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Tree of Life, Tree of Healing

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TREE OF LIFE, TREE OF HEALING

John Tvedtnes

Abstract: *The late Hebrew scholar John Tvedtnes takes readers on a grand tour of Jewish and Christian stories and traditions that attest to the Tree of Life as not only a means to prolong life, but also to impart a healing power to individuals and to the earth itself. In a future day, it is said that the Saints will eat of its sweet fruit forever.*

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See John Tvedtnes, “Tree of Life, Tree of Healing,” in *“To Seek the Law of the Lord”: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 495–520. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-see-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/>.]

This is a tree which is a Tree of Life, And a Vine, a Vine of Life!
Satisfying (fare) that is superior to all means of healing is that
which thou hast brought, revealed and given to these souls!
(*Mandaean Prayerbook* 375)¹

The tree of life appears in both the first and last books of the Christian Bible. In the Genesis account, God removes Adam and Eve from the garden so they cannot eat the fruit of the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–24). In the book of Revelation, the tree’s fruit becomes available in the last days

¹ E. S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 269–70.

to all who obey the Lord (Rev. 2:7; 22:14). Both texts declare that the tree is “in the midst [middle] of the garden” (Gen. 2:9) or “in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

Genesis 3:22 recounts how the first couple, after eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, became like God in being able to distinguish good and evil, and that, had they been able to eat the fruit of the tree of life, they would also have become immortal.² This is the earliest biblical mention of the tree as a means of prolonging life. The last such reference is in Revelation 22:1–2, where John describes the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, noting that “In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2) and that its presence on earth would abolish death and pain (Rev. 21:4). This healing power is the subject of this paper.

Adam’s Illness

The pseudepigraphic *Gospel of Nicodemus* 3 (19) notes that, when Adam was on his deathbed, he sent his son Seth to procure oil from the tree of life with which to anoint him that he might “arise from his sickness.”³ An angel appeared to Seth and asked him, “Do you desire, because of the sickness of your father, the oil that raises up the sick, or the tree from which flows such oil?” He told Seth to go to his father and tell him “that after the completion of 5,500 years from the creation of the world, the only-begotten Son of God shall become man and shall descend below the earth. And he shall anoint him with that oil [from the garden of Eden]. And he shall arise and wash him and his descendants with water and the Holy Spirit.”⁴ One Latin version of the story has the angel telling Seth that “thy father Adam will not receive of this oil of compassion now, but after many generations of time. For the most beloved Son of God will come down from heaven into the world, and will be baptized by John in the river Jordan; and then shall thy father Adam receive of this oil of compassion, and all that believe in him.”⁵

2 See also Alma 12:21–26; 42:2–6.

3 This passage suggests that the tree of life is an olive tree; other sources identify it with the almond tree, the fig tree, and even the grapevine.

4 Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., trans. R. McL. Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha* (2nd ed., Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 1:522–23.

5 Latin second version, 4, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Anti-Nicene Fathers* (reprint Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 8:456.

Two other pseudepigraphic texts (*Life of Adam and Eve and Apocalypse of Moses*) recount this story. They declare that, when Adam fell ill just days before dying, his son Seth proposed that he (Seth) should beg God to give him fruit from the garden with which to heal his father. Adam told him to ask for the “oil of life,” also termed the “oil of mercy.” As in the Nicodemus account, an angel refuses to grant his request, but promises that the oil will be made available to mortals at a future time (*Life of Adam and Eve* 31, 36, 40–43, and *Apocalypse of Moses* 6, 9, 13).⁶ Another Jewish tradition holds that the righteous will be given the “oil of life” at the resurrection.⁷

Other treatments of this oil broaden our view of its character. Speaking of Christ—whose Greek title means (as also the Hebrew meaning underlying the term Messiah) “anointed one”—*Recognitions of Clement* 1.45.5 declares, “Him first God anointed with oil which was taken from the wood of the tree of life: from that anointing therefore He is called Christ. Thence, moreover, He Himself also, according to the appointment of His Father, anoints with similar oil every one of the pious when they come to His kingdom, for their refreshment after their labors, as having got over the difficulties of the way; so that their light may shine, and being filled with the Holy Spirit, they may be endowed with immortality.”⁸

In his vision, the prophet Zechariah saw a menorah (lampstand)⁹ like the one used in the tabernacle of Moses¹⁰ and the temple of Solomon.¹¹ It was flanked by two olive trees that fed their oil into the lamps and which represented “the two anointed ones, that stand by the Lord of the whole

6 James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 2:270–75.

7 Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937) 1:94.

8 Roberts and Donaldson, *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 8:89. The shining light concept derives from the fact that olive oil was used in oil lamps in the time of Christ. In early Christianity, anointing with oil was tied to anointing by the Holy Ghost. See the author’s article “Olive Oil: Symbol of the Holy Ghost,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob* 5, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1994).

9 The King James Version of the Bible unfortunately uses the anachronistic term *candlestick*. The lampstand burned olive oil, candles not yet having been invented.

10 Exod. 25:31–35; 35:14; 37:17–23; 39:37; 40:4, 24–25; Lev. 24:4; Num. 3:31; 4:9; 8:1–4. Like the burning bush from which the Lord spoke to Moses (Exod. 3:1–4), the *menorah* is topped with flames.

11 1 Chron. 28:15; 2 Chron. 13:11. For the seven-branched *menorah* in the heavenly temple, see Rev. 1:12–13, 20; 2:1.

earth” (Zech. 4:1–3, 11–14).¹² The seven-branched menorah, as studies have shown, represents the tree of life.¹³

Noah and the Healing Trees

The Bible mentions one instance of healing by means of a tree, when the prophet Isaiah instructed the servants of Hezekiah, king of Judah, to prepare a poultice of figs to cover a boil that threatened his life (2 Kings 20:7; Isa. 38:21). In this connection, Methodius, bishop of Olympos (died ca. AD 311), identifying Christ with the vine (cf. John 15:1–6) and the Holy Spirit with the fig tree, held that Hezekiah was symbolically told to rely on the Spirit in order to be healed (*Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 10.5).¹⁴

Another early church father, Gregory of Nyssa (died after AD 385), argued that since only one of the trees in the garden of Eden was forbidden to Adam and Eve, the tree of life represents all trees bearing edible fruit. That is, every tree that sustains life is part of the tree of life (*On the Making of Man* 19.2–3).¹⁵ In a related vein, Jewish tradition holds that the healing qualities of various trees were made known to Noah and his predecessors by either the fallen angels (*1 Enoch* 7:1) or angels sent by God. Recension A of the medieval *Book of Noah* declares:¹⁶

12 The term “anointed ones” denotes Messiahs and may be the source of the idea of two Messiahs, one of Aaron and one of Israel/Judah in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and of Judah and Joseph in later Jewish tradition. In Rev. 11:3–4, two “candlesticks” and two olive trees represent the two latter-day prophets who will be killed in Jerusalem and raised up again. See D&C 77:15.

13 See, for example, Zofja Ameisenowa and W. F. Mainland, “The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography,” *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2, no. 4 (April 1939): 326–45; Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971); Simo Parpola, “The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philo,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52, no. 3 (July 1993): 161–208; Joan E. Taylor, “The Asherah, the Menorah and the Sacred Tree,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 20, no. 66 (1995): 29–54.

14 The Talmud gives a recipe for “blood rushing to the head,” mixing leaves from willow, myrtle, olive, poplar, rosemary, and two uncertain ingredients called *shurbina* and *yabla* (Tob. *Gittin* 68a).

15 This view does not account for the fact that, at the time he expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, the Lord placed cherubim to ensure that they could not eat its fruit (Gen. 3:22–24; Alma 12:21; 42:2–3; Moses 4:28–31).

16 Three recensions of the Hebrew *Book of Noah* were published in Amsterdam in 1854 by Adolph Jellinek in volume three of his six-volume *Bet ha-Midrash*, reprinted in two-volumes in 1967 by Wahrman in Jerusalem. The English translation used here is my own.

And he [God] sent an angel, one of the angels of the Presence¹⁷ from among the holy ones, named Raphael,¹⁸ to restrain the outcast spirits beneath the heavens to no longer destroy the children of Adam.¹⁹ And the angel did so and he locked them up in the house of judgment.²⁰ Only one of ten remained²¹ to

17 In Jewish tradition, there are either four or seven “angels of the Presence” who, unlike the other angels, stand in God’s presence. The term ‘presence’ is found in Isa. 63:9; Abr. 1:15; D&C 133:53; cf. Luke 1:19; 2 Ne. 9:8; D&C 76:25; Moses 5:58. These are the archangels, among whom Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel are almost always included in the lists found in early Jewish texts. Of these four, only Uriel is not named in D&C 128:21.

18 Raphael means “God heals” or “healer of God.” In Jewish tradition, he is the angel charged with healing the sick.

19 Cf. *Tobit* 6:1–8; 8:1–9; 11:1–15, where we read that the angel Raphael instructed Tobias to prepare a medication from the liver of a fish, which he used to drive away an evil spirit, then used the fish’s gall to heal his blind father Tobit. The medieval *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* 23:1–3 places the binding of the evil spirits prior to the flood, writing of the “demons, spirits, and imps in thousands and myriads, and whomever they lighted upon they injured and killed outright, until Methuselah appeared and besought the mercy of God. After fasting for three days, God gave him permission to write the ineffable name of God upon (his sword?), through which he slew ninety-four myriads of them in a minute, until Agrimus [the elder of the demons]...came to him and entreated him (to stop); he then handed over to him the names of the demons and imps. And so he placed their kings in iron fetters, while the remainder fled away and hid themselves in the innermost chambers and recesses of the ocean.” Moses Gaster, *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (reprint, New York: Ktav, 1971), 49.

20 A number of early texts suggest that the fallen angels were imprisoned until the day of judgment. See 1 *Enoch* 6–10, portions of which are cited in the New Testament epistle of Jude (verses 6, 14–15). The apostle Peter wrote of the imprisoned spirits who had been disobedient in the time of Noah (1 Pet. 3:19–20). The Arab chronographer Jacfar Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari (AD 839–923) wrote of one Oshahanj (whom he identified with Noah’s ancestor Mahalaleel), saying that “he subdued Iblis [the devil] and his armies and forbade them to mix with human beings. Writing a document on a white sheet, he imposed covenants upon them enjoining them not to confront any human being. He threatened them in case they did. He killed the rebels among them and a number of *ghūls*. Fearing him they fled into deserts, mountains, and [river] valleys.” Franz Rosenthal, trans., *The History of al-Tabari, vol. 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 342. The concept of evil spirits living in deserts and other desolate places is widespread in ancient and medieval lore and is also found in the Bible.

21 *Pistis Sophia* 15–16 speaks of the angels who transgressed and mutinied against God, bringing sorceries to mankind, and notes that Christ took away a third of their power. This evidently refers to the third of the host of heaven who fell with Satan, as described in Revelation 12:4. In a variant tradition, it is Methuselah who placed the kings of the demons born to Adam and his first wife Lilith (unknown from the Bible) in iron fetters, while the rest went into hiding in the ocean (*Chronicles of Jerahmeel* 23:3). The binding of the fallen angels with chains is also mentioned in 1 *Enoch* 53:3–5;

walk about in the earth before prince Mastemah,²² to chastise among them the wicked, to strike and to afflict them with all sorts of afflictions and illnesses and to inflict pains. And [concerning] the cures of the ills of the children of Adam and all types of cures, the angel said to heal with the trees of the earth and the plants of the ground and its roots. And, moreover, he sent the princes of the spirits to show to Noah and to tell him the trees of healing with all their grasses and their vegetation and their herbs and their roots and their seeds, why they were created, and to teach him all the things of their cures for healing and for life. (*Book of Noah*, Recension A)²³

This medical knowledge was transmitted in books. Recension A of the *Book of Noah* describes a book of cures possessed by Noah, while Recension C indicates that he had a book passed down from Enoch that contained other scientific information, notably about astronomy. It was

54:1–6; 56:1–4; 69:28 and 2 *Baruch* 56:12–15. According to 2 Enoch 7:1–4, the fallen angels are kept under guard and are tormented. In the *Gospel of Bartholomew* 4:12 (cf. 1:20), Beliar (from Belial, a name often given to the devil in early Jewish and Christian documents) is kept in fiery chains, guarded by a large number of angels. The account is repeated in book 8 of the *Apostolic History of Abdias*. Jude wrote that “the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he [God] hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day” (Jude 1:6). He further spoke of the “wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever” (Jude 1:13), followed by a quote attributed to Enoch (Jude 1:13–15). The seven “fallen stars” or “evil angels” that had sinned and had been imprisoned are mentioned in 1 *Enoch* 18:13–18; 21:1–6; 86:1–89:9; 90:20–27. The chains with which they were bound are mentioned in 1 *Enoch* 88:1–3. Peter also wrote that “God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; and spared not the old world, but saved Noah...bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly” (2 Pet. 2:4–5). In his vision, Enoch saw angels preparing chains for Satan and angels of punishment holding nets of iron and bronze (1 *Enoch* 53:3–5). Peter may have taken the idea from Enoch, for the Enoch story in Moses 7:57 is worded very much like 1 Peter 2:4–5. For chains and the lake of fire and brimstone, see Alma 12:17.

22 Mastemah (“enmity”) is one of the names of the devil in ancient Jewish texts. In this passage, Mastemah is preceded by the article, giving us “the prince of enmity.” The Book of Mormon calls the devil “the enemy of all righteousness” (Mosiah 4:14; Alma 34:23; Moro. 9:6).

23 Just before this, the text speaks of Raphael: “And he sent an angel, one of the angels of the Presence from among the holy ones, named Raphael, to restrain the outcast spirits beneath the heavens to no longer destroy the children of Adam. And the angel did so and he locked them up in the house of judgment. Only one of ten remained to walk about in the earth before prince Mastemah, to chastise among them the wicked to strike and to afflict them with all sorts of afflictions and illnesses and to inflict pains.”

Gregory Abu-l Faraj, a thirteenth-century Jewish convert to Christianity, also known as Bar Hebraeus, who wrote in his chronography that “Enoch made manifest before every man the knowledge of books and the art of writing.” He especially tied Enoch to medical knowledge by making him the teacher of Asclepius,²⁴ who was noted in Greek mythology for his healing powers. He further noted that Enoch, called Hermes Trismegistos²⁵ by the Greeks, “invented the science of the constellations and the courses (orbits?) of the stars” and “rejected the foods [which produced] impurities and drunkenness.”²⁶

Returning to Recension A of the *Book of Noah*, we read that “the knowledge of healing increased in the earth, in all the nations that examined the books of healing, among the sages of India and the sages of Macedonia and the sages of Egypt, for the sages of India roved to find all the trees of medicine and spices.”²⁷ But God seems to have wanted the tree(s) of life to remain unrevealed until a later time, as indicated in the book of Revelation. The Noah account says:

And their wisdom increased until there arose Asclepinos,²⁸ one of the sages of Macedonia and forty men with him of the magicians learned in the ancient books and they went in the land and they traversed from beyond India to the land east of Eden to find some of the trees of life in order to magnify their glory among the sages of the land. And when they came to that place and they found the trees of medicine and trees of the tree of life, they put forth their hand to take them. And the Lord shone on them the revolving sword blade²⁹ and they

24 Aesculapius in his text.

25 Trismaghistos in his text.

26 Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Chronography of Gregory Abu'l Faraj* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 5.

27 The diseases that afflict people vary widely from one region to another and hence one would expect that the cures also vary. Thus, in the Book of Mormon we read, “And there were some who died with fevers, which at some seasons of the year were very frequent in the land—but not so much so with fevers, because of the excellent qualities of the many plants and roots which God had prepared to remove the cause of diseases, to which men were subject by the nature of the climate” (Alma 46:40). Among modern medicines derived from trees are quinine (for Malaria) and aspirin (from the bark of the Yew tree).

28 This is Asclepius, a hero from Greek mythology who later become the god of medicine and healing.

29 The cherubim who guarded the east entrance of the garden of Eden had a revolving flaming sword (Gen. 3:24).

all glowed with sparks of lightning³⁰ and not one man of them escaped. (*Book of Noah*, Recension A)

Ancient Babylonian tradition also ties the flood survivor, Utnapishtim (“he who lived/survived”) to a remarkable plant that was capable of renewing youth. He informed Gilgamesh about it, who got the plant, and then placed it on a rock while he bathed in water, whence the serpent stole it. Whether connected to this story or not, in many ancient traditions, the serpent is said to possess eternal life,³¹ and has been identified as both Christ and the devil in various passages of scripture.

Ephrem of Syria, a Christian writer of the fourth century AD, frequently drew upon biblical imagery for the religious hymns he composed.³² One of his favorite topics was Noah and the flood. He compared the Christian Church with the ark and the tide of worldly sin with the waters of the flood and compared the olive branch brought back to the ark by the dove (Gen. 8:11) with the concept of a healing plant. The first of his *Nisbene Hymns* reads,

In the ark Thou didst save a remnant; save in me, O Lord, yea in me a leaven. The ark upon the mountain brought forth; let me in my hands bring forth my imprisoned ones! O Lord, gladden Thou in me the imprisoned ones of my fortresses, Thou Who didst gladden those prisoners with the olive leaf! Thou sentest healing by means of the dove to the sick ones that were drowning in every wave; it entered in and drove out all their pains. For the joy of it swallowed up their sorrow, and mourning vanished away in its consolation. And as the chief of a host gives heartening to the fugitives, so the dove disseminated courage among the forsaken. Their eyes tasted the sight of peace, and their mouth hastened to open in Thy praise. As the olive leaf in the waves, save Thou me, that Thou mayest gladden in me the prisoners of my fortresses! (*Nisbene Hymns* 1:6–7)³³

30 Lightning is also mentioned in Recension C of the *Book of Noah*.

31 Sir James George Frazer collected numerous accounts from around the world in volume 1 (of 3) of his 1919 book *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*.

32 For a discussion, see Trygve Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Universitet, 1978), *Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series* 11.

33 Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 13:168. A number of texts dealing with the flood consider Noah and his families to be prisoners in the ark.

Bearing in mind the healing ability of the leaves of the tree of life as described in Revelation 22:2, it is likely that Ephrem was suggesting that the olive branch brought by the dove to Noah's ark was from the tree of life, which brings healing and wholeness.³⁴ An unknown bishop of the early Church³⁵ used similar imagery in his *Treatise Against the Heretic Novatian*:

When, therefore, these so many and such malignant spirits are attacking and bestirring themselves for the destruction of the lapsed, a way of salvation is provided for the wounded, that with whatever strength they have they may drag themselves with their whole body, and betake themselves to their camp, wherein being received, they may heal their wounds with spiritual medicaments. Thus the dove received, after the intervention of a few days, is again sent forth from the ark; and returning, not only shows its firm footsteps, but moreover the signs of its peace and victory, in those olive leaves which it bore in its mouth. (*A Treatise Against the Heretic Novatian* 6)³⁶

The anonymous author seems to have been acquainted with the events depicted in Recension A of the *Book of Noah*, which attributes the diseases of Noah's offspring to evil spirits³⁷ and describes the use of trees as a means of curing them.³⁸

The Christian use of olive oil to bless and cure the sick is first mentioned in Mark 6:13: "they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them."³⁹ And subsequently described

34 A number of early texts indicate that the tree of life was the olive tree. See Tvedtnes, "Olive Oil: Symbol of the Holy Ghost," 427–59.

35 Novation, against whose teachings the document is addressed, lived in Rome AD 210–280.

36 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:659.

37 The New Testament also identifies evil spirits as the cause of various physical afflictions (see, for example, Matt. 8:16–17; 10:1, 8; Mark 1:32–34; 3:15; 6:13; Luke 6:18–19; 8:35–36; 9:1; 13:32; Acts 5:16; 8:7).

38 We may compare the oil to the balm of Gilead of which the prophet Jeremiah wrote as a medicine to recover health (Jer. 8:22; 46:11; 51:8). The balm of Gilead was one of the commodities taken to Egypt by the caravaneers who acquired Joseph and sold him as a slave (Gen. 37:25). Jerome wrote that "the Ishmaelitish merchantmen bring down to the Egyptians perfume and incense and balm (of the kind that grows in Gilead good for the healing of wounds)," *Letter 79* to Salvina, 3, in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 6:164.

39 In Luke 10:34, the good Samaritan pours wine and oil on the wounds of the man he rescued.

in the epistle of James: “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him” (James 5:14–15).⁴⁰ In Roman Catholicism, the practice became especially important in the “extreme unction,” whereby a dying person is anointed not for healing, but for forgiveness of sins at the time of death. The concept is also found in the Latter-day Saint practice of anointing and blessing the sick: “whosoever among you are sick, and have not faith to be healed, but believe, shall be nourished with all tenderness, with herbs and mild food, and that not by the hand of an enemy. And the elders of the church, two or more, shall be called, and shall pray for and lay their hands upon them in my name; and if they die they shall die unto me, and if they live they shall live unto me” (D&C 42:43–33).

Living Waters

The tree of life is frequently associated with water, which also possesses healing qualities. John’s vision of the new Jerusalem, with “a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb” and “on either side of the river...the tree of life” with its healing leaves (Rev. 22:1–2) seems to be patterned on Ezekiel’s vision of water flowing from the latter-day temple (which the Lord identifies as his throne in Ezek. 43:7), becoming a river and, “at the bank of the river were very many trees on the one side and on the other” (Ezek. 47:1–7). Each vision is presented by an angel who measures either the temple (Ezek. chapters 40–47) or the city that replaces the temple (Rev. 21:15–17).

40 Because of this passage, olive oil came to be associated with baptism and in early Christianity, baptism in water was followed by anointing with oil. Hugh Nibley has suggested that this was a reflection of the ancient temple initiation, i.e., washing and anointing. See his “Christian Envy of the Temple,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 50 (1959–60): 97–123, 229–240, reprinted in Nibley, *When the Lights Went Out* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1970), 55–88 and in Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: FARMS and Deseret, 1987), 391–434. In the early days of the Latter-day Saints, baptism sometimes replaced anointing and prayer as a remedy for illness as well as a means of forgiveness of sins. For example, Joseph Smith recorded, “My dear Emma was worse. Many fears were entertained that she would not recover. She was baptized twice in the river, which evidently did her much good. She grew worse again at night, and continued very sick indeed. I was unwell, and much troubled on account of Emma’s sickness” (*History of the Church* 5:167). Latter-day Saints see baptism as a sign of faith in Christ and repentance of one’s sins, baptism representing forgiveness of those sins, which is demonstrated by Christ healing people by saying, “Thy sins be forgiven thee” (e.g., Matt. 9:2–5).

Revelation 22:2 declares that “the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations,” while Ezekiel 47:12 says that “by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine.”

In Ezekiel’s vision, water has healing qualities. The angel informs him “These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed” (Ezek. 47:8). The sea east of Jerusalem is, of course, the Dead Sea, which today supports no life. At the time of its healing, the angel reported, “every thing that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live” and fish will inhabit the river and the sea (Ezek. 47:9–10).⁴¹

Zechariah’s vision of the future Jerusalem bears affinities with that of Ezekiel.⁴² Zechariah 14:8 says that “living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former [Dead] sea, and half of them toward the hinder [Mediterranean] sea: in summer and in winter shall it be.” Ezekiel’s description is more precise, saying that the “waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward: for the forefront of the house stood toward the east, and the waters came down from under from the right side of the house, at the south side of the altar” (Ezek. 47:1). Similarly, Joel 3:18 notes that “a fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim.”⁴³

The pseudepigraphic *Apocalypse [Revelation] of Paul* 22, patterned after John’s vision of the New Jerusalem, describes Paul’s vision of an unusual river and its associated trees:

And I looked round that land and I saw a river flowing with milk and honey; and at the edge of the river were planted trees full of fruit. And each tree was bearing twelve times twelve fruits in the year, various and different...And after that he

41 For a discussion of the healing of the Dead Sea, see the author’s, “Science and Genesis,” in *Science and Religion: Towards a New Dialogue*, vol. 2, Wilford M. Hess and Raymond T. Matheny, eds., (Geneva, IL: Paladin House, 1979).

42 Both Zechariah and John wrote that there would be no nighttime in Jerusalem when the Lord comes to reign (Rev. 21:23–25; 22:5; Zech. 14:6–7).

43. Shittim was situated near the Moabites, who lived across the Dead Sea from the land of Israel (Num. 25:1). It was from here that Joshua sent the two spies to Jericho (Josh. 2:1). See also Josh.3:1 and Micah 6:5.

took me up away from the place where I had seen these things and, behold, a river whose waters were very white, whiter than milk. And I said to the angel: What is this? And he said to me: This is Lake Acherusia where the city of Christ is.⁴⁴

Although it is true that “living waters” (Hebrew *mayim hayyim*) typically denotes running water (as opposed to stagnant), in these passages, the water is the source of healing, bringing life everywhere it flows, and is clearly associated with trees whose leaves and fruit also bring healing. As noted, Jewish tradition holds that the tree of life is the source of water for the earth,⁴⁵ evidently an attempt to explain the ability of water to support life, which resembles the early Christian tradition that held that the efficacy of baptism in water was because Jesus had been baptized therein.⁴⁶

Baptism, of course, washes away one’s sins. John the Baptist invited those coming to be baptized by him to “bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:8), thus again tying baptism to a fruit tree. Similarly, Jesus compared his “baptism” to the cup of wine drunk at the last supper and to his blood.⁴⁷

Introducing another aspect, the Christian Ethiopic text known as *The Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan*, holds that Adam, after being expelled from the garden, prayed that God would allow him access to “the Water of Life that I may drink of it and live” (*Conflict of Adam and Eve* I, 41.12), identifying it with “the water that flowed from under the Tree of Life” (*Conflict of Adam and Eve* I, 41.10). The premortal Christ replied, “as regards the Water of Life thou seekest, it will not be granted thee this day; but on the day that I shall shed My blood upon thy head in

44 Hennecke and Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:726. The Acherusian lake, which figures in some early Christian texts (e.g., *Gospel of Bartholomew* and *Apocalypse of Peter*) as the place where the resurrected dead are baptized prior to ascending to heaven. See the discussion in the author’s “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).

45 Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:70. Later tradition holds that the tree of life derives its powers from the water (*Zohar* Leviticus 34a–34b).

46 The tradition is most prominent among early Syrian writers, such as Ephraim. Salminius Hermias Sozomen (died ca. 448) wrote of a tree named Persis in the Egyptian city of Hermopolis, of which the branches, bark, and leaves could heal diseases. It gained this power when Jesus, as a young child, was brought to the place by Mary and Joseph, who were fleeing King Herod. (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.21).

47 Matt. 20:22–23/Mark 10:38–39; 1 Cor. 11:5.

the land of Golgotha.⁴⁸ For My blood shall be the Water of Life to you at that time, and not to just you alone, but to all your descendants who shall believe in Me” (*Conflict of Adam and Eve* I, 42.5–8).⁴⁹

Like the water flowing from the tree of life in the garden, Christ is best known for his healing power. In effect, he replaces the tree and its waters. In Revelation 21:6, the risen Savior declares, “I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.” This idea is repeated in Revelation 22:17: “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” The passage obviously derives from Isaiah 55:1, “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” Jesus alluded to this passage in the temple during the feast of tabernacles, when prayers for rain were offered at the temple and when tree branches played a significant role in both the *sukkot* and the *lulav*.⁵⁰ “In the last day, that great day of the feast [of tabernacles], Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:37–38).

With the water of life often associated with the tree of life, it is interesting that Jesus declared himself to be the source of living water (John 4:10–14), the true vine (John 15:1–8), and the heavenly bread (John 6:27–35, 41), the latter two deriving from living plants. This may have been intended to demonstrate that he was the prophet promised by Moses (Deut. 18:15–19),⁵¹ in whose day the Israelites received miraculous manna from heaven (Exod. 16:11–35) and water from the rock (Exod.

48 Christian tradition holds that Christ was crucified atop the burial place of Adam and that his blood dripped down the cross and into the crypt, where it touched Adam’s skull. This is the explanation of the Semitic name Golgotha, which means “skull” (Matt. 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17). Luke 23:33 translates this name into its Greek equivalent, *kranion*. The name Calvary derives from the Latin word for “skull,” drawn from the Vulgate version of the Bible prepared in Latin by St. Jerome.

49 S. C. Malan, *The Book of Adam and Eve, also called The Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1882), 43–45.

50 The *sukkah* (the plural, *sukkot* gives its name to the festival) is a simple outdoor temporary dwelling with overhanging tree branches (Lev. 23:42–43; Neh. 8:14–17), while the *lulav* is the palm frond carried during the celebration of the feast. For an in-depth discussion of the festival, see the author’s article “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in *By Study and Also by Faith, Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 2, John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1990).

51 That Jesus was this promised prophet is affirmed in Acts 3:18–16; 7:37; 1 Ne. 22:20–21; 3 Ne. 20:23; 21:11, 20; JSH 1:40.

17:1–7; Num. 20:2–11) that Paul later identified with Jesus (1 Cor. 10:1–4). Likewise, John wrote that “the Lamb [Christ] which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters” (Rev. 7:17).⁵²

Continuing the water imagery, in John 5:2–9, we find that Jesus healed a man who, along with others seeking a cure, waited beside a pool believed to have healing power.⁵³ On another occasion, he sent a blind man to wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam (John 9:6–7). Long before, in the Old Testament, we see the Syrian leper Naaman being healed by following the prophet Elisha’s instructions to immerse himself seven times in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:1–14).

Christians rightly think of the waters of baptism as the source of spiritual healing. The apostle Paul compared baptism to the burial and resurrection of Christ, as well as being “planted” (Rom. 6:3–5; Col. 2:12).⁵⁴ From the Jewish side, *Zohar* Leviticus 97b declares that, prior to Israel’s receiving the Torah (law) on Mount Sinai, a dew descended from the “supernal holy waters” to purify the people, “That they might be worthy to be cleansed by the waters of that stream which is called ‘living waters’...When Israel drew near to Mount Sinai, that dew that descends from the supernal Point came down in its fulness and purified them so that their filth left them.”⁵⁵ The apostle Paul may have had this tradition in mind when he wrote, “Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:1–4).⁵⁶

52 Cf. Jer. 2:13 and 17:13, where the Lord declares himself to be “the fountain of living waters.”

53 Cf. the Roman Catholic pilgrimages to the spring at Lourdes, France, in search of healing.

54 One is also reminded of the description of the righteous person in Ps. 1:3: “And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”

55. Harry Sperling et al., *The Zohar* (New York: Rebecca Bennet Publications, 1958), 5:122.

56 The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi wrote of the path and rod of iron seen by his father in vision, saying that it “led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life, which waters are a representation of the love of God [and] that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God” (1 Ne. 11:25). Gen. 2:10 notes that the primordial river has its source in Eden, while later Jewish tradition claims that it flowed from beneath

Noah and the Cross

A number of early Christian Fathers believed that Noah's ark, made of wood like the cross, prefigured the Church, through which comes eternal life.⁵⁷ Augustine of Hippo wrote that the ark represented the church "which is rescued by the wood on which hung the Mediator of God and men," while the door placed in the side of the ark "signified the wound which was made when the side of the Crucified was pierced with the spear" (City of God 15.26).

Some early Christian writers went so far as to see the flood and the ark as symbols of Christ himself. In this, they follow the apostle Peter, who compared the flood to baptism (1 Pet. 3:20). Justin Martyr wrote, "For Christ, being the first-born of every creature, became again the chief of another race regenerated by Himself through water, and faith, and wood, containing the mystery of the cross; even as Noah was saved by wood when he rode over the waters with his household...I mean, that by water, faith, and wood, those who are afore-prepared, and who repent of the sins which they have committed, shall escape from the impending judgment of God" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 138).⁵⁸ Two centuries later, Augustine of Hippo declared "That Noah, with his family is saved by water and wood, as the family of Christ is saved by baptism, as representing the suffering of the cross" (*Reply to Faustus* 12.14).⁵⁹ Hippolytus, another early Christian scholar, continued the concern with the ark:

the ark was a symbol of the Christ who was expected. For that ark was the means of the salvation of Noah and his sons, and also of the cattle, the wild beasts, and the birds. And Christ, too, when He suffered on the cross, delivered us from accusation and sins, and washed us in His own blood most pure. And just as the ark returned to the east, and neared Mount Kardu, so also Christ, when the work was accomplished and finished

the tree of life itself. Throughout *The Zohar*, the tree of life is the Torah, but sometimes is only the right side of that tree. The first set of tablets are held to have been taken from the left side, the second from the right.

57 Cyprian (*Epistle* 74), Augustine of Hippo (*Tractate* 120 on John 19–20; *Against Faustus* 32), Jerome (*Letter* 15 to Pope Damasus; *Letter* 123 to Egeruchia), Ambrose (*Duties of the Clergy* 1.18.78), Hilary of Poitiers, (*Homilies on Psalms* [Psalm 1], 14).

58 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:268.

59 Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series (reprint, Peabody, Ma: Hendrickson), 4:188. The ark would be the cross of suffering, while baptism denotes the burial and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3–11; Col. 2:12–14).

which He had proposed to Himself, returned to heaven to the bosom of His Father, and sat down upon the throne of His glory at the Father's right hand. (*On the Pentateuch* Fragment V, On Genesis 8:1).⁶⁰

Cyril of Jerusalem compared the cross to the olive tree from which the dove brought a sprig to Noah:

Of this dove, the dove of Noe, according to some, was in part a figure. For as in his time by means of wood and of water there came salvation to themselves, and the beginning of a new generation, and the dove returned to him towards evening with an olive branch; thus, say they, the Holy Ghost also descended upon the true Noe, the Author of the second birth, who draws together into one the wills of all nations, of whom the various dispositions of the animals in the ark were a figure:—Him at whose coming the spiritual wolves feed with the lambs...The spiritual dove therefore, as some interpret, came down at the season of His baptism, that He might shew that it is He who by the wood of the Cross saves them who believe, He who at eventide should grant salvation through His death. (*Catechetical Lectures* 17.10)⁶¹

To these Christian thinkers, the wood of Noah's ark and the water on which it floated were sources of spiritual rescue from death.

The Tree and the Cross

For many Christians, the tree of life and the cross of Jesus coalesce. In a number of early texts, Jesus is himself said to be the tree of life.⁶² In other early texts, the cross is the tree of life, though it is often said to have been made of wood from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.⁶³ In *Book of the Rolls* f.94a–b, we read that “the tree was the Cross

60 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:198

61 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 7:126.

62 *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Similitudes* 8.3; Hippolytus, *On Proverbs* 10; Asterius, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:4-5; Methodius, *The Symposium of the Ten Virgins* 9; Bakhayla Mika'el (Zosimas), *The Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth*; Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata*). See the discussion in Jeanette W. Miller, “The Tree of Life, A Personification of Christ,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 93–106.

63 Various Jewish and Christian texts claim that the rod possessed by Adam and passed down to his offspring was a branch of the tree of life or the tree of knowledge.

which was planted in the middle of the earth...God planted the tree of life in the middle of Paradise and it was in the form of the cross which was stretched upon it, and it was the tree of life and salvation.”⁶⁴ In the second century, Justin Martyr wrote:

And from the sayings of Jeremiah they [the Jews] have cut out the following: “I [was] like a lamb that is brought to the slaughter: they devised a device against me, saying, Come, let us lay on wood on His bread, and let us blot Him out from the land of the living; and His name shall no more be remembered.” And since this passage from the sayings of Jeremiah is still written in some copies [of the Scriptures] in the synagogues of the Jews (for it is only a short time since they were cut out), and since from these words it is demonstrated that the Jews deliberated about the Christ Himself, to crucify and put him to death, He Himself is both declared to be led as a sheep to the slaughter, as was predicted by Isaiah,⁶⁵ and is here represented as a harmless lamb.” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 72)⁶⁶

The quote used by Justin is from the Septuagint version of Jeremiah 11:19.⁶⁷ Following Justin, Tertullian interpreted the “wood” as the cross and the “bread” as the body of Christ (*Against Marcion* 2.4.40).⁶⁸ Elsewhere, he noted that Christ bore the cross “on his shoulder” in fulfillment of the wood laid on the bread in Jeremiah’s prophecy (*An Answer to the Jews* 10). Both Justin (*First Apology* 41) and Tertullian (*An Answer to the Jews* 10) drew attention to the Septuagint reading of Psalm 95:10,⁶⁹ which includes wording they said was omitted by the Jews, “God reigned from the tree.” This, they claimed, was an allusion to Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. Tertullian again drew attention to the

With it, Moses called upon God to bring the plagues upon Egypt. Replanted, it grew into a tree that Joseph the carpenter used to make the cross on which his stepson Jesus was crucified. There are many variants in the accounts.

64 Margaret Dunlop Wilson, *Apocrypha Arabica* (London: C. J. Clay, 1901), 8.

65 Evidently an allusion to Isa. 53:7.

66 Roberts and Donaldson, *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 1:234–35.

67 The KJV reads, “But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be no more remembered.”

68 *Ibid.*, 3:418. See also Cyprian (died ca. AD 246), *Treatise* 12 2.15, 20.

69 Corresponding to Ps. 96:10 in the Hebrew and English Bibles.

fact that Christ bore the cross “on his shoulder,” thus placing the wood atop his body, as symbolized by the bread of the eucharist.⁷⁰

Turning to the creation account, *Cave of Treasures* fol. 6a col. 2 declares that “Eden is the Holy Church, and the Paradise which was in it is the land of rest, and the inheritance of life, which God hath prepared for all the holy children of men,”⁷¹ while fol. 7b col. 1 says “That Tree of Life which was in the midst of Paradise prefigured the Redeeming Cross, which is the veritable Tree of Life, and this it was that was fixed in the middle of the earth.”⁷²

Drawing on Revelation 22:2, the third century writer Victorinus explained that “The tree of life on either bank [of the river] sets forth the Advent of Christ, according to the flesh, who satisfied the peoples wasted with famine, that received life from One by the wood of the Cross, with the announcement of God’s word” (*Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*).⁷³ Reflecting a similar view of the cross as an instrument of healing, a homily attributed (perhaps falsely) to Gregory Thaumaturgus has Christ saying, “It becometh me to ascend the cross, and to be pierced with its nails, and to suffer after the manner of that nature which is capable of suffering, and to heal sufferings by my suffering, and by the tree to cure the wound that was inflicted upon men by the medium of a tree” (spurious 4th homily).⁷⁴ Thus, the cross, like the tree of life, has healing power and cures the ills brought upon mankind by Adam’s partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. This idea is also expressed in the pseudepigraphic *Gospel of Nicodemus*, where Christ rescues Adam and his posterity from Hades, saying, “Come all with me, as many as have died through the tree which he [Adam] touched: for, behold, I again raise you all up through the tree of the cross.”⁷⁵ Likewise, Cyril of Jerusalem wrote of Christ, “He is bruised and wounded, but He healeth every

70 Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; John 6:31-35, 50-51, 55-58; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:23-24; Moro. 4:3; 3 Ne. 18:3-7; D&C 20:77.

71 E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1927), 62. See also *Cave of Treasures* 17a col. 1-2, *ibid.*, 111-12.

72 *Ibid.*, 63. The apostle Peter noted how Christ’s crucifixion brought healing, writing that Christ “bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). He here draws on the messianic prophecy in Isa. 53:5.

73 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:359.

74 *Ibid.*, 6:70.

75 See chapter 8 in the Greek text in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:437.

disease and every infirmity. He is lifted up and nailed to the Tree, but by the Tree of Life He restoreth us” (*3rd Theological Oration On the Son*).⁷⁶

The healing power of the tree of life is also described by early writers who drew attention to the incident at Marah (meaning “bitter”), where Moses made the water potable by casting in a tree to make it sweet (Exod. 15:23–25).⁷⁷ According to *Pseudo-Philo* 11:15, on the holy mountain God “showed Moses the tree of life, from which he cut off and threw into Marah, and the water of Marah became sweet.”⁷⁸ Christian writers tended to compare this tree with the cross. Tertullian, for example, identified “the ‘tree’ of the passion of Christ, whence life, hanging” with the tree “wherewith Moses sweetened the bitter water; whence the People, which was perishing of thirst in the desert, drank and revived; just as we do, who, drawn out from the calamities of the heathendom in which we were tarrying perishing with thirst (that is, deprived of the divine word), drinking, ‘by the faith which is on Him,’ the baptismal water of the ‘tree’ of the passion of Christ [i.e., the cross], have revived” (*An Answer to the Jews* 13).⁷⁹

Much later, Ambrose used similar imagery, saying, “Marah was a fountain of most bitter water: Moses cast wood into it and it became sweet. For water without the preaching of the Cross of the Lord is of no avail for future salvation, but, after it has been consecrated by the mystery of the saving cross, it is made suitable for the use of the spiritual layer and of the cup of salvation. As, then, Moses, that is, the prophet, cast wood into that fountain, so, too, the priest utters over this font the proclamation of the Lord’s cross, and the water is made sweet for the purpose of grace” (*On the Mysteries* 3.14).⁸⁰

Jerome, alluding to the twelve springs and 70 palm trees of Elim, where the Israelites camped after leaving Marah (Num. 33:8–9), wrote that “As wood sweetens Marah so that seventy palm-trees are watered by its streams, so the cross makes the waters of the law life-giving to the seventy who are Christ’s apostles” (*Letter 69 to Oceanus*, 6).⁸¹ Clearly, this story from the exodus found relevance for these writers as they gazed through their Christian lenses.

76 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, 7:309.

77 Cf. 2 Kings 2:19–22.

78 James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 2:319.

79 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:170.

80 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, 10:319.

81 *Ibid.*, 6:145.

The Serpent and the Cross

Though a tie between the serpent and the cross may be unexpected, one exists. In Genesis 3, the serpent is associated with the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which brought death (mortality) into the world. He tempted Eve to eat the fruit of the tree by telling her that “God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). That this part of the serpent’s speech was the truth is clear from Genesis 3:22, where the Lord himself says, “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever,” Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden and cherubim, accompanied by a flaming sword, prevented their return.

The serpent served a very different role in the time of Moses, whose rod turned into a serpent as a sign to the king of Egypt (Exod. 4:2–4; 7:9–10, 15). In addition, during the exodus, “the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died...And Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived” (Num. 21:6–19). According to *Book of the Bee* 30, this pole was the rod with which Moses brought water out of the rock.⁸² Augustine of Hippo went farther:

The bitter waters [of Marah] are sweetened by wood, as hostile people become friendly by learning to honor the cross of Christ. The twelve fountains watering the seventy palm trees [at Elim] are a figure of apostolic grace watering the nations. As seven is multiplied by ten, so the decalogue is fulfilled in the sevenfold operation of the Spirit. The enemy attempting to stop them in their way [the Amalekites] is overcome by Moses stretching out his hands in the figure of the cross. The deadly bites of serpents are healed by the brazen serpent, which was lifted up that they might look at it. (*Reply to Faustus* 12.30)⁸³

82 Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Bee* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1886), 50–51.
83 Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 4:193.

It is not surprising that some of the early Church Fathers considered the brazen serpent to be symbolic of Christ's abolition of the death caused by the serpent by dying on the cross. For example, Tertullian wrote, "Why, once more, did the same Moses, after prohibiting the likeness of everything, set up the golden serpent on the pole; and as it hung there, propose it as an object to be looked at for a cure? Did he not here also intend to show the power of our Lord's cross, whereby that old serpent the devil was vanquished,—whereby also to every man who was bitten by spiritual serpents, but who yet turned with an eye of faith to it, was proclaimed a cure from the bite of sin, and health for evermore?" (*Against Marcion* 3.18;⁸⁴ see also his *An Answer to the Jews* 10). Other early Christian writers also made the tie, including Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 91) and Augustine of Hippo (*Reply to Faustus* 14.7).

The identification of Moses' serpent with the sacrifice of Christ was already made in John 3:14–15: "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."⁸⁵ Sadly, according to 2 Kings 18:4, the brazen serpent of Moses became an object of worship to generations of Israelites, on account of which Hezekiah, king of Judah (ca. 715–687 BC), destroyed it.⁸⁶ Their distant neighbors, the Greeks, believed that serpents had healing powers, which they reportedly taught to the famous physician Asclepius. The Asclepian wand displays a serpent entwined around a pole—a symbol still used in the medical profession in our day.

Food for the Righteous

Christian scriptures proclaim that Christ will give to the righteous the fruit of the tree of life when it is restored to the earth (Prov. 11:30; Rev.

84 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:337.

85 The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi similarly declared, "as the Lord God liveth that brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt, and gave unto Moses power that he should heal the nations after they had been bitten by the poisonous serpents, if they would cast their eyes unto the serpent which he did raise up before them, and also gave him power that he should smite the rock and the water should come forth; yea, behold I say unto you, that as these things are true, and as the Lord God liveth, there is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ, of which I have spoken, whereby man can be saved" (2 Ne. 25:20). Other Book of Mormon passages that identify the brazen serpent with Christ include Alma 33:18 and Hel. 8:13–15.

86 The name given to the brazen serpent was *Nehushtan*, a term related to the Hebrew words *nahash* ("serpent") and *nehoshet* ("copper" and copper alloys, usually bronze).

2:7; 22:14).⁸⁷ Of the righteous person who inherits the heavenly kingdom, Clement of Alexandria wrote, “it is in his power to be a citizen of heaven, and to cultivate Paradise, and walk about in heaven and partake of the tree of life and immortality” (*Exhortation to the Heathen* 10).⁸⁸ Decades later, Hippolytus wrote that “The fruit of righteousness and the tree of life is Christ. He alone, as man, fulfilled all righteousness. And with His own underived life He has brought forth the fruits of knowledge and virtue like a tree, whereof they that eat shall receive eternal life, and shall enjoy the tree of life in paradise, with Adam and all the righteous” (*On Proverbs* 10).⁸⁹ Not surprisingly, the same idea is expressed in early extracanonical Jewish and Christian writings.⁹⁰

Commenting on the healing properties of the leaves of the tree of life in John’s vision of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22), Hilary of Poitiers has written the following in compelling language:

But because the tree of Life in the sacrament of Baptism is in every case one, supplying to those that come to it on every side the fruits of the apostolic message, so there stands on either side of the river one tree of Life. There is one Lamb seen amid the throne of God, and one river, and one tree of Life: three figures wherein are comprised the mysteries of the Incarnation, Baptism and Passion, whose leaves, that is to say, the words of the Gospel, bring healing to the nations through the teaching of a message that cannot fall to the ground.

87 In the Book of Mormon, see 1 Ne. 15:27–28, 36; Alma 5:34–36, 62. In Lehi’s vision, the tree of life bears a white fruit that is especially delicious (1 Ne. 8:10–13; 15:21–22). The people who came to the tree did so by holding onto an iron rod that symbolized the word of God (1 Ne. 8:19–25, 30; 1 Ne. 15:23–24; for an in-depth discussion of the rod, see the author’s “Rod and Sword as the Word of God,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 [Fall 1996], republished in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., [Provo: FARMS, 1999]). Alma likened the word of God to a seed planted within one’s heart and nourished by faith until it becomes “a tree springing up unto everlasting life. And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst” (Alma 32:28–43; see also 33:23).

88 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:198.

89 *Ibid.*, 5:173.

90 *Testament of Levi* 18:10–11; *4 Ezra* 7:123; 8:52; *1 Enoch* 24:4; 25:4; 26:5–6; *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:4–6; *Midrash Rabbah* Exodus 25a; Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 2, 25.

And all things whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. Never again shall His gift and His statutes be set at naught, as they were in the case of Adam, who by his sin in breaking the Law lost the happiness of an assured immortality; but now, thanks to the redemption wrought by the tree of Life, that is, by the Passion of the Lord, all that happens to us is eternal and eternally conscious of happiness in virtue of our future likeness to that tree of Life. For all their doings shall prosper. Being wrought no longer amid shift and change nor in human weakness, for corruption will be swallowed up in incorruption, weakness in endless life, the form of earthly flesh in the form of God. This tree, then, planted and yielding its fruit in its own season, shall that happy man resemble, himself being planted in the Garden, that what God has planted may abide, never to be rooted up, in the Garden where all things done by God shall be guided to a prosperous issue, apart from the decay that belongs to human weakness and to time, and has to be uprooted. (*Homilies on Psalms* [Psalm 1], 17)⁹¹

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91 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, 9:240.

