

The False Apron and the Tree of Death and Rebirth

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We read in Moses 4:13 that after Adam and Eve had eaten of the forbidden fruit, “the eyes of them both were opened.” In other Old Testament instances, this phrase connotes a sudden vision of hidden things.¹ By this change they realize that they “had been naked.”² The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob equates a “perfect knowledge” of “nakedness” with “guilt” and “uncleanness” while associating the perfect knowledge of the “righteous” with “enjoyment” and “being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness.”³

Partaking of the fruit of the tree allowed Adam and Eve to begin to experience and distinguish good from evil—the “opposition in all things” described in 2 Nephi 2:11. In demonstration of her new capacity for discernment, Eve immediately “sees through Satan’s disguise of clever hypocrisy, identifies him, and exposes him for what he is.”⁴

Unlike the richly-described, finely-nuanced account of the temptation dialogue, the tightly-coupled chain of verbs that follow it (“took,” “eat,” “gave,” “eat”) “indicate rapid, single-minded action”—nothing more is said, seen, or felt until the moment we are told that the eyes of Adam and Eve are opened.⁵ Then, at once, the hurried action restarts (“sewed,” “made”)—all the frantic movements proclaiming loudly, by their silent execution, the anguished undertone of shame and fear—“the physical act... as an expression of an inner state of an alarm.”⁶ The desired effect of this economical yet artful mode of narrative construction is to help the perceptive reader understand that the Lord God, Adam and Eve’s benevolent provider, who has been absent from their minds throughout the previous episode, has now reentered their thoughts with painful effect.

The False Apron

The derivation of the Hebrew term for apron (*agorah*), sometimes translated as “girdle,” confirms that this was an article of clothing intended to “enclose and cover the area of [the] lap or loins.”⁷ The fig tree has unusually large and strong leaves and its fruit 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 procreate, to “be fruitful and multiply”⁸ after the Fall.



Ostensibly, the aprons functioned to hide Adam and Eve’s nakedness—but is there more to the story than this? Ancient readers would have recognized the function of aprons in ritual context as a sign of power and authority. For example, a sacred tree was symbolically represented on an apron worn by the eighth-century Christian king Charlemagne, as in the figure above.⁹ Kings in the Middle East were often described as various sorts of trees.¹⁰ In both Egypt and Mesoamerica,¹¹ foliated aprons were also used as a sign of authority.

In Moses 4:27, God Himself will be the one to clothe Adam and Eve, whereas in Moses 4:13 we were told that Adam and Eve “*made themselves* aprons.” Like their tasting of the forbidden fruit,¹² the endeavor of Nimrod to build a tower to “reach unto heaven,”¹³ Sarah’s essay to realize the blessing of posterity through her handmaiden Hagar,¹⁴ and Rebekah’s disguising of Jacob to assure that he would receive the birthright blessing,¹⁵ this action exemplifies the “recurring theme... of the attempt and failure of human effort in obtaining a blessing that only God can give.”¹⁶

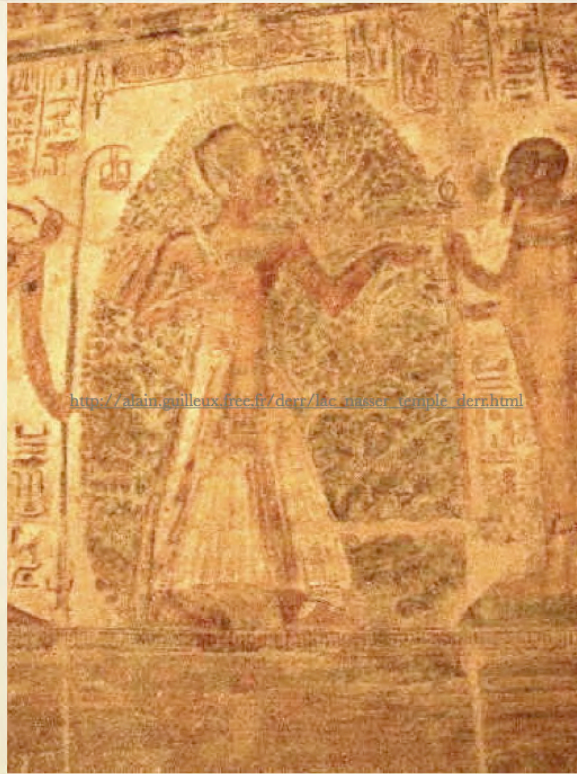
It is perfectly in character for Satan to have planted the suggestion of making their own aprons in the mind of Adam and Eve, since he often appropriates false signs of power and priesthoods for himself in order to deceive.¹⁷ Thus, we are not surprised to find the *Zohar* associating Adam and Eve’s fig leaves with a knowledge of “sorcery and magic,” false forms of “protection” and counterfeits of the true priesthood.¹⁸ Moreover, it is consistent with the plan of the Adversary to encourage sinners to flee from the presence of God rather than to reconcile and return to Him.¹⁹

In this instance, the contrast between the false clothing made from leaves and the true clothing made from the skins of animals seems paralleled in the story of Cain and Abel, where the former makes an unacceptable offering from the fruits of the ground while the latter follows the God-given pattern of animal sacrifice.²⁰ Citing another scriptural passage, Brown discusses the lambskin aprons of the warring Lamanites in the Book of Mormon, bringing to mind the Lord's warning about "false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing."²¹

Note that Satan made three attempts to mislead Adam and Eve by false appearances. First, he made claims that confused the identities of Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. Second, he appeared as a serpent, deceptively employing a symbol of Christ. Finally, in the episode of the fig-leaf aprons, he suggested a course of action to Adam and Eve that substituted a self-made emblem of power and priesthood for the true article obtainable only when authorized by God.

The Tree of Death and Rebirth

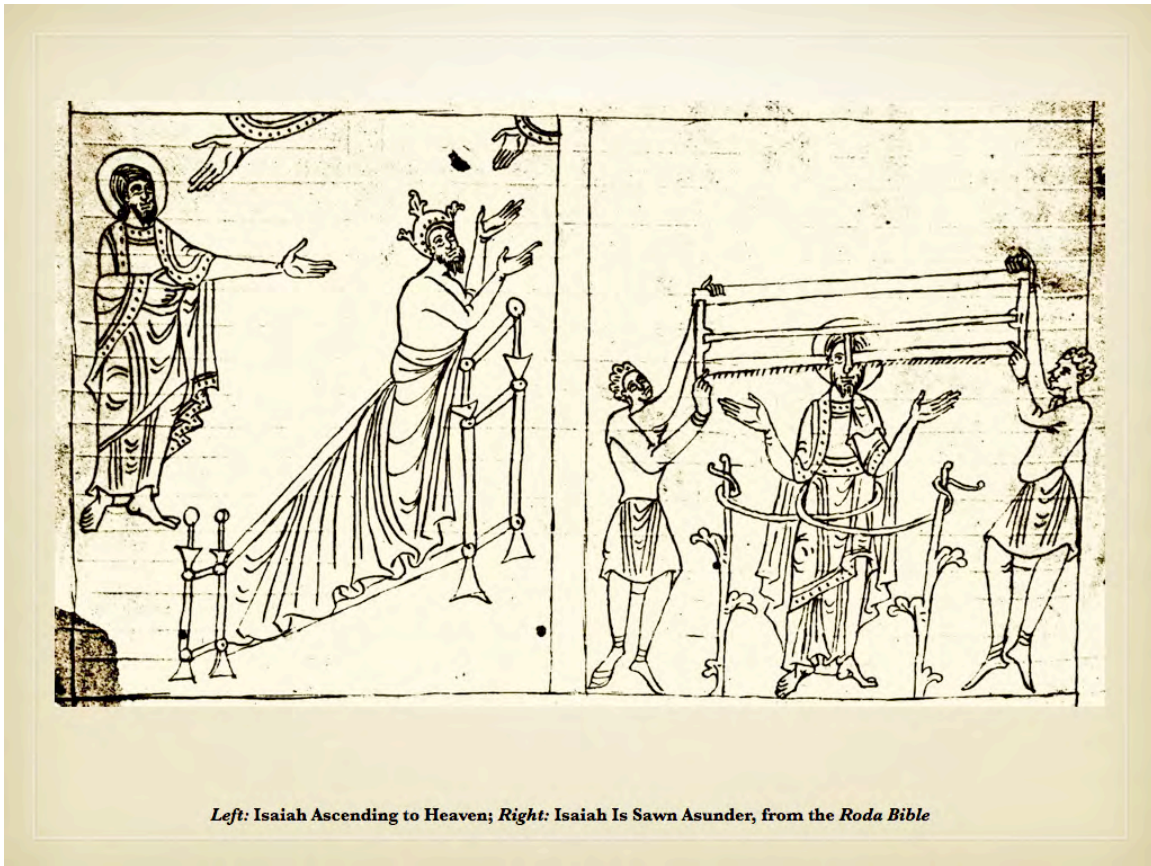
When Adam and Eve heard the voice of the Lord, the English text says that they "went to hide themselves from the presence of the Lord God *amongst the trees of the garden*."²² However the Hebrew for "tree," *etz*, can be read as singular or plural in this verse—an important subtlety glossed over in nearly every Bible translation. As a rare exception, André Chouraqui's French edition holds to a careful rendering of the key phrase describing Adam and Eve's place of concealment: "in the center of [i.e., within] the tree of the garden."²³ As Kastler observes, "they are not merely touching the [Tree of Knowledge] but they have for all intents and purposes merged with it... The tree has become their refuge—or perhaps their prison."²⁴ They have experienced a kind of death.²⁵



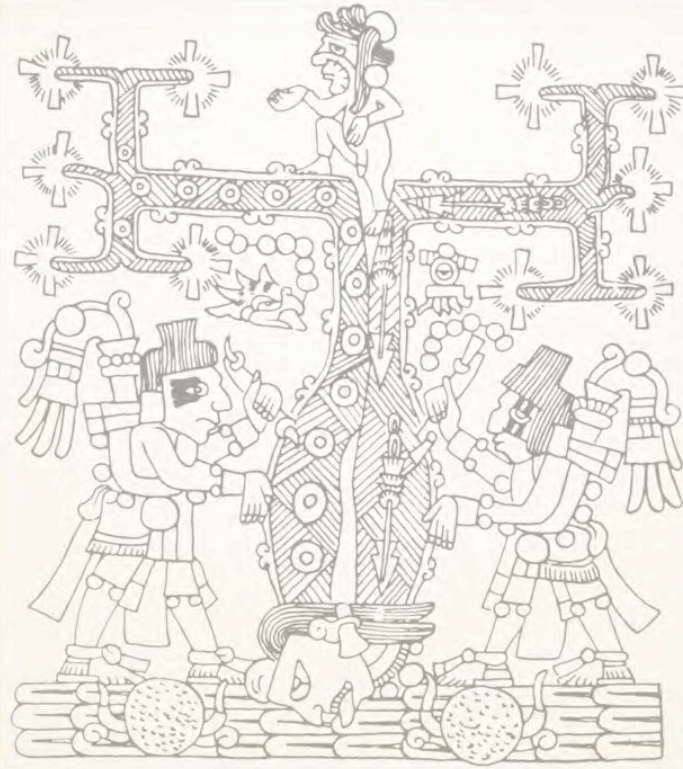
Ramesses II in the Ished Tree, Temple of Derr, 13th century BCE
(http://alain.guilleux.free.fr/derr/lac_nasser_temple_derr.html)

The image of the guilty parties, Adam and Eve, figuratively being shut up in a tree can be best understood when compared with Egyptian motifs, such as the one evoked by the figure of Ramesses II acting in the role of Osiris, as shown above.²⁶ Nibley also mentions “*Book of the Dead* vignettes showing the Lady incorporated—all but her upper part, and in many cases all but her arms only—in the fruit-bearing tree [suggesting] that the woman *in* the tree must actually have been eaten *by* it; she is the first victim, so to speak, and now invites her male companion to share her condition.”²⁷

Happily, the condition of “death” suggested by the symbolism of captivity in the tree is only temporary. In ancient year-rites in Egypt, the eventual splitting of the tree “both terminates life and liberates it,” allowing the captive initiate to be reborn.²⁸ The splitting of the tree also is also said by Hugh Nibley to represent, “among other things, the ‘splitting of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’” or the law of opposites.”²⁹



Such images of death and resurrection recall al-Tha'labi's version of the story of the martyrdom of Isaiah: "When their prophet Isaiah finished his speech, they came after him to kill him and he fled from them. A tree met him and split itself open for him and he entered it. The Devil came upon him and seized a fringe of his garment and showed it to them, so they took saws in its middle and sawed it until they cut it and cut him while he was in the midst."³⁰ Isaiah's death in the split tree was immediately followed by his rebirth and ascension to heaven.³¹ Similar stories about Isaiah are found in Christian sources. See, for example, the illustrations from the *Roda Bible* shown above.



Man Emerging from a Split Tree Trunk, *Codex Vindobonensis*, sixteenth century

Intriguingly, this same motif appears in the New World. For instance, Garth Norman notes that the “‘broken tree trunk’ symbol” is connected with the explanation of the origin of some tribes, including the Mixtecas.³² This idea can be seen in a “Tamoanchan pictograph or hieroglyph depicting a man emerging from a split tree trunk in symbolic birth.” The “tree of the Mixtec codices is a Tree of Life or World Tree extending above and below this earth, but principally a ‘tree of the heavens’ in Omeyocan guarded by the creator couple where it gives birth to humanity. It can be stated simply that in ancient Mexico the broken tree represents a birth, death, or migratory transition for man.”³³



All these stories might be taken as suggesting that Adam and Eve’s passage through mortal life provided an opportunity for eventual rebirth and return to God’s presence by means of the same tree that originally brought them death. In a speculative mood, we might see such a theme as being represented in the portion of the funerary papyrus of Nakht shown in above,³⁴ where the guide Anubis, the “guardian of the gateway,”³⁵ is shown “leading the deceased into the presence of Osiris where he will assist in the ceremony of the weighing of the heart”³⁶ in afterlife judgment. Here, they approach a tree that stands before the “false door,” representing the entrance to the “Other World.”³⁷ To reach that door, they must pass by a tree, a symbol that is frequently associated, like the door itself, with the “horizon,” the meeting place between heaven and earth.

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Endnotes

1 E. A. S. Butterworth, *Tree*, pp. 74-75; cf. Genesis 21:19; Numbers 24:3-4; 2 Kings 6:17-20. See also Butterworth's discussion of 1 Samuel 14:24-30 where the honey is compared to the "secret knowledge" of the seer (E. A. S. Butterworth, *Tree*, p. 78).

2 Moses 4:13.

3 2 Nephi 9:14; cf. Mormon 9:4-5. See also D. E. Bokovoy *et al.*, *Testaments*, pp. 61-65; J. R. Holland, *Christ*, pp. 244-245.

4 H. W. Nibley, *Patriarchy*, pp. 92-93.

5 R. Alter, *David*, p. 251; cf. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 75.

6 R. Coles, *Secular Mind*, p. 12.

7 M. B. Brown, *Girded*, p. 130.

8 Moses 2:28.

9 W. Smith *et al.*, *Dictionary*, 2:1307. The image also appears in M. B. Brown, *Girded*, p. 137.

10 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. Cf. Adam and Eve as "saplings" destined to become "cedars of Lebanon" in D. C. Matt, *Zohar 1, Be-Reshit*, 1:35a-b, pp. 220-222.

11 See, e.g., D. E. Wirth, *Parallels*, p. 106 and pp. 109-110, Figures 6.23, 6.24.

12 Moses 4:12.

13 Genesis 11:1-9.

14 Genesis 16:1-4.

15 Genesis 27:1-40.

16 J. H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, p. 61.

17 2 Corinthians 11:12-15; 2 Nephi 9:9; D&C 128:20, 129:4-7; R. Giorgi, *Anges*, pp. 85-88, see also p. 234; B. T. Ostler, *Clothed*, p. 6; J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 1 April 1842, pp. 204-205.

18 D. C. Matt, *Zohar 1*, *Be-Reshit* 1:36b, p. 229, 1:53b, pp. 296-297, p. 229 nn. 990-991, and p. 297 n. 1433.

19 Cf. 2 Nephi 32:8.

20 J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 5 October 1840, p. 169 and 22 January 1834, p. 58.

21 M. B. Brown, *Girded*, p. 145. See Matthew 7:15; 3 Nephi 14:15; cf. Zechariah 13:4.

22 Moses 4:14.

23 = “au milieu de l’arbre du jardin” (A. Chouraqui, *Bible*, p. 22); cf. J. N. Sparks *et al.*, *Orthodox Study Bible*, p. 8; R. M. Zlotowitz *et al.*, *Bereishis*, p. 123. An Islamic tradition also relates that: “Adam went inside of the tree to hide” (Wahab b. Munabbih in B. M. Wheeler, *Prophets*, p. 25).

24 E. Kastler, *Commentaire*. See also the story of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:10-28). For literary parallels to the motif of a soul being shut up in a tree, see e.g., Ariel in *The Tempest* (W. Shakespeare, *Tempest*, 1:2:275-293, p. 1615), Fradubio in *The Faerie Queene* (E. Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, 1:2:42, see n. Stanza 42, 8-9, p. 52), Polydorus in the *Aeneid* (Virgil, *Aeneid*, 3, pp. 70-71), and Pier delle Vigne in the forest of suicides in the *Divine Comedy* (D. Alighieri, *Commedia*, 13). Similar themes appear in stories about Osiris, Adonis, Attis, and Dionysus (see convenient summaries in, e.g., J. G. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, though Frazer’s inferences are not always to be trusted). See also D. E. Wirth, *Parallels*, p. 105.

²⁵ Perhaps the symbolism of death and rebirth is behind an enigmatic assertion in the *Sepher Rezial*. After stating that “Adam and his wife are concealed in the middle of the tree in the garden,” the text adds: “It is not a cemetery” (S. Savedow, *Rezial*, In the beginning, para. 7, p. 63).

26 A. Guilleux, *Temple de Derr*.

27 H. W. Nibley, *Message* 2005, p. 309.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 289, see also pp. 288-293.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

30 A. I. A. I. M. I. I. al-Tha'labi, *Lives*, p. 557 and p. 557 n. 15; cf. M. A. Knibb, *Isaiah*, 5:1-14, pp. 163-164 and pp. 146-147.

31 M. A. Knibb, *Isaiah*, 6:1-11:43, pp. 164-176.

32 Michel Graulich summarizes Mesoamerican stories of Creation and the original transgression (M. Graulich, *Myths*, p. 53; cf. D. E. Wirth, *Guide*, pp. 47-49). Frequently appearing elements of these stories include the idea of a seducer and a guilty party; a transgression involving the eating or cutting of branches, flowers, or fruit; an expulsion to the earth or the underworld; and the consequent introduction of evils, misfortunes, or discord (M. Graulich, *Myths*, p. 55). Graulich laments the fact that “modern authors, attributing these myths to Christian influence, often dismiss Mesoamerican allusions to the original paradise and to transgression even though they are very well documented” (M. Graulich, *Myths*, pp. 284-285 n. 21). Of course, the ancient sources are diverse and complex, and many gods and goddesses of Mesoamerica overlap one another—the different names constituting a particular aspect of that god. For this reason, the opinions of scholars may vary widely, and brief summaries cannot really do the subject full justice. For additional discussion, see J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, pp. 697-701, 782-783.

33 V. G. Norman, *Izapa Part 2*, p. 202, also cited in B. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:168.

34 R. O. Faulkner *et al.*, *Book of the Dead*, pp. 8, 9, 112-113.

35 J. Assman, *Death*, p. 335.

36 R. H. Wilkinson, *Art*, p. 65.

37 Serving a different symbolic function than the tree above, an analogue to the Tree of Life was often planted near ancient gravesites. Nibley writes: “At least from the beginning of the New Kingdom, every major city in Egypt had a tomb of Osiris that was sheltered by a tree, which was represented as the cedar of Byblos sheltering the coffin of Osiris in that city... From the long *Book of Breathings*, we learn that there was a cave beneath the *ished*-tree. According to the well-known legend, Osiris was actually shut up in the cedar tree and had to be liberated from it in order to be resurrected. Joseph’s grave was an *Urhügel* at Shechem, sheltered by a tree, in Egyptian fashion” (H. W. Nibley, *Message* 2005, p. 290).

A palm tree stands above “Adam’s grave” at Machpelah (N. Arnon, *Machpela*, p. 213), and is also depicted in the decoration of a twelfth-century altar as standing near Jesus’ tomb (G. R. Murphy, *Gemstone*, p. 25). Here, the Tree of Life may have represented victory over death and the final reward of the righteous deceased rather than the transition from earth to heaven symbolized by the tree from the funerary papyrus of Nakht.