developed. It was a big theme of the discipleship to Jesus means learning to live in that kind of fullness that's available through the life of the Spirit of Jesus.

Then essentially, he paints the rise of modern Western society as a rivalist of fullness is of a society that constructs a different story about how you get fullness. It's an interesting way to paint the rise of the modern West and as a rival set of offerings for fullness - the rival of the biblical story.

Jon: New ways to fill yourself.

Tim: New ways to fill yourself. But he says, "The baseline, what everybody assumes is that human life exists in a state of pretty much perpetual want and need for more on a physical level, but also on a relational existential level. And what better image of the fulfillment of that desire than the garden imagery of Genesis 1 and 2. It makes perfect sense. Even if you didn't grow up in ancient Near East, the Garden of Eden has been an image of fullness for people all over the planet. You know, millennia now.

Jon: Yeah, it's a beautiful image because of that, but then also because it's not a fullness that leads to an apathy. It's a fullness it leads to awe and adventure and productivity.

Tim: Yeah. Gardens don't cultivate themselves.

Jon: And you can continue to grow the garden and think of new ways to make the garden expand. And you're working in it, and you're enjoying it. Sometimes I think of like fullness to this degree of just like staleness of just kind of like, "You know, there's nothing else." And it's not an ending. It's like it's a launching pad. It's a type of way to now exist in a new productivity.

Tim: The need for fullness speaks to an innate human desire and need for something more. But not just something more that only I passively receive. To your point, something more for me to do and to be a part of.

Jon: We are called the rule.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: We're being filled up so that we can then rule. And what does it mean to rule the world? Subdue it. And it should mean creating generosity and love, justice, but creating more and more potential for that too.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: I think it's really cool image.

Tim: Tree of life.

Jon: Tree of life.

Tim: I spend a long time thinking about the tree of life. It's a beautiful image.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project podcast. Next week, we're going to look at the other tree found in the second page of the Bible, the tree of knowing good and evil.

Tim: The reason that the tree is there in the garden, it's a powerful image of the nature of all human experience. Every good thing in my life is also matched by an equal or greater number of opportunities to ruin it. So these two trees are intertwined. The tree of life and the tree of knowing good and bad. How you relate to one determines how you relate to the other. It's the tale of two trees.

Jon: Today's show is produced by Dan Gummel. Our theme music comes from the band Tents. If you've been following the podcast, you know we just finished a series discussing the theme of seventh-day rest in the Bible, the Sabbath day, the Sabbath year, the year of jubilee, and how Jesus brings us all to fulfillment. It was a great podcast series. We just released our video that summarizes that in a visual format. You could find that video. It's up at YouTube, youtube.com/thebibleproject, and on our website, thebibleproject.com. Check it out if you haven't seen it yet.

We're going to continue this series on trees. And as you come up with questions, things you'd love to hear more about, you can send those questions in for upcoming question response episodes. Try to keep your recording to about 30 seconds. Let us know who you are, where you're from. Send that question to info@jointhebibleproject.com. The Bible Project is a crowdfunded nonprofit. We're in Portland, Oregon. We make free resources to show that the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus. And all of this is possible because of the generous support of people all around the world, just like you for pitching in and making this happen. We are really grateful. Thanks for being a part of this with us.

Kelly: Hi, this is Kelly Rouse, and I am from Englewood, New Jersey. I first heard about The Bible Project when another blogger posted their first video on Instagram and I instantly was hooked. I use The Bible Project in my own personal studies, and also with a small group and at church. My favorite thing about the Bible project is that it takes insanely hard topics in the Bible and makes it super simple for everyone to understand, and so I feel a lot smarter after I watch one of their videos. We believe that the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus. We're a crowdfunded

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