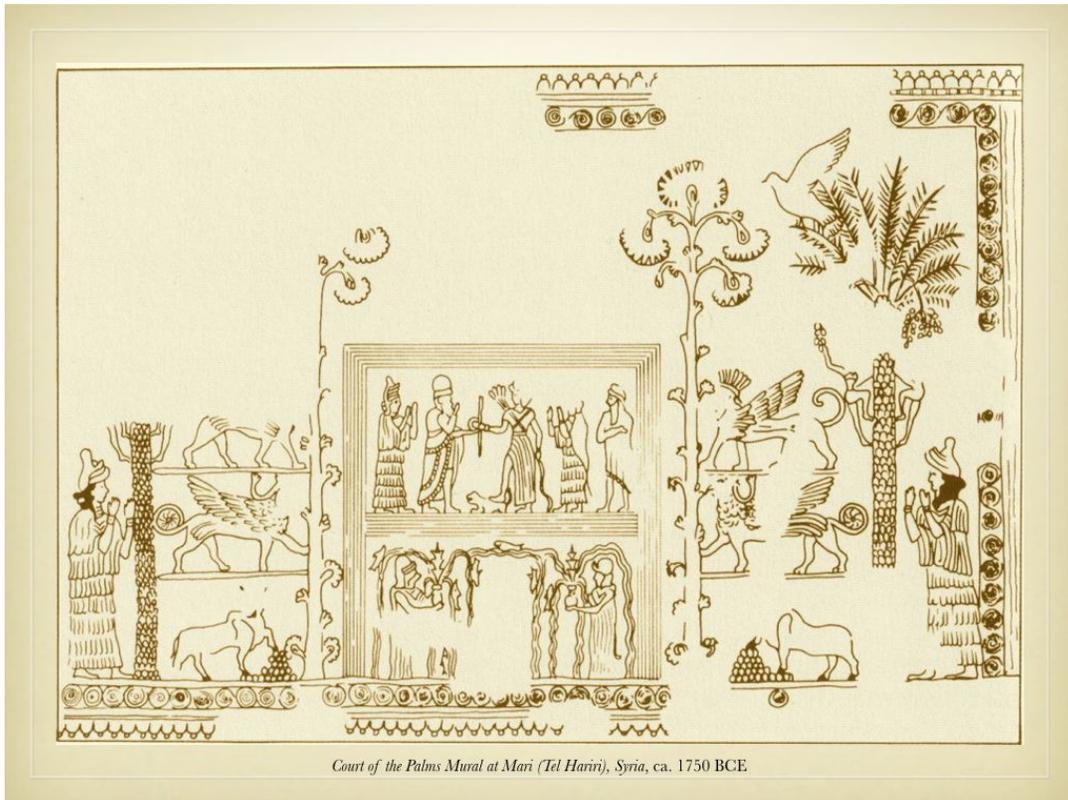


The Temple Symbolism of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge

Jeffrey M. Bradshaw



A mural from the Court of the Palms at Mari dated to 1750 BCE is an example of how temple and garden themes were combined anciently, even outside of Judaism. J. R. Porter writes of how the scene depicted above “strikingly recall[s] details of the Genesis description of the Garden of Eden. In particular, the mural depicts two types of tree,” one type clearly being a date palm, “guarded by mythical winged animals[—the Assyrian version of the] cherubim.”¹ In the symmetrical side panels at the far left and right of the mural, two men climb each of the two date palms;² the tree on the right can clearly be seen as harboring a dove.³

“The lower half of the central panel shows figures holding jars from which flow four streams,” with a seedling growing out of the middle, recalling the streams that flowed out from underneath the Tree of Life in the Garden.⁴ The streams originate in a basement room that might be seen as providing an ideal setting for ritual washings.⁵ “The upper scene may depict a king being invested by the Mesopotamian fertility goddess Ishtar: Eve has been associated with such divine figures.”⁶ Note the king’s raised right hand, perhaps an oath-related gesture.⁷ His outstretched left arm receives the crown and staff of his office.⁸

In many traditions, sacred trees are identified with a human king,⁹ or with the mother of a king, whether human or divine.¹⁰ Like the two figures witnessing the investiture, two others near the trees raise their hands in worship and supplication,¹¹ suggesting a parallel

between the tree and the king himself. Like the tree, the king is an “archetypal receiver and distributor of divine blessing.”¹²

The Tree of Life is certainly the most significant object in the Garden of Eden. Its presence has always been somewhat of a puzzle to students of the Bible, however, because it is only briefly mentioned in Genesis: once at the beginning of the story, in connection with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,¹³ and once at the end when cherubim and a flaming sword are placed before it to prevent Adam and Eve from partaking of its fruit.¹⁴

Though neither the nature nor the function of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are given explicitly in scripture, an understanding of temple teachings and layout can greatly illuminate this subject. In this article, I will provide some background on the symbolism of the two special trees themselves. In next week’s article, I will discuss how their placement in the Garden of Eden relates to the layout of Israelite temples and makes their roles in the story of Adam and Eve apparent.

Symbolism of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil



The Hebrew expression “knowledge of good and evil” can mean knowledge of what is good and bad, or of happiness and misery—or, most arguably, of “everything,” if “good and evil” can be taken to mean the totality of all that is, was, or is yet to be.¹⁵ The variegated light and darkness in the photograph of the fig tree shown above suggests the ambivalent nature of this symbolism.

Perhaps the most relevant hint on the meaning of the phrase comes from Deuteronomy 1:39, which speaks of little children “who... have no knowledge of good and evil,” suggesting “that they are not legally responsible for their actions.”¹⁶ In this sense, the term refers not to abstract conceptual knowledge but rather to the kind of “knowledge which infancy lacks and experience acquires.”¹⁷ Thus, sensing his inexperience, the young King Solomon prayed for the ability “to discern between good and evil” so that he would be able to function in his royal role.¹⁸ Consistent with this reading of the phrase, LDS scripture refers to the ability to know “good *from* evil,”¹⁹ which presupposes “man’s power to choose the sweet even when it is harmful and reject the bitter even when beneficial.”²⁰

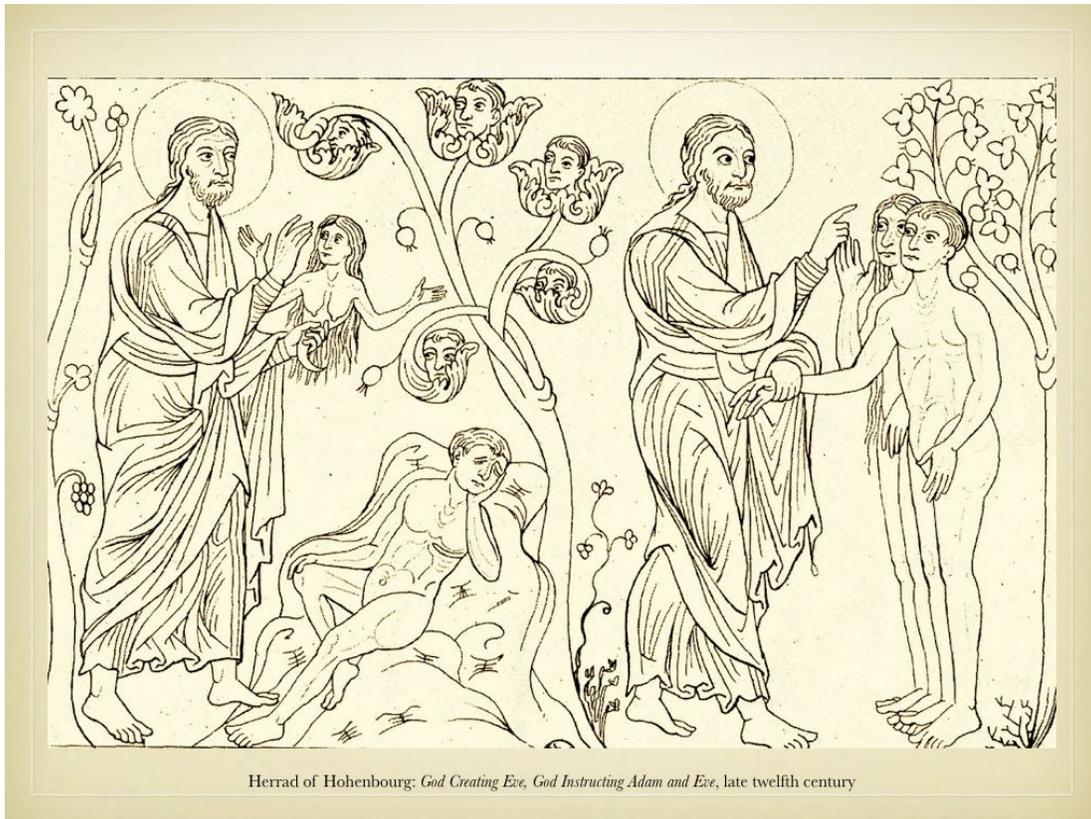
The commandment specifying the prohibition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge is given in Moses 3:16-17:

16 And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat,

17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou²¹ shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

The phrase “thou mayest choose for thyself” is a book of Moses addition to the Genesis account. The phrase serves to emphasize the fact that Adam and Eve are to be placed in a situation where they must exercise their agency in order to continue their progression. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, speaking while an LDS apostle, offered the following paraphrase of the command:

The Lord said to Adam, here is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you want to stay here then you cannot eat of that fruit. If you want to stay here, then I forbid you to eat it. But you may act for yourself and you may eat of it if you want to. And if you eat of it you will die.²²



Shown above is a twelfth-century drawing of two scenes from the Garden of Eden. At the left is Eve, who is being created from Adam's rib with their future posterity represented as the fruit of a heavenly "Tree of Souls."²³ At the right is God, giving Adam and Eve a commandment not to partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.²⁴ Gary A. Anderson points out an interesting divergence between Genesis story and the drawing featured here: "Whereas Genesis 2 recounts that Adam was created first,²⁵ given a commandment,²⁶ and only then received a spouse,²⁷ the [illustration] has it that Adam was created, then Eve was drawn from his rib, and finally *both* were given a commandment."²⁸ At right, God gestures toward the Tree of Knowledge in warning as He takes Adam firmly by the wrist. At the same time, Eve raises her arm in what seems a gesture of consent to God's commandment.²⁹

Consistent with the shapes of the leaves and fruit shown at the right of this illustration, Jewish and Christian traditions often identify the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil as a fig tree, thus heightening the irony later on when Adam and Eve attempt to cover themselves with its leaves.³⁰ The fruit of the fig tree is known for its abundance of seeds, thus an apron of green fig leaves is an appropriate symbol for Adam and Eve's ability to "be fruitful and multiply"³¹ after the Fall.³² Less likely are suggestions that the forbidden fruit was to be symbolized by the grape,³³ the pomegranate, or the apple (based on the correspondence between the Latin *malus* = evil and *malum* = apple).³⁴

LDS teachings about the nature of the "forbidden fruit" include a wide variety of opinions. For example, while President Brigham Young³⁵ and Elder James E. Talmage³⁶ understood the scriptures as describing a literal ingestion of "food" of some sort, Elder

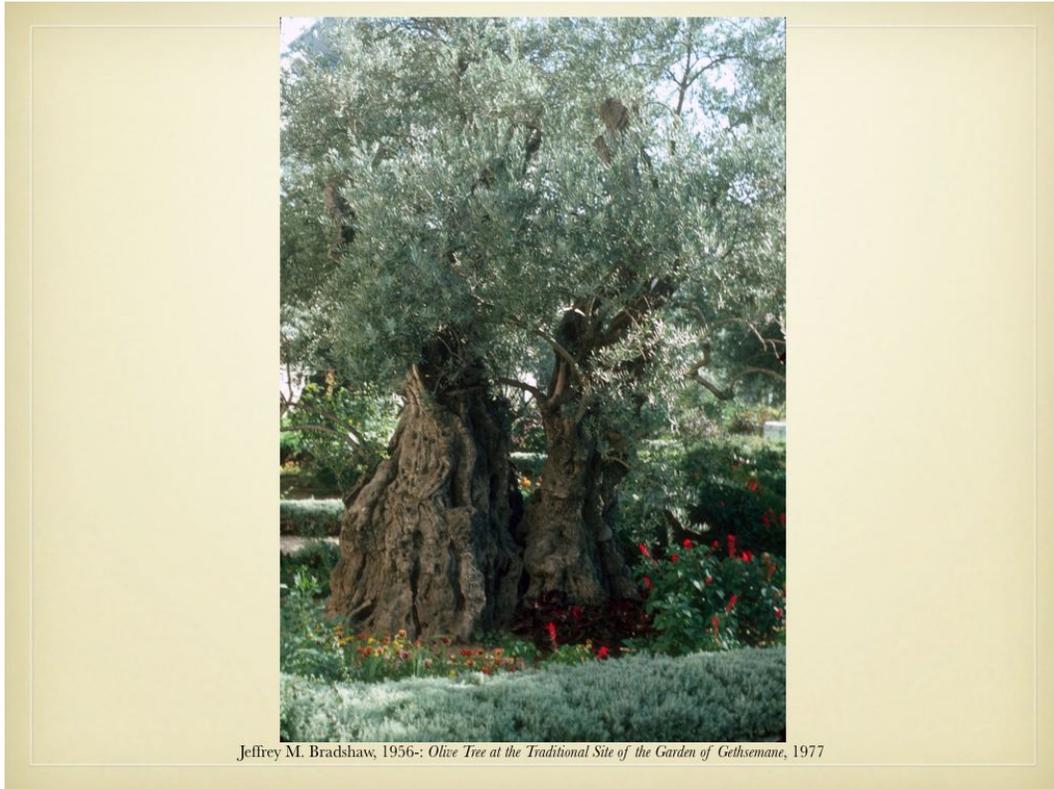
Bruce R. McConkie left the door open for a figurative interpretation: “What is meant by partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil is that our first parents complied with whatever laws were involved so that their bodies would change from their state of paradisiacal immortality to a state of natural mortality.”³⁷

Symbolism of the Tree of Life

Since the Tree of Life is not specifically prohibited to Adam and Eve, commentators have often speculated as to whether Adam and Eve may have eaten from it to prolong their lives so long as they remained in the Garden. However, a careful reading of Genesis itself seems to run counter to this view. For example, the use of the term “also” (Hebrew *gam*) in Genesis 3:22 (“and take *also* of the tree of life”) suggests that they had not yet partaken of the fruit of the Tree of Life at the time these words were spoken. Evidence for the use of *gam* in the sense of “new and additional activity” is provided in Genesis 3:6 as well (“and *also* gave to her husband”).³⁸ Additionally, Barr studied 131 cases of “lest” (Hebrew *pen*; “lest he put for his hand... and eat”) in the Bible “and found none which means ‘lest someone continue to do what they are already doing.’”³⁹ Specifically affirming such a reading is a unique Samaritan exegesis of Genesis 2:16 that specifically excludes the Tree of Life from the original permission given to Adam and Eve to eat from the trees of the Garden.⁴⁰

In contrast to the idea that eating the fruit of the Tree of Life was merely a way to provide biological immortality, Elder Bruce R. McConkie maintained that its purpose was to confer the glory of “eternal life”⁴¹—the kind of life that God lives—in whatever degree, of course, those who partake are qualified to receive it.⁴² Non-Mormon scholar Vos concurs, concluding that “the tree was associated with the higher, the unchangeable, the eternal life to be secured by obedience throughout the probation.”⁴³ According to this view, Adam and Eve would not have been permitted to partake of the fruit of the Tree of Life at their own discretion. Like each one of us, Adam and Eve’s only approach to the Tree of Life was by way of leaving the Garden to pass into mortality, and finally returning at last to take of the sweet fruit only when they had completed their probation and were authoritatively invited to do so.⁴⁴

Olive Tree or Date Palm?



Ancient commentators often identify the Tree of Life with the olive tree.⁴⁵ Its extremely long life makes it a fitting symbol for eternal life, and the everyday use of the oil as a source of both nourishment for man and fuel for light evokes natural associations when used in conjunction with the ritual anointing of priests and kings, and the blessing of the sick.⁴⁶

A variety of texts associate the olive tree with the Garden of Eden. For example, ancient traditions recount that on his sickbed Adam requested Eve and Seth to return to the Garden to retrieve oil—presumably olive oil—from the “tree of his mercy.”⁴⁷ Recalling the story of the dove that returned to Noah’s ark with the olive branch in its mouth, one rabbinical opinion gives it that the “gates of the garden of Eden opened for the dove, and from there she brought it.”⁴⁸ Two days after a revelation describing how war was to be “poured out upon all nations,” Joseph Smith designated D&C 88, by way of contrast, as the “olive leaf... plucked from the Tree of Paradise, the Lord’s message of peace to us.”⁴⁹



Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, 1956-; *Palm Tree Near the Dead Sea*, 2008

The date palm, on the other hand, is the sacred tree in Assyrian mythology, and its longevity was a fitting symbol for long life to the Egyptians.⁵⁰ The Old Testament Deborah rendered judgment as she dwelt under a palm tree,⁵¹ and the holiest places within the temples of Solomon and of Ezekiel's vision were decorated with palms.⁵² As a sign of victory and kingship, palm fronds were a central part of the celebration of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.⁵³ The *Qur'an* also describes the palm as providing shelter and nourishment for Mary, who was said to have given birth to Jesus in the wilderness beneath such a tree.⁵⁴

A single date palm tree “often yielded more than one hundred pounds of fruit per year over a productive lifetime of one hundred years or more. Akkadian synonyms for date palm included ‘tree of abundance’ (*isu masru*) and ‘tree of riches’ (*isu rasu*)—appropriate names for the vehicle of agricultural success and richness.”⁵⁵

Also in favor of the date palm as a representation of the Tree of Life are the Book of Mormon accounts of the visions of Lehi and Nephi. Lehi contrasts the fruit of the Tree of Life to the fruit of the forbidden tree: “the one being sweet and the other bitter.”⁵⁶ The fruit of the date palm—often described as “white” in its most desirable varieties, well-known to Lehi's family, and likely available in the Valley of Lemuel where the family was camped at the time of the visions—would have provided a more fitting analogue than the olive to the love of God that was “sweet above all that is sweet.”⁵⁷

Reconciling the competing ideas of a Tree of Life that bears sweet fruit like the date as opposed to oil-producing fruit like the olive are ancient suggestions that the Garden story was concerned with three special trees rather than two.⁵⁸ In addition to the original Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge, the third tree, an olive tree, is said to have sprouted up only after the sin of Adam. Thus, in a speculative mood, we might consider the possibility of two “Trees of Life”: the original Edenic tree with its sweet fruit, destined as the ultimate reward of the righteous and arguably represented within the Holy of Holies of the First Temple,⁵⁹ and the subsequently-sprouted oil-bearing “Tree of Mercy”⁶⁰ that may have been symbolized in the *menorah* that is said to have stood in front of the veil in the Holy Place. In the parlance of the doctrines of the Restoration, we might see the oil-bearing olive tree as representing the Savior, His healing atonement, and the Gospel covenants explained to Adam and Eve after the Fall that would eventually enable them to return to the presence of the Father and the enjoyment of the sweet fruit of eternal life.

Conclusion

I have argued for the view that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is a symbol of the totality of knowledge that can be acquired only after and, in part, through a successful probationary experience. This sort of understanding, as biblical scholar Claus Westermann⁶¹ concludes, is thus:

... concerned with knowledge (or wisdom) in the general, comprehensive sense. Any limitation of the meaning of “the knowledge of good and evil” is thereby excluded. It can mean neither moral nor sexual⁶² nor any other partial knowledge, but only that knowledge which includes and determines human existence as a whole, [the ability to master]... one’s own existence.

The message about the results of eating of one or the other tree is clear. In both cases, those who eat become “partakers of the divine nature”⁶³—the Tree of Life symbolizing the means by which a fitting measure of eternal life is granted to the faithful, while the Tree of Knowledge enabling those who ingest its fruit to become “as gods, knowing good and evil.”⁶⁴ The subsequent story of the Fall seems to teach, however, that eating of either tree in an unprepared state may bring dire consequences.

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Endnotes

1 Cf. Moses 4:31.

2 Associated in some cultures with the idea of heavenly ascent and the attainment of divine vision. See, e.g., E. A. S. Butterworth, *Tree*, p. 213.

3 See J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, pp. 42-43, 166, 209, 246, 473, 654.

4 Alma 32:41-42.

5 Cf. Moses 3:10, 1 Nephi 11:25.

6 J. R. Porter, *Guide*, p. 28.

7 See S. D. Ricks, *Oaths*, pp. 49-50.

8 Cf. R. Giorgi, *Anges*, p. 281; L. M. Hilton, *Hand*.

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- 9 Cf. Daniel 4:20, 22: “The tree... is thou, O king.” See also Judges 9:7-21, E. D. Clark, Cedars; T. Stordalen, Echoes, pp. 89-92, 100-101, 291.
- 10 N. Wyatt, Space, p. 170; cf. 1 Nephi 11:8-22, M. Barker, Joseph Smith, p. 76; M. Cazenave, Encyclopédie, p. 44; D. C. Peterson, Asherah 1998; D. C. Peterson, Asherah 2000 H. Schwartz, Tree, p. 50. See also *Qur'an* 19:23-26, A. a.-S. M. H. at-Tabataba'i, Al-Mizan, 6:146.
- 11 Y. M. al-Khalesi, Palms, pp. 45, 54, 56; J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image, pp. 355-356.
- 12 T. Stordalen, Echoes, p. 101.
- 13 Moses 3:9.
- 14 Moses 4:28-31.
- 15 D&C 93:24.
- 16 V. P. Hamilton, Genesis, p. 166.
- 17 J. H. Hertz, Pentateuch, p. 8; cf. J. E. Faulconer, Adam and Eve, pp. 19-20.
- 18 1 Kings 3:9; cf. *Targum Yerushalmi*: “the tree of knowledge, of which any one who ate would distinguish between good and evil” (cited in J. W. Etheridge, Onkelos).
- 19 In contrast to the Bible, which exclusively employs the term “good *and* evil,” (Genesis 2:9, 17; Genesis 3:5, 22; Deuteronomy 1:39; 2 Samuel 19:35; Proverbs 31:12; Isaiah 5:20; Jeremiah 24:3; Amos 5:14; Matthew 12:35; Luke 6:45; Hebrews 5:14; cf. 2 Nephi 2:18, 15:20; Alma 29:5, 42:3; Moses 3:9, 17; Moses 4:11, 28; Moses 5:11; Abraham 5:9, 13; JS-H 1:33), the Book of Mormon and the book of Moses contain nine instances of the similar phrase “good *from* evil” (2 Nephi 2:5, 26; Alma 12:31, 29:5; Helaman 14:31; Moroni 7:15-16, 19; Moses 6:56). Though, admittedly, the difference in connotation between these terms is not entirely consistent across all scriptural references to them (see e.g., Alma 12:31 and Moses 4:28), one might still argue for a distinction between the knowledge Adam and Eve attempted to acquire when they determined to eat the forbidden fruit (and would eventually receive in its fullness when they had successfully finished their probation), and that which they gained later through the experience of repeated choice in a fallen world. Unlike the former attempt to gain knowledge that had come in response to Satan’s deception and as the result of moral autonomy exercised in transgression of divine instruction, the essential knowledge attained gradually by Adam and Eve during their later period of mortal probation would depend on their hearkening to the “Spirit of Christ” (Moroni 7:16, 19), mercifully made available to them through the power of redemption (2 Nephi 2:26), and enabling them to “know good from evil... with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night” (Moroni 7:15).
- 20 A. Cohen, Chumash, p. 10.

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- 21 Whereas the Hebrew text uses the singular “thou,” implying that the commandment was given to Adam alone, the Greek *Septuagint* uses the plural “you” (L. C. L. Brenton, *Septuagint*, Genesis 2:17, p. 3; C. Dogniez *et al.*, *Pentateuque*, Genesis 2:17, pp. 140-141). The idea that both Adam and Eve were both present to hear this command from God was not uncommon in Jewish and early Christian tradition (G. A. Anderson *et al.*, *Synopsis*, 32:1, p. 36E; G. A. Anderson, *Perfection*, pp. 81-84).
- 22 J. F. Smith, Jr., *Fall*. See also J. F. Smith, Jr., *Answers*, 4:81. The unique phrasing of this commandment is noted by Elder Smith: “In no other commandment the Lord ever gave to man, did he say: ‘But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself’” (J. F. Smith, Jr., *Doctrines*, 1:114).
- 23 H. Schwartz, *Tree*, 199, p. 165.
- 24 R. Green *et al.*, *Hortus*, Vol. 1, Original fol. HD 17r. (Figure 21).
- 25 Genesis 2:4-7.
- 26 Genesis 2:16-17.
- 27 Genesis 2:19-24.
- 28 G. A. Anderson, *Original Form*, p. 83; G. A. Anderson, *Perfection*, pp. 216-217 n. 6.
- 29 See S. D. Ricks, *Oaths*, pp. 49-50.
- 30 E.g., D. C. Matt, *Zohar* 1, *Be-Reshit* 1:36b, p. 229.
- 31 Moses 2:28.
- 32 Similarly, in the Zoroastrian *Bundahishn*, the special tree standing near to the Tree of Life is called the “tree of many seeds” (F. M. Müller, *Bundahis*, 9:5, 18:9, 27:2, pp. 31, 66, 99-100). A Coptic text says that the leaves of the Tree of Knowledge “are like fig leaves. Its fruit is like a good appetizing date” (H.-G. Bethge *et al.*, *Origin*, 110:22-23, p. 179). The fig tree also is prominent as a symbol in the New Testament, and at a crucial point in Jesus’ ministry became the subject of a curse (Matthew 21:18-20; 24:32; Luke 13:6-9; John 1:48; James 3:12; cf. Joel 2:22).
- 33 The story of Noah’s drunkenness is often given as the basis for this identification—see JST Genesis 9:24. For examples, see A. I. A. I. M. I. I. al-Tha’labi, *Lives*, p. 49; H. E. Gaylord, Jr., *3 Baruch*, 6:15-17, p. 669; M. Ibn Ishaq ibn Yasar, *Making*, p. 37; H. W. Nibley, *Sacred*, pp. 577-579; H. W. Nibley, *Message* 2005, p. 308. On the possibility of polemical motivations for the identification of the forbidden fruit as the grape, see N. Koltun-Fromm, *Aphrahat*.
- 34 Or perhaps: Latin *pomum* (fruit) = French *pomme* (apple) (A. LaCocque, *Trial*, p. 95 n. 47).

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- 35 B. Young, 8 October 1854, p. 98. President Young taught that Adam and Eve “partook of the fruit of the Earth, until their systems were charged with the nature of Earth.”
- 36 J. E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, p. 19. Elder Talmage describes Eve’s transgression as “indulgence in food unsuited to [her] nature.”
- 37 B. R. McConkie, *Sermons*, p. 189.
- 38 V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, p. 209. See also T. N. D. Mettinger, *Eden*, p. 20.
- 39 T. Stordalen, *Echoes*, pp. 230-231. However, slightly weakening Barr’s claim, there are two exceptions among the 131 instances: Exodus 1:9 and 2 Samuel 12:27.
- 40 S. Lowy, *Principles*, p. 403.
- 41 B. R. McConkie, *New Witness*, p. 86; cf. A. Gileadi, *Studies*, p. 10; B. C. Hafen, *Broken*, p. 30.
- 42 D&C 88:28-32; R. J. Matthews, *Probationary Nature*, p. 56.
- 43 Cited in V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, p. 209 n. 6. Note that in the vision of Lehi there is not the same ultimacy when the fruit is eaten, since some, “after they had tasted of the fruit... were ashamed... and... fell away” (1 Nephi 8:28).
- 44 D&C 88:68.
- 45 C. W. Griggs, *Tree of Life*; S. D. Ricks, *Olive*; J. A. Tvedtnes, *Olive Oil*, pp. 429-430.
- 46 T. G. Madsen, *Sacrament*, p. 97; T. G. Madsen, *Gethsemane*; J. A. Tvedtnes, *Olive Oil*, p. 429.
- 47 Cf. G. A. Anderson *et al.*, *Synopsis*, Latin 36:2, p. 40E; S. C. Malan, *Adam and Eve*, 36:1-3, pp. 39-40.
- 48 J. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah 1*, 33:6, p. 351.
- 49 J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 14 January 1833, p. 18.
- 50 J. O. Ryen, *Mandaean Vine*, p. 205.
- 51 Judges 4:5.
- 52 1 Kings 6:29, 32, 35, 7:36; 2 Chronicles 3:5; Ezekiel 40:16, 22, 26, 31, 34, 37; 41:18-20, 25-26.
- 53 John 12:12-13; cf. Revelation 7:9, 14.
- 54 *Qur’an* 19:23-26.

55 T. Stordalen, *Echoes*, p. 82.

56 2 Nephi 2:15.

57 Alma 32:42.

58 See J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, pp. 166-167, 210, 658, 755-756.

59 See *Ibid.*, p. 658, 755-756. See also Ezekiel 41:20 which says, in describing the Holies in Solomon's temple, that "From the ground unto above the door were cherubims and palm trees made, and on the wall of the temple."

60 See, e.g., M.-B. Halford, *Eva und Adam*, pp. 279-281.

61 C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp. 247-248; cf. T. N. D. Mettinger, *Eden*, pp. 61-63.

62 Sarna writes: "Against the interpretation that [the fruit represented carnal knowledge] is the fact... that sexual differentiation is made by God Himself [Moses 2:27], that the institution of marriage is looked upon... as part of the divinely ordained order [Moses 2:25], and that... 'knowledge of good and bad' is a divine characteristic" (N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 19; see Moses 4:11, 28). Westermann concurs, concluding that the opening of the eyes experienced by Adam and Eve in Moses 4:13 "does not mean that they become conscious of sexuality" (C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 251). It is later, immediately following the account of their expulsion from Eden, that we are given the significant detail that "Adam knew his wife, and she bare unto him sons and daughters" (Moses 5:2. See J. E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, p. 30).

63 2 Peter 1:4. For recent exegesis of this phrase, see J. Starr, *Partakers*.

64 Moses 4:11; cf. Moses 4:28.