

WISDOM AND THE OTHER TREE: A TEMPLE THEOLOGY READING OF THE GENESIS EDEN
STORY.

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This is an overview, to show how *Temple Theology* reads the story of the two trees in the garden of Eden. *Temple Theology* emphasises the double meanings of several texts, achieved by word play, and that with different pointing other meanings emerge. In a brief exposition such as this, it will only be possible to give the big picture. The details of the double meanings and the wordplay have been published elsewhere. *Temple Theology* does not privilege any particular group of texts such as the post-Christian canonical version of the Hebrew text, and listens to the other voices that gave a different account and interpretation of the same events. *Temple Theology* recognises the possibility that the ‘restorations of the scribes’¹ may have been more extensive than is usually recognised, and that the Christian use and understanding of the Hebrew texts was not necessarily a re-reading.

Let us begin with three canonical texts:

- Deuteronomy 4.6, which says that keeping the Law of Moses will be ‘your wisdom and your understanding’: the Law was to replace Wisdom;
- Proverbs 1.20-33, which shows Wisdom rejected by her people and warning of the consequences;
- Jeremiah 44.18, the protests of the refugees in Egypt who argued with Jeremiah: ‘Since we ceased burning incense ... to the Queen of Heaven we have lacked everything...’

The Enochic *Apocalypse of Weeks* gives the context for all these canonical texts. It says that in the sixth week, that is, in the latter part of the first temple period: ‘all who are living [in the temple] will lose their sight, and the hearts of all will godlessly forsake Wisdom. In that week a man shall ascend, and as it ends, the house of dominion shall be burned and the entire race of the chosen root will be scattered.’ (1 En. 93.8). In other words, the destruction of the temple followed the rejection of Wisdom by the temple priests. Whoever wrote the *Apocalypse of Weeks* remembered Wisdom as the defining characteristic of the first temple, and that when the priests rejected Wisdom, they became blind. The ascending man is an indication of when this happened, since he was Isaiah, and not Elijah as is sometimes said.

The Apocalypse of Weeks is remarkable insofar as it tells the history of Israel without mentioning the Exodus, and so represents the ‘other side’ of the history in the canonical texts.

¹ D Barthélemy, ‘Les tiqquné sopherimet la critique textuelle de l’Ancien Testament’, VT supp. IX, 1963, pp. 285-304.

It has long been recognised [since von Rad, 1938²] that the Sinai episode was an insertion into the Moses and Exodus saga, that Moses was not the original figure who received the divine Law on the holy mountain. In the *Apocalypse of Weeks* we have the reciprocal of the canonical account, the story as Jeremiah's refugees in Egypt would have told it, before Moses was part of the picture and before the Queen of Heaven was abandoned.

In the fourth week, says the *Apocalypse of Weeks*, the Law was given with a vision of the holy and righteous ones, the angels. This is the scene in that ancient poem now known as *The Blessing of Moses* and found at the end of Deuteronomy. It shows what Deuteronomy was intended to replace. The poem describes the older lawgiving, when the LORD became king and blessed the tribes. A few words inserted into the text - 'When Moses commanded us a law' (Deut.33.4) - rebranded the entire process for the era of Deuteronomy, and at the same time, the Lady vanished. She had originally appeared at the right hand of the LORD, but after the work of the correcting scribes, she became the fiery law in his right hand: 'šrth became 'š dt.

The obvious moment for the final and decisive rejection of Wisdom was Josiah's purge. The account in 2 Kings 23 does not mention her by name, but says only that Asherah was removed from the temple and burned. This account of Josiah's purge implies that a form of Deuteronomy was found in the temple, that Asherah/Wisdom was driven out and that the Law of Moses was restored. Josiah made a covenant to keep the Law. Hence the words in Deuteronomy 4, that keeping the Law of Moses would, in the future, be 'your wisdom and your understanding'; and the words of Deuteronomy 29.29, that the secret things were for the LORD alone, and that human beings need concern themselves only with the Law. The symbol of the Lady was dragged from the temple and burned, and the Law of Moses replaced whatever she had been. Josiah's spiritual heirs - those correcting scribes - either changed or removed her name from texts. She had originally been Ashratah, the form of her name that is found in inscriptions, that is, in unedited texts. Hence that picture at the beginning of Proverbs, where Wisdom cries out to her foolish children who have rejected her and do not realise the consequences of what they have done.

This was not the first time that the Lady had been removed from the temple. King Asa [about 900 BCE] had removed her symbol, even though his mother had worshipped the Lady and had made this symbol (1 Kgs 15.9-13). Asa had it burned by the Kidron, as did Josiah. About 150 years later, something similar must have happened during the early life of Isaiah, in the mid-eighth century. When he saw the LORD enthroned he cried out 'Woe is me for I am lost' or maybe the original was 'I kept silent', as in the Vulgate (Isa.6.5).³ Presumably he felt guilty because had not spoken out against false teaching that made his people's lips unclean. The message he had to take to his people implies that they had rejected Wisdom and her gifts, or, as the *Apocalypse of Weeks* puts it 'they had lost their sight' shortly before a

² G von Rad, 'The Form Critical Problem of the Hexateuch', ET *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays*, tr. E W Trueman Dicken, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965, pp.1-78.

³ Reading *nidmêû* from III *dāmāh*, be silent, rather than IV *dāmāh*, destroy, c.f Lxx Qmg *esiōpēsa*, Vg. *quia tacui*.

man ascended. This man was Isaiah, and the ascent was his vision of the throne. His message was to people who had recently rejected Wisdom.

Isaiah's message to his people was this: their punishment would be to live with what they had chosen. They would hear but not understand, they would see and not perceive, and their minds would be unable to comprehend. In other words, they would be living without the gifts of Wisdom. Their cities would become waste and their land would be desolate until the Forsaken One was great again in the midst of the land, another way to read the line usually translated 'Until the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land' (Isa.6.12, *rabbâ hâ^azûbâ b^eqereb hâ'āreṣ*). This was exactly the complaint of the refugees in Egypt: they had been secure and had prospered, they said, as long as they had had the Lady. The following verse in Isaiah 6 is now opaque - perhaps more work of the correcting scribes - but seems to be about a great tree that would be burned again, and the holy seed that would survive in its stump. That burned tree again. Asa had burned the tree; and this verse - many think it was a later addition - mentions a burned tree that would survive, a tree that had been burned but was not consumed.

The career of Moses began with a burning tree on the side of the holy mountain, a tree that was burning but not consumed. Scholars recognise that this is the point where the sagas of the patriarchs were joined to the saga of Moses. The voice from the fire was the moment when the deity of the patriarchs was superseded by the deity of Moses and the Law, and so Moses learned the new Name. The deity of the patriarchs had been El Shaddai (Exod.6.3), a name with many possible meanings, one of which is 'God with breasts'. The Judaeian pillar figurines, which were widely used in Judah and Jerusalem until the time of Josiah and were originally identified as dolls, were images of this God with breasts. The figurines also had huge eyes, because the Lady had given sight, and those who rejected her lost their spiritual sight. The figurines have been found in almost every site in Judah, most of them broken, but none from the second temple period. [They were probably the teraphim which Josiah destroyed, 2 Kgs 23. 24). The burning bush is a story to set alongside Deuteronomy's proclamation that the Law of Moses was, in the future, to be their wisdom and their understanding.

In *The Blessing of Moses*, Joseph was blessed with fertile land and the favour of the one who dwelt in the bush. 'Bush' is the conventional, but not certain, translation of *s^eneh*, which is found only here and in the burning bush episode; and the 'dweller in the bush' was not necessarily a male figure. This could be an archaic feminine form⁴, not unexpected in an ancient poem, and so could be the Lady in her tree. This possibility is strengthened by the names of some who returned from Babylon, by far the largest group of whom were called the sons of Sena'ah. This name is otherwise unknown and looks suspiciously like that word 'bush'. The large group could have been sons of, that is, devotees of, the Lady in the bush (Ezra 2.35; Neh.7.38).

⁴ *škny* would be the archaic feminine, *škn* and *ay*, an old feminine termination, like Sarai, see Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar* # 80 l.

The symbol of the Lady was the tree of life, and when the story of Eden was told by the Genesis writer, Adam was intended to eat its fruit. Only the other tree was forbidden. Nobody knows where that other tree came from, nor how it came to be in Eden. All the LORD God could do was warn his Adam against it, knowing that it would lead to death.

Genesis 2-3 tells the story of the rejection of the Lady and its consequences. Adam and Eve were driven from Eden and faced the prospect of thorns and thistles, pain, dust and death. The land became infertile - just as Isaiah had warned his people, and the refugees in Egypt had complained. Eden represented the original temple, as is clear in *Jubilees* and many other texts. The undivided Adam-and-Eve were the original high priesthood, driven from their temple where they had enjoyed angel status and walked with the LORD. After eating from the forbidden tree, they lost their angel status and faced the prospect of death and returning to dust. In the code of the temple, they became 'animals' and not 'men, that is mortals and not angels.

The first creation story is in Genesis 1, and the relationship between this account and the Eden story has long been a problem. Genesis 1 is a priestly text, a stylised account of the creation that was replicated in the ceremonial erection of the tabernacle and in the form and function of the temple. The creation of Adam corresponded to the purification of the high priests, and Adam was remembered as a glorious and wise figure whose priesthood upheld the creation. The *Community Rule* shows that the people at Qumran hoped to regain all the glory of Adam, the knowledge of the Most High and the wisdom of the sons of heaven (1QS IV). There is none of this in Genesis 1 as we point and read the text today, but the wise and glorious Adam was well known in non-canonical texts⁵. Adam had been the ideal for the sacral kings in Jerusalem, and when they became corrupt and eventually lost their throne, questions were asked about Adam and how he had lost his original state and status.

One of the responses to this crisis was Ezekiel's twin oracles that now appear as oracles against Tyre. They were originally prompted by the expulsion of the sacral kings from the temple, Adam driven from Eden. The Eden stories encoded the story of the temple and its priesthood.

The problems of Ezekiel 28 are well known and are not our concern today; suffice it to say that in second-temple Hebrew script, Tyre and Zion look very similar and there was good reason to obscure the original object of Ezekiel's condemnations. The LXX of Ezekiel 28.13 has the cherub dressed in all the precious stones of the high-priest's breastplate (Exod.28.17-20), but the Hebrew text here is shorter and the list is not complete. It is therefore less obvious in the Hebrew text that Ezekiel was describing an angel high priest in Zion, thrown from the holy mountain, the garden of Eden. The text is full of difficulties such as a confusion of masculine and feminine forms, but these need not concern us here either, beyond observing that the original Adam was both male-and-female when set in the Eden

⁵ Wordplay: *pa'ar*, be beautiful, for *parah*, be fruitful; *rabah* can mean great or multiply.

temple. The difficulties are unlikely to have been in the original text, and so who would have wanted to introduce them and obscure the identity of the high priestly cherub? The cherub had been created full of wisdom, said Ezekiel, doubtless the source of Philo's saying that cherub meant 'full knowledge' (Moses 2.97; Q Exod. 2.62). The cherub was punished for corrupting Wisdom, and the description of the cherub's destruction could well have been drawing on priestly memories of how Josiah destroyed the great tree.

I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God...

I cast you to the ground...

I brought forth fire from the midst of you, it consumed you,

And I turned you to ashes upon the earth

in the sight of all who saw you (Ezek.28.16, 17, 18).

The Genesis Eden story, our main concern, is another reaction to the crisis, explaining why Adam the high priest was expelled from Eden. Whoever wrote this story knew more about Adam than is included in that text. Where did the snake come from? How did the human pair know they were naked? What had they been wearing? Had they lost their original clothing by listening to the snake, as the storyteller implies? The story of Adam and Eden has far more detail in texts that are assumed to be later, and it is also assumed that these details were the product of a later imagination. They are more likely to have been memories, preserved outside the canonical texts, that Adam wore garments of light and the LORD was enthroned by the tree of life.

Immediately after Josiah's purges, the Babylonians attacked and destroyed Jerusalem, and within a few years, the Second Isaiah was comparing the disaster to Noah's flood (Isa.54.9). We cannot know if the prophet inspired the writers of Genesis, or if they influenced him. Understanding the Babylonian crisis in terms of Noah's flood was just their way of interpreting recent events, and it is not a construct of recent scholarship. *1 Enoch* tells in detail the story of what caused the great flood: it was the fallen angels, and the brief version of the story in Genesis makes the same link.

According to *1 Enoch*, the rebel angels brought their heavenly knowledge to earth and they made a covenant (1 En.6.4). Since the temple priests had seen themselves as angels, the fallen angels were corrupted priests, presumably making a new covenant, and the Enochic account of their fall blames them for the great flood. Now bringing heavenly knowledge to earth, revealing it and making a new-style of covenant was the hallmark of the Deuteronomists; they rejected heavenly knowledge, saying that it belonged to the Lord alone (Deut 29.29), and emphasised instead the revealed commandments.

The Dream Visions, the other history in *1 Enoch*, links the tempter in Eden and the fallen angels; at first only one star fell from heaven, and later, many more stars came down (1 En.86.1-3). In other words, the temptation represented in Genesis 3 was the precursor of the fall that brought Noah's flood. One leading priest had been corrupted, then others followed, and this caused the Babylonian invasion.

When had this corruption first happened? Isaiah had lived through a disastrous apostasy to false teaching, and he received his vision in the year that King Uzziah died. The Deuteronomic account of the reign of Uzziah is very short and confused; the Chronicler's account, however, says that Uzziah was caught up in a power struggle with the Aaronite priests and that he was defeated. In other words, the Davidic sacral king was removed from the temple and lost his role there, and the Aaronite priests were left in control. This was the first appearance of the Moses group within the temple, and this was the event that Isaiah had not condemned and for which he felt such guilt. According to *The Dream Visions*, this was the time when the LORD abandoned his temple and handed his flock of blinded sheep over to foreign rulers, described as various unclean wild animals (1 En.89.51-56).

Jeremiah often spoke out against corrupted priests. At his call, one year after Josiah began his purges, he saw an almond branch in danger, which is why the LORD was watching over it. Now the tree in the temple that represented the Lady was the menorah, made of almond work (Exod.25.31-39), and an almond branch was the sign of true priesthood (Num.17.8). Jeremiah's vision was about danger to the priesthood. Josiah expelled large numbers, and Jeremiah was told to stand against the kings, princes and *priests* of Judah (Jer.1.18). Presumably these were the corrupted priests.

The canonical texts do not mention a menorah in the first temple, and yet Zechariah saw it in his vision before the second temple was built and furnished (Zech.4). Further, it was long remembered that when the Messiah restored the true temple, he would restore the five things that had been missing from the second temple and one of these was the menorah. There had been a menorah in the second temple - it was depicted along with other temple loot on the arch of Titus - and we can only conclude that some people did not recognise this second-temple lamp as the true menorah. Perhaps it had been in a different place in the first temple, or had had another meaning. Or both. The tabernacle menorah was *outside* the holy of holies (Exod.40.24), but the tree of life, and so the Lady that it represented, appeared in St John's visions *within* the holy of holies (Rev.12.1; 22.1-3). The menorah's absence from the canonical texts about the first temple may be due to what it had represented.

When Jeremiah was assured that the LORD was watching over his branch, it was a word of hope for the true priests. Jeremiah spoke of an 'appalling and horrible thing', false prophets in league with the priests (Jer.5.30-31); 'both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their wickedness, says the LORD' (Jer.23.11). Zedekiah was afraid of the people who had gone over to fight with the Chaldeans (Jer.38.19), and these were long remembered as many young priests.⁶ Presumably they were the ones who had not accepted the new ways. The *Apocalypse of Weeks* put it differently: the people in the temple had lost their sight, because they had rejected Wisdom.

The Genesis Eden story concerns two trees. Both were in Eden so both were in the temple. The tree of life was the Lady and her wisdom in the temple; the other tree, which the LORD

⁶ J. Ta'anit 4.5.

God had warned against and forbidden, must have represented the alternative to wisdom which had been established in the temple. It was the Law, which had been 'found;' in the temple and which prompted the purge that rejected the Lady. Nobody knows the origin of the law book in the temple, and nobody knows the origin of the second tree in Eden.

In the second temple period, texts were changed: the praise of Wisdom became the praise of the Law, for example in the very obvious addition to Ben Sira's poem in praise of Wisdom: 'All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High... (Ben Sira 24.23); or the reworking in Baruch 4.1, where the Law becomes what Wisdom and her tree of life had formerly been: 'She is the book of the commandments of God, and the law that endures for ever. All who hold her fast will live...' (c.f. Prov.3.18). Neofiti simply says: 'The Law is the tree of life' (TN.Gen.3.24). But all this is later than Genesis 3, and there must have been other opinions about the two trees, because, as we shall see, the Christians said that the Law had been the other tree.

Originally the snake made the two trees seem identical: the forbidden tree was good for food, a delight to the eyes and the way to wisdom. The snake said that the forbidden tree would open their eyes so they became like *'elohim*, here meaning angels. This was also the role of the tree of life, whose oil was used to anoint the eyelids of the high priests, to give them sight and make them angels. When access to the tree was lost, so too was the oil. Later tradition said it had been kept in the holy of holies, but was hidden away in the time of Josiah (Tosefta Kippurim 2.15; b. Horayoth 12a).

The woman in Eden was convinced that the two trees were identical; she believed the snake. In other words, she accepted Deuteronomy's declaration that the law would be her wisdom. This was the first appearance in Scripture of 'that ancient serpent... the deceiver of the whole world' (Rev.12.9) and since he was the deceiver, we must ask if this was his customary form, or whether he was only in the form of a familiar temple figure. Isaiah had seen and heard a fiery winged snake, a seraph, in his vision of the throne, and that snake had brought him the words of the LORD. The snake was a messenger from the LORD. The snake later became the symbol of evil, although, as we know, this had not always been the case, and in other cultures the snake had been widely associated with the Lady.

Even in the Genesis Eden story, the writer knew that one day the woman's child would overcome the snake, and this is the scene in Revelation 12. The Lady re-appears in the temple and gives birth to her son, and the snake is defeated and cast down. This scene, like the Eden story, *is also set in the temple*, and describes first the leader and then his angels, driven from heaven.

Once they had listened to the snake, the human pair knew they were naked. They had lost a garment that the Genesis writer had not mentioned, but which later texts used by Christians knew was the garment of wisdom in which the Lady clothed her children. 'Wisdom says... I am giving you a high-priestly garment woven from every wisdom...' (Silvanus 89). Here as elsewhere there is wordplay and resonance with canonical texts. In priestly texts, the characteristic fabric of high priestly garments was *hēšeb* work (e.g. Exod.28.27), usually

translated 'ingenious work' but the word implies thinking, calculating or planning. This could have been 'wisdom 'work.

The Lady and her tree were not forgotten, and people did remember the original significance of the second tree which brought death. It was the Law. St Paul, explaining the effect of the Law in his life, said this: 'Apart from the Law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.' (Rom.7.8b-10).

The *Gospel of Philip*, likely to have its roots in the original Hebrew church in Palestine, teaches about the two trees. The texts are broken and so the translation is not certain, but the gist is that the two trees led to different ways of life. The distinction is expressed in traditional temple terms: an 'animal' meant the mortal state and a 'man' the angelic state. The *Gospel of Philip* says that Adam ate from the tree that produced animals, that the tree was the law. 'It has the power to give knowledge of good and evil. It neither removed him from evil, nor did it set him in the good, but it created death for those who ate of it.' (Gospel of Philip 71, 74).

The story underlying the New Testament tells how the original disaster in Eden was reversed. Jesus promised that the faithful Christian would once again have access to the tree of life (Rev.2.7; 22.14). This cannot possibly have meant that the faithful Christian would have access to the Law of Moses. Paul made the same claim in a different way: he said that Christianity was rooted in the faith that preceded Moses, in other words, before the tree of the Law of Moses had appeared in the temple.