

The World Tree Felled

And the Arms of Pharaoh Broken

A

- 1 ²⁰ In the eleventh year, in the first month, on the seventh day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: ²¹ “Son of man, I have **broken the arm** of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and behold, it has not been bound up, to heal it by binding it with a bandage, so that it may become strong to wield the **sword**.
- 2 ²³ I will **scatter the Egyptians** among the nations and disperse them through the countries.
- 3 ²⁵ ^{RSV} **I will strengthen** the arms of the **king of Babylon**, but **the arms of Pharaoh** shall fall; and **they shall know that I am the Lord**. When I put **my sword** into the hand of **the king of Babylon**, he shall stretch it out against the land of Egypt;

A

- 1 **31** In the eleventh year, in the third month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: ² “Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his multitude:
“**Whom are you like in your greatness?**
³ Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade, and of **towering height**, its **top among the clouds**.
- 2 ⁴ The waters nourished it; the deep made **it grow tall**, making its rivers flow around the place of its planting, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the field.
- ⁵ So it towered high above all **the trees of the field**; its **boughs** grew large and its branches long from abundant water in its shoots.
- 3 ⁶ All **the birds of the heavens** made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived **all great nations**.
- ⁷ It was beautiful in its greatness,

B

²² Therefore thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against Pharaoh king of Egypt and will **break his arms**, both the **strong arm** and the one that was broken, and I will make the **sword** fall from his hand.

²⁴ And I will **strengthen the arms** of the **king of Babylon** and put my sword in his hand, but **I will break** the arms of Pharaoh, and he will groan before him like a man mortally wounded.

²⁶ ^{RSV} and **I will scatter the Egyptians** among the nations and disperse them throughout the countries. **Then they will know that I am the Lord.**”

B

¹⁰ “Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because it **towered high** and set its **top among the clouds**, and **its heart was proud of its height**,

¹¹ I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. ¹² **Foreigners**, the most ruthless of nations, have **cut it down and left it**. On the mountains and in all the valleys its **branches** have fallen, and its **boughs** have been broken in all the ravines of the land, and all the peoples of the earth have gone away from its shadow and left it.

¹³ On its fallen trunk dwell all **the birds of the heavens**, and on its branches are all the beasts of the field. ¹⁴ All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among **the children of man**, with those who go down to the pit.

in the length of its branches;
 for its roots went down
 to abundant waters.

4 ⁸ The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it,
 nor the fir trees equal its boughs;
 neither were the plane trees
 like its branches;
 no tree in the garden of God
 was its equal in beauty.

⁹ I made it beautiful
 in the mass of its branches,
 and all the trees of Eden envied it,
 that were in the garden of God.

¹⁵ “Thus says the Lord God: On the day the cedar went down to Sheol I caused mourning; I closed the deep over it, and restrained its rivers, and many waters were stopped. I clothed Lebanon in gloom for it, and all the trees of the field fainted because of it. ¹⁶ I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol with those who go down to the pit. And all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, were comforted in the world below. ¹⁷ They also went down to Sheol with it, to those who are slain by the sword; yes, those who were its arm, who lived under its shadow among the nations. ¹⁸ “Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword. “This is Pharaoh and all his multitude, declares the Lord God.”

Ezekiel 30:20-31:18

Giant Trees?

In his discussion of Ezekiel 31, Michael Heiser takes a jab at flat-earthers (I’m no flat-earther, although a *hollow* earth ... quite possibly) as he begins to talk about something called the “world tree.” He says,

By the way, that’s something that the flat-earthers won’t tell you about, will they? They make a big deal that Heiser and others talking about Israelite cosmology... “Well, we have to believe that the earth is flat because ‘*that’s what the Bible says.*’” Well, the Bible talks about the world tree, too. And I don't know about you, but we ain’t running into a giant tree

whose branches extend to the heavens and whose roots go down to Sheol.¹

As soon as I heard him say that I thought to myself, “*Surely he’d heard about the Giant Trees theory, hadn’t he?*” So I did a little digging.

Among the more fantastical, sometimes ridiculous, but sometimes fascinating alternative theories out there is this belief that [our world was once checkered with gigantic trees](#)—trees literally miles tall. You’ve seen them all over the place, you just don’t know it because scientists have called them rocks, buttes, mesas, or even mountains. The most obvious is [Devil’s Tower](#) our neighbor to the north of Close Encounters fame, which by the looks of it certainly appears like a giant tree stump that towers 800 ft. above the trees below. But someone long ago, likely an angel,² cut it down near the base, meaning that it could have once been several miles tall! Turns out this theory owes its origin to Russian researcher named Ludin Rusi who in 2016 put out a *YouTube* documentary that went viral, especially in flat-

¹ [Michael S. Heiser](#), “[Ezekiel 31; Naked Bible Podcast Transcript Ep. 145](#),” *Naked Bible Podcast* (Feb 11, 2017), 9.

² This piece of the theory takes texts such as 3 Baruch 4, a Midrash of Shemhazai and ‘Azael ([25.10](#)), 4Q530 and 6Q8 frag. 2 in the DSS, 1En 66:1-3, and so on to say that the angels were cutting down these giant trees. None actually says exactly what is being taught, but pieces are certainly there.

earth circles.³ So that's why Heiser didn't know about it. His discussion of Ezek 31 was in 2017.

The World Tree

Whatever you make of the giant tree theory, one thing is certain. Early peoples all over the ancient world conceived of a giant tree whose top reached into the heavens and whose roots went all the way down to Sheol as *the cosmological center of the created universe*, if not a physical one. Today we call it the Cosmic or *World Tree*.

Let's stop for a moment and think about what I just said. *Cosmology* (lit. the study of the *kosmos* or world) basically deals with how reality is organized and what holds it together. You have a cosmology, even if you don't know to call it that. *Modern western cosmology* is entirely materialistic. Big balls of dirt and gas revolve around bigger balls of fire which revolve around really *really* big groups of balls of fire for as far as we can possibly discover and it all happened by chance; yet it is all, incredibly, run by natural laws that randomly origi-

³ The YouTube channel is since gone, but it appears the original show, with a few changes, may still be online. See "[The Giant Trees of the Past – Entire Documentary](#)," *Lotus SunRise YouTube* (Sept 10, 2024).

nated in a chaotic explosion that somehow cause all this matter to work. The earth is just one of trillions of meaningless balls of dirt. There is nothing special about it. There is no spirit world that exists to put into our cosmology. Carl Sagan summed it up in the first line of his famous book *Cosmos*: “The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”⁴ That’s western modern *cosmology* in a nutshell.

Ancient *world tree cosmology*, by contrast, envisions a *spiritual*-material universe pictured as a three-tiered system—heaven above, earth in the middle, and the underworld or deep below (cf. **Php 2:10**)—held together by a gigantic living tree. Its roots reach the subterranean waters, its trunk stands on the earth, and its branches stretch into the heavens, serving as a living axis that sustains life and connects the divine, human, and dead realms. *Britanica* describes this ancient idea well,

World tree, centre of the world ... Two main forms are known ... In the one, the tree is *the vertical centre* binding together heaven and earth; in the other, the tree is the source of life at *the horizontal centre* of the earth. Adopting biblical terminology, the former may be called the tree of knowledge; the latter, the tree of life.

⁴ **Carl Sagan**, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 1.

In the vertical, [tree-of-knowledge tradition](#), the tree extends between earth and heaven. It is the vital connection between the world of the gods and the human world. Oracles and judgments or other prophetic activities are performed at its base.

In the horizontal, [tree-of-life tradition](#), the tree is planted at the centre of the world and is [protected by supernatural guardians](#) [these guardians are elsewhere called Watchers and gardeners].⁵ It is the source of terrestrial fertility and life. Human life is descended from it; its fruit confers everlasting life; and if it were cut down, all fecundity [fertility] would cease.⁶

To belabor the point, when the Bible uses this kind of language, it is speaking of ancient *cosmology*, not giving a modern scientific description of the physical shape of the planet. This does not mean the events or places are unreal or non-historical. Eden was a real place with real trees, yet carried profound theological and cosmological significance, expressing both the vertical axis connecting heaven and earth and the horizontal source of life. Those trees did not need to be literally miles high for that significance to be true. The Bible is not a physics or geology textbook. It simply uses the

⁵ Amar Annus, “[On the Origin of Watchers: A Comparative Study of the Antediluvian Wisdom in Mesopotamian and Jewish Traditions](#),” *JSP* 19.4 (2010): 309.

⁶ “[World Tree](#),” *Britannica.com* (n.d.).

shared cultural imagery of its day to make profound *theological* claims about who really rules the cosmos and where true life and order come from.

One dictionary put it this way: the world tree is “a natural pillar on which all levels of the cosmos exist. Either at the roots or around the trunk of the tree there is usually a serpent which appears contrasted with an eagle in the branches above.”⁷ Anything there sound familiar?

So why a tree? I’m not entirely sure. But I tend to think it has something to do with the biblical metaphorical relationship between God (and the gods) and trees. God—especially the Son of God—is called the “thornbush dweller” (Deut 33:16; cf. Ex 3:2), the “righteous branch” (Isa 4:2; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12), the “stump of Jesse” (Isa 11:1). He is like a “green pine” (Hos 14:8), “the vine” (John 15:5), and the “tree of life” (Prov 3:18). Then there are the gods, which we are repeatedly warned against making idols of them out of trees (Hab 2:19; Jer 2:27; Ezek 20:32; Deut 28:64) and who in Ex 15:27 seem to be likened to the seventy palms—an idea highly evocative of Deut 32:7-8 and the divine council. In fact, curiously, several Hebrew words for God or gods—such as *el* (mighty one / god), *elim* (gods /

⁷ Lowell K. Handy, “Serpent (Religious Symbol),” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1113.

mighty ones), *elohim* (God / gods), and *elyon* (Most High)—carry strong phonetic and conceptual echoes of Hebrew terms for mighty or sacred trees, including *elon* (terebinth / sacred tree), *elah* (terebinth / oak), *ayil* (mighty tree / ram), and *eylan* (tree), suggesting an ancient linguistic and symbolic connection between divine power and the image of a towering, life-giving tree. Interestingly, both the world tree known as the *mēsu* and idols made of wood are called “flesh of the gods.”⁸

⁸ On “flesh of the gods” in the *Babylonian mēsu world-tree*, see the *Erra Epic*, aka *Erra and Ishum*, 150-153, translated *Stephanie Dalley*, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (rev. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 290-291. The “flesh of the gods” is the exact language used of gold that is put over an idol (*Augustine*, *City of God* 8.23.1). On this language specifically in Egypt see *Hymn to Osiris*, “Thy body is of bright and shining metal ... and the brilliance of the turquoise encircleth thee.” In *Wallace E. Budge*, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 1988 reprint), 424. See also *Erik Hornung*, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, 134; *Gay Robins*, “Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ASOR Book Series 10; ed. Neal H. Walls; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 1-2.

Ancient Word	Reference	Contextual Meaning
<i>'elohim</i>	Gen 1:1 etc.	The God of Israel
<i>'elohim</i>	Genesis 6:2, 4; Job 1:6, 2:1; 38:7	sons of God
<i>'elim</i>	Exodus 15:11	gods
<i>'elim</i> (<i>'eylim</i>)	Exodus 15:27	location of 70 palm trees in desert
<i>'elohim</i>	Deut 32:43 (LXX, see DSS)	Angels (<i>aggelos</i>)
<i>'elim</i>	Ps 29:1; 89:6	sons of God
<i>'elyon</i>	Ps 82:6	sons of God
<i>'el</i> (<i>'eyl</i>) ⁸	Ezekiel 31:11	mighty leader, god, or tree
<i>'eleyhem</i>	Ezekiel 31:14	trees of Eden (terebinth tree), haughty(?)
<i>'elon</i> ⁸	Daniel 4	tree-king Nebuchadnezzar
ROOT: <i>'el</i> probably derives from “mighty” or “first in rank.” ⁸		

At any rate, it is because we have a basically [an atheistic cosmology](#) (technically, a scientific one, but science cannot speak to anything non-material) that that the world tree idea seems so bizarre to us. *They* weren't atheists! And while Christians aren't either, our cosmology without proper guardrails often functions that way, creating real tension for those who want to take the Bible seriously.

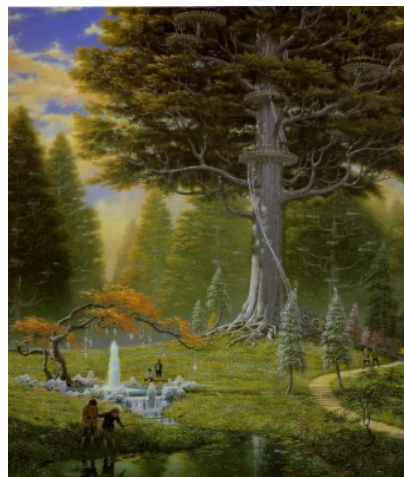
Case in point, I think this is the fundamental problem with the whole [flat-earth](#) thing. Because Christians don't understand that such depictions in the Bible are *cosmological*, they take them as scientific rather than metaphysical claims. They flat out (pardon the pun) skip the cosmology and theology and run straight to geology, just like they are starting to do with Devil's Tower being an ancient tree. I agree that the Bible does appear to give a flat earth *cosmology*, but that doesn't mean it is commenting on the scientific physical actual shape of our planet any more than it means the trees of Eden had to be miles high. It *might* be, but you can't just assume that because your own cosmology is usurping the Bible's. It is up to good scientific observation and experiment to explain those things, and I'm quite open to good science telling me that the earth is flat or that Devil's Tower is an ancient tree.

Believe it or not, this is all relevant to a proper reading of our passage today and even things happening in our own culture. This worldview has made **remarkable appearances in pop-culture** in unexpected places such as *World of Warcraft*, the *Lord of the Rings*, and the highest grossing per-film franchise and single highest grossing film ever made, *Avatar*. It even shows up in *Captain America: The First Avenger* where Red Skull points to a carving on a wall and says, “**Yggdrasil. Tree of the world. Guardian of wisdom... and fate, also.**” I bet most don’t even realize what they are seeing.

Incredibly, in the ancient world, this world-tree cosmology is found not only in the Americas, Australia, and Asia as Britannica suggested, but also in Scandinavia, China, India, Greece, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, and—as we will see shortly—even in Ezekiel. It also continues into our own popular consciousness in one place many Christians think is actually



World Tree in Hyjal, *World of Warcraft*
Blizzard Entertainment

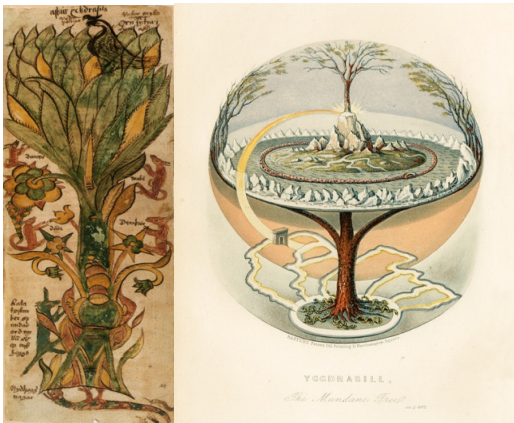


Mighty Mellyrn of Caras Galadhon
Ted Nasmith



“Hometree,” in the movie *Avatar*
20th Century Fox

an idol: *the Christmas tree*.⁹ With its lights and star high in the heavens and gifts (or sometimes a nativity scene) at the base, the Christmas tree visually represents God's cosmos from top to bottom — from heaven to earth to below the earth — as ordered and sacred. Lutherans in 15th-century Germany likely drew on older Northern European traditions of evergreens as symbols of enduring life, traditions that existed in a cultural memory shaped in part by ancient world-tree imagery such as Yggdrasil. They repurposed the symbol for Christ: the evergreen pointing to eternal life, the lights to the true Light of the world, and the star to the Star of Bethlehem. Jesus is the ultimate expression of the world tree, for in him all things live and breathe and have their meaning. But more on that later.



Scandinavia

Yggdrasil. (Left) *Northern Antiquities*, an English translation of the *Prose Edda* from 1847. Painted by Oluf Olufsen Bagge. (Right) Yggdrasil with the assorted animals that live in it and on it. The serpent-worm Níðhöggr gnaws the roots. 17th century Icelandic manuscript AM 738 4to.



Assyria

Wall relief (883-859 BC): the eagle-headed Apkallu (Watcher) tends the World Tree. The Louvre.



Egypt

Ramesses II in the sacred Tree before Ptah and Sekhmet with Thoth behind inscribing Pharaoh's name. North wall of second pillared hall in Temple of Derr. Lake Nasser, Egypt (1279-1213 BC). Image: Olaf Tausch.¹⁰

⁹ See the fascinating discussion by [Robert N. St. Clair](https://web.archive.org/web/20110227082138/http://epistemic-forms.com/R-World-tree.html), "The World Ash Tree: The Mythical Origins of the Christmas Tree," at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110227082138/http://epistemic-forms.com/R-World-tree.html>.

¹⁰ A short informative piece on the Tree of Life in Egypt is [Veronique](#), "[Importance of the Tree of Life in Ancient Egypt](#)," *Mandalashop* (1-19-2022).

Ezekiel 30:20-31:18 In Context

Today we look at **Ezekiel 31:1-18**. It is **the fifth oracle** against Egypt. In it, we will discover the great World Tree. It will be associated with Eden and what it teaches is a surprising and vital message not only to Egypt to whom the oracle is directed, but to all the nations of the world that stand in opposition to the God of creation. This is truly one of my favorite chapters of the Bible.

But we will also look the oracle prior to it, the much shorter **30:20-26**. Both oracles come near the end of our long section on the oracles against the nations, those oracles which **hold the nations accountable** to the covenant of creation or covenant with Noah that God put all mankind under at creation and the flood. No one escapes the scrutiny and judgment of God—even if they refuse to acknowledge that he even exists, much less that he is their God.

Both oracles can be viewed *chiastically*. For the first, it means that central point is that God will break the arms of Pharaoh and on another reading, that he will strengthen the

arms of Babylon.¹¹ For the second, it centers on God felling the great world tree.¹² Obviously, both ideas are quite similar in terms of judgment. Both oracles can also be viewed as *woven texts*, meaning that they have repetitions that parallel one another as the stories move along. Any time you feel like you've just read something a few verses earlier, you can pretty much guess that one or both of these devices is being employed by the writer.

Finally, there is a *complementary counterpart* to the world tree. It is *the cosmic mountain*, also considered an *axis mundi* or center of the earth. I bring this up because we saw the cosmic mountain cosmology explicit in *Ezekiel 28* where it was called "*the mountain of God*" that the "*guardian cherub*" was on in "*Eden*." Eden appears in both stories. Furthermore, the "king" oracle of Tyre is written nearly identically to Ezekiel 31, meaning that the cosmic mountain and world tree ideas are paralleling one another and this will most certainly help us in our interpretation when we remember how supernatural that was!

¹¹ See JLB, "[Ezekiel 30:20-26](#)," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Oct 6, 2017).

¹² It is a simple ABA'. A. The unmatched glory and height of the great cedar (31:1-9). B. The pride of the tree and its felling by divine judgment (10-14). A'. The fall and descent of the great tree to Sheol with the trees of Eden (15-18).

Verse Range (Ezek 28)	Key Content in Ezek 28 (King of Tyre)	Parallel Verse Range (Ezek 31)	Key Content in Ezek 31 (Pharaoh/Egypt)	Shared Theme
28:12-13	“You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God...” (adorned with precious stones)	31:8-9	“The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it... All the trees of Eden envied it.” (placed in Eden among glorious trees)	Both are placed in primeval Eden as exceptionally beautiful and exalted beings.
28:14	“You were an anointed guardian cherub... on the holy mountain of God” (divine council / sacred space role)	31:3-7	“Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon ... its top among the thick boughs... All the birds nested in its boughs... all great nations lived in its shade” (cosmic/world-tree role)	Both are given a privileged cosmic position near God (guardian cherub vs. world tree).
28:15	“You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you”	31:10	“Because it towered high... and its heart was proud of its height...”	Initial perfection followed by the rise of pride/hubris .
28:16-17a	“Heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor”	31:10-11	“Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you are high... I will deliver it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations”	Pride in beauty/height leads to corruption and divine judgment.
28:16b-17b	“I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God , and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub”	31:12-14	“Foreigners, the most ruthless of nations, have cut it down ... On its ruin all the birds of the heavens will dwell” (the tree is felled)	Divine casting down / cutting down from the sacred height.
28:18	“By the multitude of your iniquities... so I brought fire out from your midst; it consumed you”	31:15-17	“I made the deep mourn... all the trees of the field fainted... They also went down to Sheol with it” (cosmic mourning)	Judgment brings cosmic disruption and descent.
28:19	“All who knew you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever”	31:18	“To whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below... in the midst of the uncircumcised”	Total humiliation and descent to Sheol; others are appalled or mourn.

The Broken Arms of Pharaoh (Ezek 30:20-26)

We begin with the shorter of the two oracles. “[In the eleventh year, in the first month, on the seventh day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me](#)” ([Ezek 30:20](#)). This puts us around [April 29, 587 BC](#). This is approximately sixteen years *prior* to the previously dated oracle that we looked at last time ([Ezek 29:17-21](#)), but only four *months* after the

one before that ([Ezek 29:1-16](#)). Thus, we are back [just prior to the fall of Jerusalem](#) which will take place a mere three months from now (July 587).

“Son of man, I have broken the arm of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and behold, it has not been bound up, to heal it by binding it with a bandage, so that it may become strong to [wield the sword](#)” ([21](#)). At first glance, this just seems like personification. Pharaoh is powerful, so I will [break his arm](#). But when you start to dig deeper, you realize a couple of important points that brings depth to the prophet’s oracle.

First, Pharaohs were routinely called things like “[Mighty of Arm](#)” (*wsr hps*), “[Possessor of a Strong Arm](#),” “[Whose Arm is Great](#),” or “[The One Who Smites with His Arm](#).”¹³ Egyptian art and inscriptions often show Pharaoh with an upraised, conquering arm smiting enemies. It represented the king’s divine-like power to subdue nations and maintain order (*maat*). Curiously, maintaining order of what the world tree is supposed to symbolize.

Tied to this is also the fact that this [military epithet of the arm](#) (think “[Right Hand Man](#)” idea in war) appeared most often with two parts of his five-fold titulary title: [Golden](#)

¹³ See [James Hoffmeier](#), “[The Arm of God Versus the Arm of Pharaoh in the Exodus Narratives](#),” *Biblica* 67.3 (1986): 384; [K. S. Freedy](#) and D. B. Redford, “[The Dates in Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian and Egyptian Sources](#),” *JAOs* 90.3 (Jul-Sep 1970): 482.

Horus and **Two Ladies**.¹⁴ Horus is the oldest and most important god in ancient Egypt and is also the most important name for a Pharaoh. Falcon-headed sky-god and *divine warrior*, the bringer of order out of chaos, Pharaoh was believed to be the earthly incarnation of Horus. Pharaoh Hophra (Apries) to whom this oracle was directed, took as his Horus name: “**Horus, the Strong-Armed One**.” Are you seeing the connections between the god and the king? The world-tree symbolized that relationship as being in good, working order.

Second, the Two Ladies title (his “Nebty” name) is the second most important title for the Pharaoh. “Two Ladies” refers to the gods **Nekhbet** (vulture, Upper Egypt) and **Wadjet** (cobra, Lower Egypt). It shows that the Pharaoh rules the unified Two Lands that make up Egypt. Pharaoh Hophra took as his Two Ladies name, “**He of the Two Ladies --- Possessor of a Strong Arm**.” Ezekiel is mocking his name!

Historically, Pharaoh Hophra, who just a year earlier had formed an alliance with Zedekiah of Judah and sent an army to relieve Jerusalem discovers that when Babylon hears

¹⁴ “Psammetichus I’s Two Ladies name was *nb* ’ (68) while Psammetichus II was known as *wsr* ” Strong of Arm.” Apries included *nb hpš* in both his Golden Horus and Two Ladies name. Apparently these titles were known to Ezekiel for he mocks the name in Ezek 30,20.” Hoffmeier, 384.

of the approaching Egyptian force, they temporarily lift the siege of Jerusalem (**Jer 37:5-8**) and turn *towards him*. So Pharaoh decides it's not worth the risk and so returns to Egypt without helping Zedekiah. Yet, **he continues boasting** that he possessed the strong arm empowered by Horus and protected by the two ladies. Yahweh, just three months before the destruction of Jerusalem, is directly countering, “**No. I have broken the arm of Pharaoh.**” Imagine getting that news after you fled from the battlefield? That's salt in the wound you've been ignoring through your pride. It would likely have infuriated Hophra that Israel's God would say such a thing.

One final point here is that it is very fascinating to think about how God demonstrated **the superiority of his own Arm** over Pharaoh in the Exodus centuries earlier. “**I will redeem you with *an outstretched arm* and with great acts of judgment**” (**Ex 6:6**). “**Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of *your arm*, they are still as a stone**” (**15:6**).

It **gets worse for this Pharaoh** now though. “**Therefore thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against Pharaoh king of Egypt and will break *his arms*, both the strong arm and the one that was broken, and I will make the sword fall from his**

hand” (22). If one arm symbolized the central power of Pharaoh, both arms symbolize the totality of his power, including his very name. Pharaoh is doomed.

On the other hand (no pun intended), “I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, but the arms of Pharaoh shall fall; and they shall know that I am the Lord. When I put my sword into the hand of the king of Babylon, he shall stretch it out against the land of Egypt” (23 RSV). Pharaoh is taken down through the rising power and *strengthened arm of Nebuchadnezzar* whom God is raising up to take Egypt down. “And I will scatter the Egyptians among the nations and disperse them throughout the countries. Then they will know that I am the LORD” (26). It isn’t just Judah that is going to be scattered to the four winds. It is also Egypt.

Historically, after Hophra left the battlefield in Jerusalem, he was fine for about *seven years*. But then, in 570 there was an internal coup within his army. His general Amasis (Ahmose II) was proclaimed pharaoh by the troops. Hophra was deposed and forced to flee Egypt. He could no longer hold the sword as ruler. Amazingly, Hophra sought help *from Nebuchadnezzar* in 568 and returned to Egypt with a Babylonian force to reclaim his throne. But in the process, Amasis killed Hophra, dramatically strengthening Babylon’s

arms. Oh the irony. Egypt never again exercised the kind of dominance it once had over the Levant. God's word came true.

The Great World Tree (Ezek 31:1-9)

We come then to the world tree in Ch. 31. The oracle begins, “In the eleventh year, in the third month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me” (Ezek 31:1). This translates to a couple months after the previous oracle, approximately June 21, 587 BC, and now only a month before Jerusalem will fall to Babylon. While I won't make too much of this, because I don't see any striking similarities with the other oracle dates, it is fascinating that this oracle is delivered on the Summer Solstice, the day when the sun reached its highest point in the sky. In Egyptian theology, this was the moment of Ra's (the sun god) greatest strength and glory, and Pharaoh, as the son of Ra and the living incarnation of Horus, was believed to reflect that solar majesty. Thus, at the very moment when Ra (and therefore Pharaoh) was mythologically at the zenith of power, the Word of the Lord instructed Ezekiel to prophesy against Egypt. God truly takes all things into account in his word.

And what will he prophesy? The felling of a proud cosmic cedar whose “top was among the clouds” and whose height exalted itself above all other trees. That is precisely world-tree language. The irony is profound: the false sun and the self-exalting world tree are both declared ready for judgment. Let’s look at the prophecy.

“Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt *and to his multitude...*” (2a). This is not just to Pharaoh, but also to his multitude. This small phrase is very important. The prophecy is not directed *at one man*, but at the entire Egyptian empire and its people. Many scholars compare Pharaoh to Adam in this oracle, just as they do with the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28.¹⁵ However, Adam is never mentioned in the chapter and as we will see by the end, Adam was never punished in Sheol as this tree is. He was actually redeemed by God’s grace! The phrase “*and to his multitude*” makes clear that the metaphor is much broader — it concerns the collective pride and coming fall of a powerful nation, pictured as a towering cosmic tree *in Eden*.

¹⁵ I didn’t get into this in that chapter because it makes little sense. There is a potential opening in the LXX there for this idea when it says that the king was “*with*” the guardian cherub (the Heb says he *was* the cherub). But there is no hint of even that in Ezek 31. On Pharaoh to Adam here and the demythologization Ezekiel is supposedly doing see Silviu N. Bunta, “The Mēsu Tree and the Animal Inside: Theomorphism and Theriomorphism in Daniel 4,” *Scrinium* III (2007): 364-84.

Thus it continues, “Whom are you like in your greatness? Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon...” (2b-3a). This is extremely bizarre. First, the oracle is against Egypt, so why bring up *Assyria* which fell to Babylon 25 years earlier and is no longer a power? Second, Assyria is over in northern Iran. It is nowhere near Lebanon, which is the nation just north of Israel. So how can Assyria be a cedar *in Lebanon*?

Ezekiel deliberately places the symbolic cedar “in Lebanon” because Lebanon’s cedars were the premier symbol of majestic, towering beauty and divine favor in the ancient Near East (and in the Bible itself—see Psalm 104, Isaiah 35, etc.). It’s not a geography error but a deliberate mythic-poetic choice to evoke the cosmic/world tree motif. We saw it before with Jerusalem itself in Ch. 17. *Assyria* functions here as the recent historical example of a “world tree” that was felled (its empire collapsed in 612–605 BC with the fall of Nineveh and its remnants), serving as a vivid warning to Egypt (and ultimately to any proud nation, including future Babylon).

Let’s look at exactly what is being depicted. “... with beautiful branches and forest shade, and of towering height, its top among the clouds” (3b). That language will repeat in vs. 10, “It towered high and set its top among the clouds...”

showing how the two halves of the story are woven together.

It continues, “The waters nourished it; the deep made it grow tall, making its rivers flow around the place of its planting, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the field. So it towered high above all the trees of the field. Its boughs grew large and its branches long from abundant water in its shoots. All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations. It was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches; for its roots went down to abundant waters. The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor the fir trees equal its boughs; neither were the plane trees like its branches; no tree in the garden of God was its equal in beauty. I made it beautiful in the mass of its branches, and all the trees of Eden envied it, that were in the garden of God” (4-9). What’s going on here?

Daniel Block in the NICOT commentary is typical of many conservative scholars who say that this passage is a purely military allegory and political satire about a majestic but completely symbolic representation of the Assyrian em-

pire. It is not mythological and has only incidental superficial connections to the world tree idea.¹⁶ To actually think it does would be to reduce God's word to fiction, pagan superstition, and something theologically dangerous. So, they **de-mythologize the story**, draining it of its cosmic, divine-council, and historical context. Welcome to modern cosmology inserting itself on the biblical text.

On the other hand, others like Heiser understand that Ezekiel isn't rejecting a mythic worldview of the ancients, but **repurposing it**! The towering cedar in Lebanon isn't some random, impressive tree picked for poetic effect. It is deliberately drawn from the world-tree cosmology. This fits the pattern found throughout the OANs, and why not? These are oracles against pagan nations, not God's people. So why not use their own ideas against them?¹⁷ Thus John Geyer summarizes, **"The oracles [against the nations] are steeped in mythological concepts... These oracles show a significant dependence on mythological themes. They do not contain any indictments referring to specific events. Where any complaint is mentioned it has to do with hybris,**

¹⁶ Block, 183-97.

¹⁷ I realize Israel also has the idea embedded in its worldview. But here we are dealing with the pagan view.

with a minor god (represented on earth by the king) claiming for himself the power and glory that belong to the high [G]od alone.”¹⁸

For example, even though it is in Scandinavia, *Yggdrasil*—perhaps the most famous of all world trees—is described in the *Edda* Epics as the biggest and best of all trees. Its branches extend out over all the world and reach into the sky. Three of its roots support it and stretch extremely far: one among the *Æsir* in the upper heavenly realm of the gods, the second among the frost *jötnar* in the middle earthly realm, and the third down into Niflheim, the misty, dark, cold underworld, reaching all the way to the spring Hvergelmir in its deepest part. The root in Niflheim is gnawed at by the dragon-serpent *Níðhöggr*. Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) also describes an eagle at the top, the squirrel Ratatoskr racing up and down the trunk carrying messages (often insults) between the eagle and the dragon, and four stags grazing on its leaves.¹⁹ This is the same basic three-tiered cosmic structure — heaven, earth, and the subterranean deep — that Ezekiel invokes with the cedar whose top reaches the clouds, whose roots drink from the tehom (the deep), and whose fall causes cosmic mourning as it descends

¹⁸ John B. Geyer, “[Mythology and Culture in the Oracles against the Nations](#),” *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 144, 41.

¹⁹ See *Poetic Edda*, Grímnismál, stanzas 31, 35; *Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning, ch. 15.

to Sheol. This is not a coincidence, and all ancient cultures had this idea.

Heiser explains why we have [Assyria being placed in Lebanon](#) rather than in Mesopotamia where it should be. He points out that the language here echoes older traditions. In the old Babylonian version of the *Gilgamesh Epic* (remember, Ezekiel is in Babylon), the Cedar Forest (guarded by the monster Humbaba) is explicitly identified with [Mt. Hermon and Lebanon](#) — the very region Ezekiel keeps returning to.²⁰ That forest is called “[the secret dwelling of the Anunnaki](#),” the place where the divine council meets. The Anunnaki are themselves the Babylonian twins of the Israelites Watchers.

The [Watchers](#), importantly, appear only one explicit time in the Bible. This is in Daniel 4. That chapter is vital to Ezekiel 31, because it also describes a world tree.

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

²⁰ See [Edward Lipinski](#), “[El's Abode: Mythological Traditions Related to Mount Hermon and to the Mountains of Armenia](#),” *Orientalia Lovaniensa Periodica* II, (Leuven, 1971): 18. pp. 13-69.

Going Deeper. It's interesting that the old Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells of how Gilgamesh (Babylonian equivalent of a Nephilim) and Enkidu (semi-equivalent of a satyr-demon) go into the cedar forest of Lebanon at the foot of Mt. Hermon and destroy that “[watchman](#)” “monster” Huwawa. Could Huwawa actually be a Watcher who was assigned to take care of the Cedar Forest at the foot of the cosmic mountain and the Babylonian story is repurposing it to make the Nephilim the good guys? On the text, see Heiser, 18-19. Even more curious, Gilgamesh's very name Gish-gin in Sumerian means “[Tree-Equilibrium](#),” referring to the sacred tree. Does the epic subtly portray Gilgamesh as aspiring to the role of the world tree in opposition to the gods? It's quite something to think on.

top *reached to heaven*, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful 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 heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, *a watcher, a holy one*, came down from heaven. He proclaimed aloud and said thus: ‘Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit ... The sentence is by the decree of *the watchers*, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.

(Daniel 4:10-17)

How interesting it is to learn that the Anunnaki (and their Apkallu counterparts) in Babylon and the Watchers in Israel—both heavenly beings—were given the task of being *gardeners* of the world tree!²¹

It seems to me that there’s something profound going on here between the Watchers, the world tree, and the kings. If Watchers are supposed to tend to the world tree, then that means they were assigned the task of making sure that God’s creation would stay in workable order. And by the way, as the Daniel story shows, *they did not all fall*. Some, perhaps

²¹ *Annus*, 293; 309. See also the Babylonian wall relief above.

most, continue to serve God and carry out his decrees perfectly on earth as they were assigned to do. But the world tree itself is supposed to bring order to creation by being the living link that keeps the realms separate yet related. Thinking specifically of Pharaoh, who is supposedly Horus incarnate (obviously not, but that's a way of saying he is supposed to do what Horus would do as his vice-regent), his job was also to ensure that creation was working properly and in order. Are you seeing all the connections? The nations are never off the hook from keeping order and law in God's world, even if God didn't come to them like he did to Israel on Mt. Sinai.

One more point before we move on. The same motif of a well-watered place which Ezekiel talks about over and over with this tree appears in Ugaritic texts describing El's abode as a well-watered garden or mountain “at the sources of the rivers, in the midst of the springs of the two oceans.” Hermon functions as the cosmic mountain, the meeting place of the gods, while Lebanon symbolizes Eden with a great cedar growing there as no ordinary tree — it is the world tree, the “flesh of the gods.”

When Ezekiel describes this magnificent cedar whose “top was among the clouds” and whose roots drink from the

deep, he is taking the well-known cosmic symbol and is about to turn it against Egypt. Assyria once stood like that tree: exalted, life-giving to the nations in its shadow, yet its heart became proud of its height. Because of that hubris, God hands it over to be cut down by “**the most ruthless of nations**,” and it falls to Sheol with cosmic consequences. Egypt, who now thinks it stands in the same exalted place, will share the same fate.

The World Tree Felled (Ezek 31:10-18)

Thus we come to **the second half of the story**. It parallels the first in how it unfolds. But it does so by adding to it a great and mighty fall. But of what? Of whom?

“**Therefore thus says the Lord GOD (the Sovereign LORD): Because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height...**” This sounds very similar to **Ezek 28:16-17** where the cherub’s heart was proud because of its beauty. Also **Isaiah 14:13-14**, where *Helel ben Shachar* (Day Star Son of Dawn), “**You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God, I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most**

High.” Each of these are seemingly related to the same event—an event that took place long ago, in the garden of Eden.

God says, “I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. Foreigners, the most ruthless of nations, have cut it down and left it. On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen, and its boughs have been broken in all the ravines of the land, and all the peoples of the earth have gone away from its shadow and left it” (11-12). Now remember, this is talking about the Assyrian empire and in fact, this has already taken place.

It all started with the sack of Nineveh in 612 BC. Their repentance before Jonah was now long ago—approximately 150 years earlier. A coalition of Babylonians under Nabopolassar and Medes under Cyaxares besieged and destroyed the city. Two years later, the Medes took Ashur, the old religious capital. Five years later, the last holdout Harran in Abram’s old stomping grounds was defeated, ironically, with a little help from Pharaoh Neco II. It was a brutal end to the greatest empire the world had known—the very one that took the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity.

Ezekiel describes Babylon as “a mighty one of the nations” or perhaps better, “most powerful of nations.” And truly it had become. God says that Babylon dealt with Assyria “as its wickedness deserves.” This is always the theme of judgment. God doesn’t capriciously rule over the nations, allowing whoever to do whatever. He used one nation to punish an extremely violent, ruthless, perverted one. Assyria got what it deserved. And don’t worry, Babylon will get its reward in due time.

But the way the picture unfolds is of the great world tree being cut down. Its branches fell. Its boughs and heights were broken as the thing collapsed to the ground with the greatest thud heard up to that point in time in human history. Now it just sits there, rotting on the ground with no people around since its entire function in the world has been destroyed. All that are left on its fallen trunk are the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the field on its branches (13).

The LORD says there is a purpose for the fall of this tree. It serves as the great warning to all proud world empires. “All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height” (14a). Beware your political and religious hubris.

This is God's world and he rules over all. Men and empires, they “are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit” (14b).

This is not just a warning to Pharaoh, or to empires, but to all people, even you here today. Behold, your mortality: “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14). God “returns man to dust and says, ‘Return, o children of man!’ You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers” (Ps 90:3-6). “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone” (Ps 103:15-16). “He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and does not stay” (Job 14:1-2). What sense then does pride make? It is the great wrecking machine of human history.

But this is no mere man. This is the great cedar, the greatest of all trees. The world tree personified. Most powerful nation on earth. “Thus says the Lord God: On the day the cedar went down to Sheol I caused mourning; I closed the deep over it, and restrained its rivers, and many waters

were stopped. I clothed Lebanon in gloom for it, and all the trees of the field fainted because of it” (15). Now listen to the language, “I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol with those who go down to the pit. And all *the trees of Eden*, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, were comforted in the world below. They also went down to Sheol with it, to those who are slain by the sword; yes, those who were its arm, who lived under its shadow among the nations. Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among *the trees of Eden*? You shall be brought down with *the trees of Eden* to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword” (16-18a).

The *trees of Eden* parallel the *trees in the garden of God* in vs. 8. This is strange language? We are back in Eden, just like the cherub. And just like that cherub, this great tree falls and goes down to Sheol. But what in the world does it mean that *a tree goes down to Sheol-Hades*? This is not talking about Adam, much less other humans there in the Garden, because there *weren't* any other humans except Eve, and Adam *wasn't punished* by God in judgment. He was redeemed. This is referring, the same way as *the stones of fire*

did, to the **other angelic entities** that were present in the forest of Eden.

Remember when our parents immediate response is to reach for leaves from the very trees of Eden, **clothing themselves in the figs of the trees** (**Gen 3:7**) right after giving into the temptation to become “**as gods**” (5, KJV)? Reading the story with Ezekiel, it seems very much to me that in their guilty state, they were attempting to clothe themselves *with the glory or status of the divine council members*, to masquerade as these very trees—the *elohim*. For Ezekiel calls these trees living beings there in Eden with them. But while Adam was given the great privilege of being on the divine council just by being in Eden, He was never allowed to seize equality with the heavenly beings. So, after eating, with Europa eyes (wide open), they feel exposed in their mere-human state and **desperately try to hide their nakedness and legitimize their new “god-like” status**. This act actually becomes a profound picture of usurpation and failed imitation, and it completely mirrors the pride of the great cedar in Ezekiel 31, exalting itself among the trees of Eden.

For that is what the world-tree image surrounded by the other trees of Eden pictures. In world-tree symbology, it was the job of the Watchers **to tend** to the tree. That job is

now being recast as they themselves *become* the other trees! This is not just the nation of Assyria, for Assyria wasn't in Eden. It is the supernatural power behind its rise, and the supernatural powers over all the nations.

God's world is not merely mechanical and machine-like. It is enchanted. It is supernatural. The world tree teaches you this, as the whole cosmos comes together in its height, middle, and depth. The world below us—the underworld, Sheol, Hades. The world above us—the heavenly realm. And our realm. They were created to work together. There is no separation of them in the ancient mind.

We on the other hand, we don't really even have a place for such ideas in our cosmology. And because of it, our theology and belief in the supernatural that we still affirm with our mouths hangs by a dangling thread. There are good reasons why so many conservative Christians in our day are fleeing either to atheism or more enchanted religions. But this should not be. God's holy word talks much about these things. And when you get a glimpse of the power of a fully functioning cosmos that works in harmony, then you can start to grasp that this isn't merely a political oracle against a great power. It is an oracle that says from top to bottom, that when you fall, chaos in every nook and cranny of your culture and existence will now ensue.

Not just your **politics**, but your **ethics**, your **spirituality**, your **art**, your **music**, your **entertainment**, the way you practice **business**, your **courts**, your **schools**, your **food** industries, your **health and medicine**, your **armies** ... it all becomes corrupted because of pride thinking that we take the place of the Most High. And it is not just spiritual worldviews that usurp God in pride. What is atheism and our own modern cosmology if not **the height of hubris thinking that man is the pinnacle** of the universe or the opposite, that the universe is utterly meaningless?

But no. It isn't. Yet, there is wickedness in our realm. There is certainly wickedness in the underworld. And there is wickedness in the highest realms too. That's what we learn even in Genesis 3, when a heavenly being came to our first parents and tempted us to sin. God punishes them. God carries out judgment against us.

The killer about all this **for Egypt** is that while the entire oracle seems to be blasted against *Assyria*, it ends abruptly with these words: “**This is Pharaoh and all his multitude, declares the Lord God**” (18b). And Pharaoh couldn't say he didn't understand the image, because the world-tree was also found in Egypt.



Shabti box on which deceased and her ba receive nourishment from the goddess Nut, associated with the cosmic tree
Lenka Peacock, courtesy of the British Museum²²

And so it was. And so it will be again with [Babylon](#), the great tree regrown that didn't learn the lesson of the Assyrian whom he conquered. And the Medes and Persians destroyed it. And so it was with the [Medes and Persians](#) when Alexander conquered them. And so it was with [Greece](#). And so it was with [Rome](#). And so it has and will be with all nations that do not learn the lesson of the world tree in Ezekiel 31.

²² [John H Walton](#), *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 473.

But beloved, that is *the hopelessness of the world* and of our sin and mortality. Every towering cedar of human pride — every empire, every nation, every heart that exalts itself as the center of the cosmos — will be cut down.

Yet the good news of the gospel is that Scripture time and again shows us the true World Tree *is God himself*. We are not pagans when we think of this Tree. We are Christians. He alone brings order from chaos, harmony from discord, and life from death — and he does it through a tree.

Jesus is *the Righteous Branch* sprung from the stump of Jesse. *He is the tender Shoot* planted on the heights. *He is the true Vine* in whom we must abide. *He is the Evergreen* that never withers, pointing to eternal life. *He is the Tree of Life* whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

And how is this World Tree brought home to us in the most surprising, life-changing way? Through *another tree* — a cursed tree of death. On *Calvary*, the cosmic dimensions converged once more. The One whose height once reached the heavens was lifted up between heaven and earth, his “roots” descending into the grave itself. There, the true World Tree was felled — not in pride, but *in perfect obedience and love*. He was cut down so that we, the branches of every fallen cedar, might be grafted in.

On that tree **the doom of the nations was addressed**. Every rebellious “arm” was broken. Every proud height was brought low. Every claim to be the center of the cosmos was answered by the only One who truly is. The sound of his fall made the nations quake, just as the fall of the great cedar once did — but this time the mourning turned to joy, because his descent opened the way back to the garden.

Now the risen Jesus stands as the living *axis mundi*. In him, heaven and earth and the world below are reconciled. In him, the scattered multitudes — from Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and every nation under heaven — can find shade, sustenance, and eternal life. **He tends the true Tree like the perfect Gardener**, making sure it flourishes for all who come to him.

Look upon this Tree and believe. Be grafted into the only cedar that will never be felled. Let his cross be the center of your cosmos. For in Christ alone, the felled trees of Eden are raised to new and unending life.

“**This is Pharaoh and all his multitude**,” declares the Sovereign Lord — but for all who trust in the Branch, the word is different: “**You shall live and not die, and you shall declare that I am the Lord.**”

Appendix: Eating from the Trees of Eden – Fellowship, Usurpation, and the Fall

In the Deuteronomy 32 worldview reflected throughout Scripture, the garden of Eden was the cosmic meeting place where heaven and earth overlapped—the sacred space where Yahweh presided over His heavenly court and where humanity was invited to participate as image-bearing vice-regents. The “trees of Eden” in Ezekiel 31 are not mere botanical hardwood but represent divine beings, members of that council, some of whom functioned as Watchers and gardeners of the cosmic order.²³ God’s original design was relational and generous: humanity was summoned into this holy fellowship under His sovereign headship to tend and care for the Garden and to spread its beauty throughout the world.

The “trees of Eden” in Ezekiel 31 parallel the “trees in the garden of God.” They are glorious, envious of the great cedar—the World Tree—and ultimately descend to Sheol with it when judgment falls. These same trees are living heavenly

²³ In the Old Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh and Enkidu (both the Babylonian equivalent of Nephilim and hybrids), slay the monster Humbaba-- Humbaba, “Guardian of the Forest”... “watchman of the woods” put there “to preserve the cedar” by Enlil who “appointed him as a terror to mortals.” After its defeat it is said that Gilgamesh “opened up the secret dwelling of the Anunnaki. While Gilgamesh cut down the trees, Enkidu dug up the ... Enkidu said to Gilgamesh: ‘... Gilgamesh, felled are the cedars.’” James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with Supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 504-05. It is plausible that Humbaba was a Watcher-guardian stationed to guard and tend the great cedars, akin to the Anunnaki who are often depicted tending to the World Tree. In the Dead Sea Scroll, where Gilgamesh and Nephilin (Nephilim) are mentioned, it calls the watchers “gardeners and they were watering ... numerous roots issued from their trunk.” 4Q503 col ii 7-8.

beings—Watchers assigned to tend the cosmic garden and maintain ordered creation. When they fall with the proud cedar, we see the tragic consequence of rebellion: even members of the divine council can be cast down to the pit when they exalt themselves or align with pride against the Most High.

Before the Fall, the command to eat freely from every tree except one carried profound vocational meaning. Jewish traditions preserve *a positive* memory of this original design. Jubilees records that God sent the Watchers to earth “to instruct human beings and to act with justice and righteousness” (Jubilees 4:15). The Aramaic Book of Giants (4Q530) depicts them as faithful “gardeners” watering and nurturing the trees of the garden. This is the positive take on the old tale of the watchers communicating knowledge to mankind. In this pre-Fall context, “eating from the trees” meant open, life-giving fellowship: humanity could learn, ask questions, and benefit from the instructional role of these loyal divine beings as they helped tend the world under Yahweh’s authority. This may very well explain why Eve was talking to the Nachash.

But they were tempted to become “like gods” (Gen 3:5 KJV), ate the forbidden fruit, and plunged themselves and their race into sin. Right after they ate the forbidden fruit, “the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons” (Gen 3:7). In light of Ezekiel 31, those fig leaves came from the very trees of Eden—the domain and

symbolic glory of the heavenly divine council members. Having grasped for autonomous god-like knowledge, our first parents desperately tried to clothe themselves in the status and radiance of the lesser *elohim*. It was a pathetic yet profound act of usurpation: they attempted to masquerade as gods by borrowing the covering that belonged to the council itself.

After the Fall and expulsion from Eden, the original permission became dangerous and largely withdrawn. The Enochic tradition powerfully illustrates *the negative* turn. In 1 Enoch 6–16 and related works, certain Watchers rebel, lust after human women, and teach forbidden arts—metallurgy, sorcery, weapons, and astrology—that bring violence and corruption upon the earth. This is the negative spin on the watchers conveying knowledge to humanity. What began as an instructional mission became a source of catastrophic rebellion. The boundary God had set for humanity’s protection was now even more necessary, as open communication with the divine realm risked further deception and judgment.

The trees of Eden in Ezekiel 31 ultimately go down to Sheol with the great cedar, mourning its fall and sharing in its descent. These same heavenly beings, once present in the garden as gardeners and instructors, were swept up in rebellion as pride or disloyalty took root. Their judgment reminds us that even the divine council is accountable to the Most High. No tree—whether human empire or heavenly being—may exalt itself as the center of the cosmos without consequence.

The gospel restores and surpasses what was lost in the original divine council at Eden. Jesus Christ, the true and faithful Vine (John 15:5), the Righteous Branch (Isa 4:2), the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:1) planted by God Himself, did not grasp equality with God but emptied Himself. On the cross the true World Tree was felled in perfect obedience so that we, who once tried to clothe ourselves with borrowed leaves, might be clothed in His righteousness and grafted into the only Tree that never falls. Now, he opens the way back to the Tree of Life (Rev 2:7; 22:14). In Him the original invitation to fellowship is renewed—not as usurpers, but as beloved sons and daughters welcomed back into the divine family.

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