

The Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Iconography

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As noted by Charles Echols in the introduction to the previous chapter, the phrase “tree of life” is rare in ancient Near Eastern texts outside of the Bible. When it comes to ancient Near Eastern iconography, the phrase does not appear on any extant images at all, and yet the prominence of sacred, life-giving trees in the iconographic record suggests that perhaps the symbol was so well known that one did not need labels or explanations to draw the connection between the tree and abundant life. It is fitting, then, that the authors of Genesis may have followed the example of many other ancient Near Eastern cultures in adapting the Sacred Tree motif to suit their own religious and cultural context as the “tree of life.” The difficulty of this approach is that it limits what we can learn about the Sacred Tree when we make a single reinterpretation of Gen 2–3 our primary end-goal. Instead, I analyze the Sacred Tree on its own accord as a multivalent image with multiple layers of meaning accrued over time, and shifting with each location, time period, and religious tradition. This gives the reader multiple options for re-reading the “tree of life” in Gen 2–3, which is taken up in the following chapter.

The precise meaning of the tree of life or Sacred Tree motif in ancient Near Eastern iconography eludes its modern audience, as every depiction of the Sacred Tree is deeply embedded in a millennia-long tradition of iconographic language and activity that is no longer “spoken” in modern parlance.¹ In general, modern scholarship interprets Sacred Tree iconography in one of two ways: either as symbolic of a nurturing goddess in charge of life-cycles or as symbolic of kingship, both of which carry connotations of provision and protection. In

1 Throughout this chapter, I use the generic designation “Sacred Tree” instead of the more specific “Tree of Life.” While there are iconographic indicators that the trees discussed are indeed sacred, one may only speculate whether they were known as a “Tree of Life,” as the phrase is extremely rare in inscriptions from the ancient world and has yet to be witnessed in any extant iconographic works. For further discussion of the specific titles by which the Sacred Tree has been known throughout the history of its interpretation, see Mariana Giovino, *The Assyrian Sacred Tree: A History of Interpretation*, OBO 230 (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2007), 5, 9–20.

the process of tracing the development of the Sacred Tree across the ancient Near East and across the third through first millennia BCE, this chapter argues that the Sacred Tree bears not one meaning but a constellation of interrelated meanings that brings together terrestrial concerns and cosmic activities within the symbolic space of the tree, a symbol that each iconographer nuances in relation to his or her own historical context and artistic traditions. First and foremost, the image serves as a symbol of the nurturing aspects of the divine, most often personified as the mother-goddess, and this remains its primary significance through the third and second millennia BCE. As time moves forward and cultures shift, so too does the Sacred Tree. The association with the mother-goddess remains, but other associations are added that both complement and compete with the feminine symbolism—the most significant being the appearance of kingship in the first millennium as a major theme in Sacred Tree iconography.

The development of the ancient Near Eastern Sacred Tree as an iconographic motif is intimately connected to the history of the region, in particular the region's politics and religions. Since each geographic area, time period, and sample is marked by its own characteristics, artistic trends, and mythological or ideological backgrounds, examining the Sacred Tree as a consistent, central motif against the backdrop of ever-shifting cultural contexts highlights the multivalent and fluid nature of the Sacred Tree symbolism, a symbolism whose flexibility allows it to translate across space and time from deep antiquity through today. In order to arrive at a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Sacred Tree image in ancient Near Eastern iconography, one must analyze it with an eye for the presence and interplay of multiple meanings and traditions, but in order to do so, one must first understand the meanings and traditions upon which an iconographer might draw.

This chapter suggests that in order to move forward the conversation about the Sacred Tree and, by extension, its potential influence on the biblical “tree of life,” one must take an approach to iconography that makes three assumptions: The first is that understanding the millennia-long trajectory of a motif is key to understanding its symbolism; the second is that multiple meanings often exist simultaneously and in layers; and the third is that the core associations expressed through semiotic language do not disappear when new associations or language are added, but instead withstand cultural and artistic change from generation to generation.² This chapter thus examines the millennia-long

2 On the ability of the semiotic language to withstand changes, see Mehmet-Ali Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning in Neo-Assyrian Relief Sculpture,” *The Art Bulletin* 88 (2006): 69–101.

development of the themes of the divine feminine and kingship, both separately and together, as well as the interplay between them in the iconographic records of ancient Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Egypt.³ The innumerable variations of the Sacred Tree motif as it appears across many miles and millennia are the result of continuous developments and expansions of iconographic language over space and time, adding to the complexity of the image from prehistory onward, and all while maintaining the image's roots in the lived experience of trees.⁴

1 Identifying a Sacred Tree

Before delving into the specifics of the topic at hand, it is fruitful to first address how one identifies a Sacred Tree in the iconographic record of the ancient Near East. Irene Winter helpfully distinguishes between depictions of trees using the two categories “referential” and “symbolic.”⁵ Referential trees are depictions that *refer* to natural trees, as one would see them in a field or garden, and usually appear in the background of a scene. Symbolic (stylized) trees, on the other hand, are composite images that are simultaneously based on the reality of nature, and constructed in a way that renders them abstract.⁶ Most symbolic trees take on a “stylized” form in that they mimic certain elements of natural trees, sometimes multiple species at once, while also exhibiting unnatural sym-

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- 3 The Sacred Tree motif also appears in other geographic areas of the Eastern Mediterranean, such as Greece and Cyprus, but examples are less frequent and beyond the scope of this chapter. For example, see Hans-Günter Buchholz, “Kyprische Bildkunst zwischen 1100 und 500 v. Chr.,” in *Images as Media: Sources for the Cultural History of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean (1st Millennium BCE)*, ed. Christoph Uehlinger, OBO 175 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 249.
- 4 For a catalog of Mesopotamian variations of the stylized tree from the second millennium, see Christine Kepinski-Lecomte, *L'Arbre Stylisé en Asie Occidentale au 2^e Millénaire Avant J. C.*, Tome I–II (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1982). Such a thorough study of Levantine or Egyptian stylized trees is yet to be published. An abridged list of first millennium Mesopotamian variations is available in Simo Parpola, “The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy,” *JNES* 52 (1993): 200–201; reproduced by Jerrold Cooper, “Assyrian Prophecies, The Assyrian Tree, and the Mesopotamian Origins of Jewish Monotheism, Greek Philosophy, Christian Theology, Gnosticism, and Much More,” *JAOS* 120 (2000): 433.
- 5 Irene J. Winter, “Tree(s) on the Mountain: Landscape and Territory on the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin of Agade,” in *On Art in the Ancient Near East: Volume 11, From the Third Millennium B.C.E.*, CHANE 34.2 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 117.
- 6 Winter, “Tree(s) on the Mountain,” 117; Barbara Nevling Porter, “Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II,” *JNES* 52 (1993): 129–139.

metry and proportions. All of these features come together to emphasize the orderly, otherworldly nature of the tree, and to elevate it to the realm of the divine.⁷

On Winter's definitions, once the strange or unearthly nature of the tree is established, it is not a far step to associate the tree with the divine or sacred realm. All regions of the ancient Near East are home to a tradition in which the symbolic tree is rendered "sacred" through the incorporation of an anthropomorphic deity into the tree itself or through the appearance of tree imagery on the very body of deity, most often a mother-goddess as discussed throughout this chapter. While the deity-tree hybrid is not always the normative means of representing the sacredness of the Sacred Tree, traditions of deity-tree hybrids are evidenced in the archaeological records of Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt, and beyond. However, the deity-tree association does not disappear when anthropomorphic characteristics become absent, but rather is incorporated into the symbolic language common to the iconographer and his intended audience. This suggestion is supported by the enduring presence of accompanying motifs, to which we now turn, that remain consistent despite changes in the tree's aesthetic.

These accompanying motifs make possible a more nuanced understanding of the Sacred Tree than is made available by the tree itself. In contrast with referential trees, symbolic trees are essential to the overall composition of the piece, and the function of the supporting motifs to draw the viewer's eye toward the tree while also supplementing the symbol in its most basic form. Within the scene, the tree is usually the center of attention. Artistically, this is accomplished in one of three ways: either the Sacred Tree is portrayed as the largest element of the composition, it is portrayed as the primary active agent (e.g., giving food or water to supplicants), or it is portrayed as being venerated or acted upon from both sides by one or more of a variety of beings. The latter option is perhaps the most common in the iconographic record, especially in Mesopotamia and the Levant. In the absence of anthropomorphic features, the Sacred Tree is often marked, even identified, as symbolic or "sacred" by the presence of figures flanking the tree, the most common of which are caprids (i.e., goat-like animals), fish, semi-divine hybrid creatures, deities, and humans. These flanking creatures most often appear in pairs, with one on either side of the tree, giving Sacred Tree iconography its classic symmetry. Other supporting

7 On the importance of symmetry toward expressing a divine or sacred nature, see Irene J. Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," in *On Art in the Ancient Near East: Volume I, Of the First Millennium B.C.E.*, CHANE 34.1 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 10.

motifs that appear regularly throughout Sacred Tree iconography but generally do not appear in pairs include the lotus flower, an ancient Near Eastern symbol of eternal regeneration, and celestial motifs, which are intimately connected to the activities of those in the heavenly realm.

Each of these and other recurring motifs, many of which are discussed throughout this chapter, have their own history, complications, and nuances. Additionally, almost every example of Sacred Tree iconography exhibits a combination of supporting motifs that are specific to the time, place, community, and artist to which it belongs. Therefore, the analysis that follows examines the use and symbolism of these supporting motifs only to the extent that it is useful for understanding the symbolic import of the primary motif, the Sacred Tree (and by extension, the tree of life). This process produces numerous insights that strongly suggest that if we are to develop a robust understanding of what the iconographer wishes to signify, it is important to attend to supporting motifs. In the particular case of the Sacred Tree, the supporting motifs emphasize the tree's nurturing, protective, and sacred qualities, but perhaps more importantly, they also signal shifts in the iconographic language and imagination that cannot be observed through analysis of the tree image alone.

2 The Divine Feminine

Due to their reproductive, cyclical, and regenerative properties, as well as their ability to direct people to water and produce food, cultures across the ancient Near East associate trees with the motherly, nurturing aspects of the divine. This is attested through Sacred Tree images themselves, as Sacred Tree iconography in most periods and regions expresses a symbolic connection between tree and the divine feminine either by portraying both tree and anthropomorphic goddess in close relation, or by equating the goddess with a tree and communicating that equation through supporting motifs. It is seldom clear from the iconographic record alone, especially in the Levant where it is rare for image and text to appear together, which named goddess (if any) is affiliated with the Sacred Tree; therefore many scholars hold the assumption that the goddess associated with the Sacred Tree, whether Mesopotamian, Levantine, or Egyptian, is mostly likely the goddess described in contemporary texts as in charge of the fertility of all life.⁸

8 Othmar Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and the*

Sometimes this assumption is supported by iconographic evidence, but most of the time the evidence is circumstantial. Regardless of the exact identification of the goddess pictured therein and regardless of the period and location to which an image belongs, the Sacred Tree motif expresses the conceptual connection between the bounty of the earth—water, air, produce, shelter, security—and the divine feminine. This connection is best pronounced in exemplars from the third and second millennia BCE discussed below; with the introduction of the theme of kingship in the first millennium, the tree-goddess connection undergoes significant transition.

2.1 *Mesopotamia*

The motif of the Sacred Tree has provoked more discussion and controversy than almost any other element of Mesopotamian art, inspiring numerous volumes, countless articles, and endless speculation.⁹ This is in part because Mesopotamian texts, especially religious texts, are replete with tree imagery and metaphor, but there is no extant text that explains the meaning, association, theology, or mythology behind the Sacred Tree image. Research into the meaning of the Sacred Tree in the third and second millennia—which is the focus of this section—is limited by the nature of the evidence, leaving one to suggest only three matters: that the tree is increasingly stylized and therefore symbolic of at least one aspect or association, that it is most often accompanied by supporting motifs that are themselves symbolic and thus enhance our understanding of the central image, and that the Sacred Tree is most likely associated with the goddess Ishtar (Inanna in Sumerian) but may also be associated with other deities related to agricultural blessing or perhaps simply the nurturing aspects of the divine realm in general.

In the prehistoric and Early Dynastic art of Mesopotamia, religious symbols and scenes of temples and worshippers are common features, but there are few representations of gods in anthropomorphic form until the Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2150 BCE).¹⁰ Instead, elements of the natural world are trans-

Hebrew Bible, JSOTSup 261 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Othmar Keel and Silvia Schroer, *Creation: Biblical Theologies in the Context of the Ancient Near East*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 40.

9 Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 170; For examples of complete volumes, see Giovino, *Assyrian Sacred Tree*; E.O. James, *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study*, SHR 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1966).

10 Anthony Green, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religious Iconography," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack Sasson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 1842.



FIGURE 2.1 Cylinder Seal, Akkadian Period (2360–2180 BCE), Mari (Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, fig. 19)

lated into symbols representing the divine and come to be understood as part of an iconographic language that withstands the advent of writing and exists alongside cuneiform throughout Mesopotamian history.¹¹ The Sacred Tree is one example of this phenomenon. From the fourth millennium through the Achaemenid Period, trees are a popular symbol in all forms of Mesopotamian art with images of Sacred Trees scattered throughout the iconographic record, and achieving their greatest popularity in the first millennium BCE.¹²

The association of the Sacred Tree with regenerative life, agricultural abundance, and protection from the elements is rooted in the lived experience of trees from the terrestrial world as seasonal providers of sustenance and shade, but what is not as clear at the outset is the origin of the Sacred Tree's association with the divine and, by extension, the cosmos. Most Mesopotamian examples of Sacred Tree iconography depict a stylized tree devoid of any anthropomorphic characteristics that would clarify its identity with a deity, yet there are enough iconographic examples of deity-tree hybrids and deities holding branches nibbled by caprids to suggest strongly that the Sacred Tree is symbolic of one or more deities related to agricultural blessing, including the goddess Ishtar (fig. 2.1–2).¹³

11 Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning in Neo-Assyrian Relief Sculpture," 69.

12 Particularly in the northern region, where its association with kingship is literally carved in stone.

13 Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 31–36, fig. 13, 18, 19; ANEP, fig. 528, 672; Dominique Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (London: British Museum Press, 2005), fig. 6, 106, 135.



FIGURE 2.2 Cylinder Seal, ca. 2500 BCE, Shadad (Iran; Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, fig. 18)

Once the connection between symbolic tree and divine realm is established in the symbolic language of Mesopotamian iconography, it remains an active and viable connection throughout the ages, even in the absence of anthropomorphism.

The cosmic significance of the tree is further accentuated by numerous supporting motifs, especially the use of astral symbols.¹⁴ In the third and second millennia, these astral symbols include the sun, moon, stars, and constellations, whereas Sacred Tree iconography of the first millennium favors the winged solar disc, which often doubles as a political symbol.¹⁵ What confirms that the celestial bodies are symbolic rather than referential is the appearance of both sun and moon or sun and stars within the same image. The direct association of the Sacred Tree with the divine in general and the divine feminine in particular comes to the fore when one notices the frequent appearance of the eight-pointed star (fig. 2.1).¹⁶ This eight-pointed star is identified throughout the ages as Ishtar herself. Thus, not only do the astral motifs clarify the connection of the Sacred Tree to the cosmos, they also connect the tree to the rhythm of that cosmos via association with the goddess of natural cycles.¹⁷ As a result, the aesthetically simple iconography of the Sacred Tree expresses a complex web of

14 Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 37.

15 The solar disc appears in a minority of examples from the second millennium. For example, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 217–219.

16 For example, Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 36–37, fig. 19–21; Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 216, 221, 245, 296, 345, 355.

17 Ishtar's lordship over natural cycles is the central theme of the *Descent of Ishtar* in which she journeys to the Netherworld and back in order to establish and ensure the maintenance of the earthly seasons.

ideas that interrelates the terrestrial concerns of humankind, the annual death and rebirth of plant life, and the cosmic activities of various deities, specifically Ishtar.

The connection to Ishtar is furthered by the Sacred Tree's date-like characteristics. Most scholars agree that even though the tree is stylized and therefore defies botanic identification, the majority of examples incorporate characteristics of the date palm that are important for understanding the symbolic import of the tree's construction. The actual date palm reaches a height of 21–23 m. (69–75 feet) and yields more than one hundred pounds of sweet fruit per year for an average production life of over one hundred years.¹⁸ Dates were an important food not only because of their yield but also because they are easily transported and preserved. In a plentiful year, dates could remain a source of calories and sweetness year-round, and also be traded with communities outside of date-growing regions. It is therefore fitting that synonyms for the date palm include “tree of riches” (*iš rašê*) and “tree of abundance” (*iš mašrê*) since a good crop was destined to ensure both profit and provision for the community.¹⁹ It is also fitting that iconographers would use palmettes to refer to the fruiting top of the date palm, both referentially and symbolically, and frequently *repeat* the palmette motif upon the same Sacred Tree as a way of underscoring the symbolism of divine, even miraculous, provision. The palm is also perceived as having apotropaic qualities in its own right and is therefore incorporated into various rituals of protection.²⁰ This symbolism is understood throughout the region of Mesopotamia, even in areas where date palms cannot grow.²¹

Due to its reproductive capabilities, the date palm is associated with the goddess Ishtar and also the female gender more broadly. From as early as the third millennium BCE, Ishtar's Sumerian counterpart, Inanna, is considered “the one who makes the dates full of abundance.”²² Beginning in the Akkadian Period, when anthropomorphic representations of the gods become prominent, Ishtar is linked to the date palm both iconographically and textually, either through

18 W.H. Barrevel, *Date Palm Products*, FAO Agricultural Services Bulletin 101 (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1993); online: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/t0681E/t0681e00.htm> (accessed 7 Nov 2017).

19 Porter, “Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II,” 134.

20 Barbara Parker Mallowan, “Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs,” in *Essays on Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology in Honor of Charles Kyrle Wilkinson*, ed. Prudence O. Harper and Holly Pittmann (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983), 37–39.

21 E.g., Assyria, which will be discussed in the section on kingship.

22 Paul Collins, “Trees and Gender in Assyrian Art,” *Iraq* LXVIII (2006): 99.

visual proximity, holding a cluster of dates, or actually being called a “palm tree” or “mighty date palm, with heroic strength” (fig. 2.4–5).²³ The symbolic connection of the date palm and Ishtar persists throughout the ages, yet at the same time a parallel tradition emerges in which the date palm also becomes a generic symbol of femininity and fruitfulness.²⁴ These traditions carry over into Sacred Tree iconography of the first millennium, where they become central to the self-understanding of the early Neo-Assyrian empire and the identity of its kings.

2.2 *Levant*

The connection between the Sacred Tree and the divine feminine in the iconography of the Levant is well documented in archaeological records from the Middle Bronze Age (MB) through the early Iron Age (IA).²⁵ Numerous seals from the late third through early second millennia BCE (MB I or MB IIA) depict the Sacred Tree as a goddess-tree hybrid with branches emanating from her shoulders or with her body incorporated into its trunk. In other instances, the Sacred Tree appears as a stylized tree either accompanied by a goddess in anthropomorphic form or flanked with animals, namely fish and caprids, whose presence communicates to those familiar with the symbolic language of ancient Levantine iconography that the tree signifies the goddess and her life-giving qualities (fig. 2.3).²⁶

These ways of communicating the association between goddess and tree form the basis of the symbolic language of Sacred Tree iconography, and continue to be in use through the Late Bronze Age (LB) and IA, with additional type-scenes added over time.

Beginning in MB IIB, craftsmen incorporate the Sacred Tree image into precious objects such as metal work, cylinder seals, and scarabs, and expand the iconographic language of the goddess-tree association. Portrayals of an anthropomorphic goddess sprouting branches from her navel and/or pudenda, or

23 Collins, “Trees and Gender in Assyrian Art,” 99–101; Pauline Albenda, “Assyrian Sacred Trees in the Brooklyn Museum,” *Iraq* 56 (1994): 132–133; Porter, “Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II,” 138.

24 Collins, “Trees and Gender in Assyrian Art,” 99–101; For examples, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 112, 296, 621 (fig. 296 also includes an eight-pointed star); the date’s masculine counterpart is the conifer, which likely stands for Assyria and/or its chief deity, Assur. See Collins, “Trees and Gender in Assyrian Art.”

25 For an illustrated survey of the development of goddess-tree iconography in the Levant, see Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 16–59.

26 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 20–24; for Mesopotamian examples of this same motif, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 242, 248, 263–265, 464, 878, 916, 932.

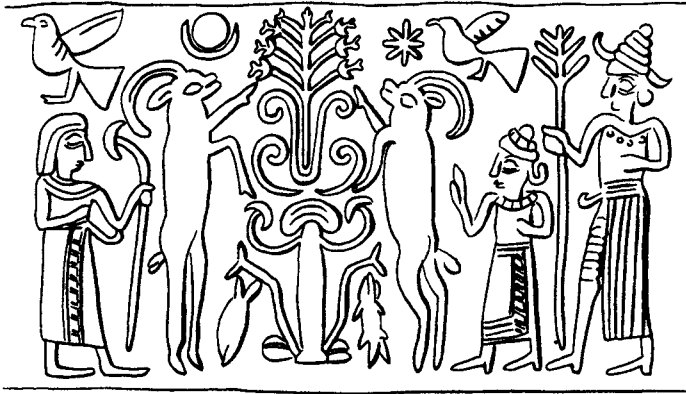


FIGURE 2.3 Cylinder Seal, Old Syrian (1750–1550 BCE; Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, fig. 21)

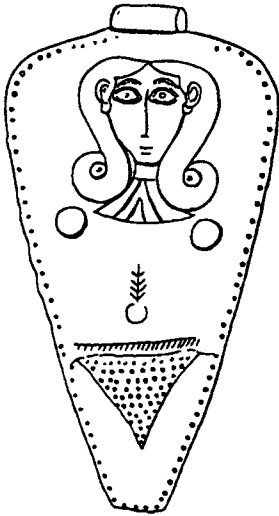


FIGURE 2.4 Pendant, Tell el-'Ajul, MB II B (Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*, 17)

with branches flanking her sides or held in her hands constitute the major artistic trends that characterize Sacred Tree iconography of this period (fig. 2.4–6).²⁷

There are also numerous examples of a stylized tree flanked by one or two worshippers, which suggests that the tree could stand alone as the symbol of the goddess in her role as provider.²⁸ The stylized tree or goddess holding

27 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 24–29.

28 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 24–29; for Mesopotamian examples of this motif, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 112 (cj.), 243, 245, 257–259.



FIGURE 2.5
Scarab, Gezer, MB IIB (Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*, 26)

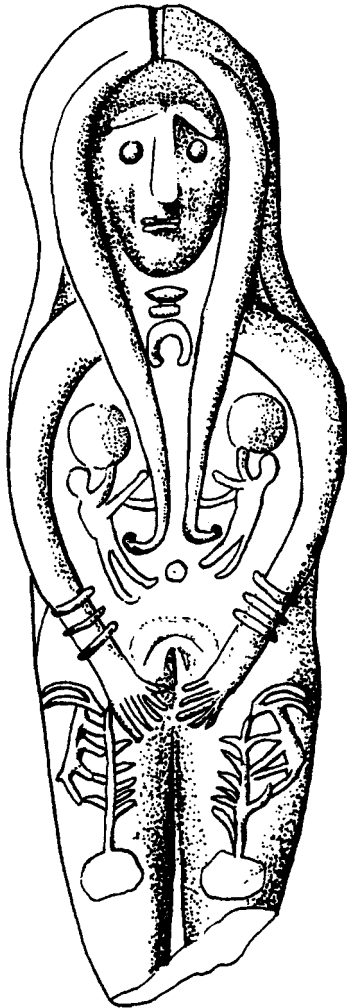


FIGURE 2.6
Terracotta plaque, Tel Harassim, LB (Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*, fig. 52)

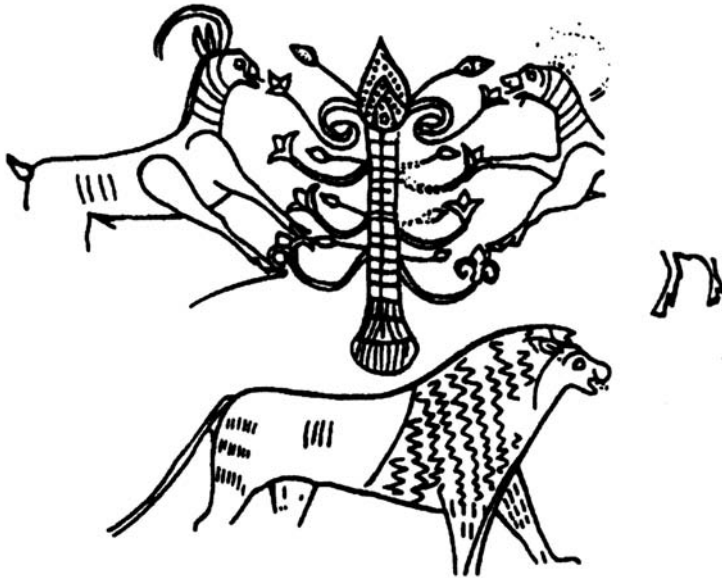


FIGURE 2.7 Pithoi, Kuntillet Ajrud, IA IIB (Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*, fig. 77)

branches is also sometimes flanked by caprids, a motif carried over from earlier periods that emphasizes the life-giving nature of the goddess who the Sacred Tree symbolizes.

In the LB, Sacred Tree iconography begins a two-fold shift that continues into the IA: the first aspect of this shift relates to how people represent the goddess-tree association, and the second aspect relates to the medium upon which people depict the Sacred Tree. While there are enough images of an anthropomorphic goddess holding branches nibbled by caprids to suggest that the goddess and stylized Sacred Tree remain interchangeable in the symbolic language of Bronze Age Levantine iconography, the popularity of anthropomorphic images of the goddess diminishes overall.²⁹ As Sacred Tree iconographers shift away from anthropomorphic forms, they take the equally ancient, though less popular, image of the stylized tree flanked by two caprids and transition it into the dominant method of portraying the Sacred Tree (fig. 2.7).³⁰

29 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 30–36.

30 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 24–29.

Often the caprid-flanked tree loosely resembles a fruiting palm, and the two creatures either rest in its shade or lift their front hooves onto its trunk in order to partake of the tree's abundance, nursing on the leaves and fruit. In reality, caprids are much too small to pick fruit from date palms, which underscores the notion that the tree is symbolic and designed to communicate a particular meaning or association. With its impressive height, yield, and the sweet taste of its fruit, the date palm represents the goddess' accomplishments in the area of agricultural abundance, while the caprids' ability to rest under or feed upon the date palm signifies the peace, sanctuary, and satisfaction that the life-sustaining goddess provides.

While the inclusion of the Sacred Tree motif on precious objects and materials continues into the LB and IA, painted ceramics and figurines become the primary medium on which the motif appears. In the southern Levant, the Sacred Tree is the most predominant motif attested on painted pottery, and in many cases demonstrates less artistic training than examples from previous eras, suggesting that most instances of the image in the LB Levant are not connected directly to cultic institutions or formal systems of worship, but either relate to common devotional practices or provide examples of cultural and artistic appropriation.³¹ Whether for reasons of theology, artistic ease, preference in style, or other concerns, the proliferation and popularization of the Sacred Tree image parallels a slow shift away from the use of anthropomorphic or hybrid goddess-tree images toward the use of a stylized tree. This enabled the religious imagination to adapt the Sacred Tree from a symbolic stand-in for the divine feminine in MB and LB to a generic symbol of blessing in IA I, and eventually a representation of the blessing of specific male deities (e.g., Yahweh, Kemosh, Milkom) by IA IIC—a shift discussed in more detail below.³²

However, the transition from goddess-tree to generic symbol of plenty is by no means comprehensive, which brings us to a topic that arises consistently in discussions of Levantine tree imagery, the topic of A/asherah. While both iconographic and written evidence of a direct connection between the Levantine goddess Asherah and the Sacred Tree is ambiguous at best, available evidence does suggest that the object referred to in the Hebrew Bible as an

31 G.D. Choi, "Decoding Canaanite Pottery Paintings from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I," PhD Dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008.

32 Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Acculturating Gender Roles: Goddess Images as Conveyors of Culture in Ancient Israel," in *Image, Text, Exegesis: Iconographic Interpretation and the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS 588, ed. Izaak J. de Hulster and Joel M. LeMon (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); David T. Sugimoto, "'Tree of Life' Decoration on Iron Age Pottery from the Southern Levant," *Orient* (2012): 125–146; Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 42–46.

asherah was at least made of wood, and may have even been a small, pruned, and living tree, perhaps the almond.³³ Whether a tree, a tree-like object, or some other form of wooden entity, an *asherah* was not necessarily a visual form of the mother-goddess of the same name. Another option might be that the object represented her presence and participation in cultic systems concerned with life-giving, life-cycles, and humankind's need to maintain divine favor in those areas of life.³⁴ Furthermore, the continuation of the suckling caprid motif ensured then and now suggests that the feminine, nurturing aspects of the Sacred Tree image—rooted in a millennia-long iconographic association between goddess and plant—does not disappear from the iconographic vocabulary of the Levant, but persists beyond the IA.³⁵

2.3 Egypt

In Egypt, the tradition of a goddess-tree is not well established in the iconographic record until the fifteenth century BCE, centuries after the image was developed throughout Mesopotamia and the Levant.³⁶ Thanks to the practice of pairing illustration with text in the Book of the Dead, Egyptologists are able to positively identify Nut as the goddess most commonly associated with trees—particularly sycamore fig trees—in the iconography of the New Kingdom (16th–11th centuries BCE) and beyond. According to Billing, the sycamore of Nut is designed to function as “a dominating iconographic realization of

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- 33 Steve A. Wiggins, “Of Asherahs and Trees: Some Methodological Questions,” *JANER* 1 (2001): 158–187; Joan E. Taylor, “The Asherah, the Menorah and the Sacred Tree,” *JOST* 66 (1995): 29–54; For arguments against the association of trees and A/asherah, see Christian Frevel, *Aschera und der Ausschließlichkeitsanspruch YHWHs: Beiträge zu literarischen, religionsgeschichtlichen und ikonographischen Aspekten der Ascheradiskussion*, 2 vols., BBB 94 (Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1995); Jörg Jeremias and Friedhelm Hartenstein, “‘JHWH und seine Aschera’: ‘Offizielle Religion’ und ‘Volksreligion’ zur Zeit der klassischen Propheten,” in *Religionsgeschichte Israels: Formale und materiale Aspekte*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Matthias Köckert, VWGT 15 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1999).
- 34 Choi, “Decoding Canaanite Pottery Paintings from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I,” 424; it is also noteworthy that if A/asherah worship was indeed associated with trees, then it is one of several forms of Levantine Sacred Tree imagery mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Other examples include “mighty trees” such as the terebinth (Josh 24:26–27; Ezek 6:13) or special oaks (Gen 12:6; 13:18; 14:13; 18:1). Taylor, “Asherah, the Menorah and the Sacred Tree,” 40.
- 35 Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 127, fig. 153–155; for examples from the Greco-Roman period, see Ray L. Cleveland, “Cherubs and the ‘Tree of Life’ in Ancient South Arabia,” *BASOR* 172 (1963): 55–60.
- 36 Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 43.

the maternal ... in which Nut, with her distinctive core attributes of space and water, is given a central, though not exclusive, role."³⁷

The New Kingdom expressions of Nut as divine mother and supplier of life-giving air and water through her iconographic association with the sycamore fig is one of many manifestations of a tradition dating at least as far back the fifth dynasty (2494–2345 BCE) in which the Egyptians first personified trees and associated them with divine provision and agricultural blessing.³⁸ By the time of Pepi I (r. 2332–2287 BCE), the Pyramid Texts describe one who “seizes the sycamores” as one who attains divine status in the afterlife, expressing a symbolic association between sycamore trees and eternal life long before the connection is forged to a specific goddess.³⁹ While the goddesses Isis and Hathor are at times also associated with Sacred Trees, it is Nut’s manifestation within the sycamore that dominates the goddess-tree motif.

Within Egyptian goddess-tree iconography, there are four major types, each with a great number of variations: with one or two arms protruding from the tree, with a woman’s upper body or breasts protruding from the tree, with an anthropomorphic figure carrying the tree on her head, and with the goddess standing in front of or beside the tree with her complete body in view (fig. 2.8–9).⁴⁰

In Egyptian mythology, Nut is not only the primeval mother and sustainer of all life; she is also the sky goddess. It then follows that the sycamore of Nut provides the essential elements of water and breath for all of the cosmos’ inhabitants, including those in the afterlife (see below). Therefore, many of

37 Nils Billing, *Nut, the Goddess of Life in Text and Iconography*, Uppsala Studies in Egyptology 5 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2002), 185. For a complete treatment of the history of the tree-goddess motif in Egypt with special attention to Nut, see Billing, *Nut*, 185–309.

38 Billing, *Nut*, 224.

39 James P. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, SBL WAW 23 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 126, 176; Christopher Hays, “‘There is Hope for a Tree’: Job’s Hope for the Afterlife in Light of Egyptian Tree Imagery,” *CBQ* 77 (2015): 44; for an extensive analysis of goddess-tree images of this period, including 57 illustrations, see Othmar Keel, “Ägyptische Baumgöttinnen der 18.–21. Dynastie Bild und Wort, Wort und Bild,” in *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden: Drei Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder*, OBO 122 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 61–138.

40 Adapted from Keel’s five types; Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 36–37. For a list of the distribution and general typology of the Nut iconographic corpus, as well as an alternate listing of the major and minor iconographic types, see Billing, *Nut*, 199–200. For examples, see Richard H. Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 116; Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin, *Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Reference to the Myths, Religions, Pyramids and Temples of the Land of the Pharaohs* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007), 332–333.



FIGURE 2.8 Tomb painting, Valley of the Kings: Tomb of Thutmose (r. 1502–1448 BCE; Keel, *Symbolism*, fig. 253)

the extant images that portray sycamore-Nut include the supporting motifs of water flowing from the goddess's pitcher, nourishment through suckling, the goddess presenting supplicants with a plate of food, or some combination of these motifs—all of which represent the goddess' care for the needs of her supplicants. Lotus flowers, which are themselves symbolic of eternal life and regeneration, are also a common supporting motif.⁴¹

The association of the Egyptian Sacred Tree with eternal well-being, specifically, comes to the fore when one considers that the goddess-tree image appears most often on sarcophagi, on tomb walls, or in manuscripts of the Book of the Dead.⁴² Nut is, at times, presented in both text and iconography as one who

41 John Strange, "The Idea of Afterlife in Ancient Israel: Some Remarks on the Iconography in Solomon's Temple," *PEQ* 117 (1985): 36–39.

42 William R. Osborne, "The Tree of Life in Ancient Egypt and the Book of Proverbs," *JANER* 14 (2014): 128; see also Billing, *Nut*, 199–200.



FIGURE 2.9 Tomb painting, Deir el Medinah: Tomb of Sennudyem, 19th dyn. (1345–1200; Keel, *Symbolism*, fig. 254)

embodies the inner mummiform sarcophagus, where she embraces or spreads herself over the deceased and incorporates them into herself that she may bear them anew, unto eternal regeneration.⁴³ This presentation of Nut reflects a broader practice of portraying death as a return to the womb, where one's identity is reset for the next phase of existence.⁴⁴ Nut's ability to give rebirth to the deceased in the afterlife echoes in the dying-and-rising myth of Osiris, Nut's firstborn son, who is suffocated inside a coffin and protected by a *tcheret* (tamarisk or willow) tree until his wife revives him.

Invocations for Nut to use her plant-like abilities to provide water and breath to those in the afterlife are common feature in New Kingdom funerary prac-

43 Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 168–171.

44 Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 173–185.

tices, as they are repeated throughout funerary texts and written upon funerary objects, some of which are accompanied by illustrations.⁴⁵ The symbolism of eternal well-being also appears in the form of funerary amulets shaped like sycamore leaves to protect the deceased on their journey.⁴⁶ Other mentions of the sycamore of Nut describe the goddess-tree as provider of eternal nourishment and protector against the dangers of the netherworld, drawing from the tree's ability to produce both sustenance and shade in a way that brings new meaning to the tree as both a literary and iconographic symbol.⁴⁷ In the New Kingdom, people planted live sycamores near tombs for use in the afterlife, demonstrating that the symbolism of the Sacred Tree reaches beyond text and iconography, and extends to the natural world.⁴⁸ In the following Ramesside Period (1295–1069 BCE), the connection of sycamore and goddess is yet again underscored when religious officials assign the sycamore as a location for festivals and thus deem it a sacred place.⁴⁹ Many of these practices surrounding Sacred Tree symbolism continue into the first millennium, but the association of the tree with Nut shifts to her firstborn son, Osiris, primeval king of the cosmos and father of all who sit upon Egypt's throne.

3 Kingship

In recent decades, much research in the field of archaeology has been dedicated to clarifying the nature and process of the transition from the LB to IA in the ancient Near East, and has unearthed a great deal of evidence of a marked shift in culture between the twelfth and tenth centuries BCE. This shift was most likely inspired by a string of catastrophic events in the twelfth century BCE that brought about a transitional period, which scholars once referred to as history's first "Dark Age."⁵⁰ The cosmopolitan, globalized world of the fifteenth through twelfth centuries fragmented due to numerous natural disasters and societal responses to those disasters, leading to region-wide instability,

45 E.g., *Book of the Dead*, spells 59, 68; cf. 52. Nils Billing, "Writing an Image: The Formulation of the Tree Goddess Motif in the Book of the Dead, Ch.59," *SAK* 32 (2004): 35–50. Osborne, "Tree of Life in Ancient Egypt and the Book of Proverbs," 120–123.

46 Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art*, 117.

47 Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 129–130, 153, 224–225.

48 Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art*, 117.

49 Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 218–234; on sycamores planted near tombs, see Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art*, 117.

50 Eric H. Cline, *1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), xv.

conflict, and eventually collapse in 1177 BCE.⁵¹ In many respects, this process reset the ancient Near East and Mediterranean as a forest fire resets an ecosystem; although much was destroyed, including many human lives, the process cleared the way for new communities to establish themselves and eventually thrive, and for new developments in thought, communication, technology, and governance to emerge and take hold.⁵² Most systems of thought and expression that flourished throughout the LB, including the symbolic language that informs ancient Near Eastern iconography, did carry over into the new era but underwent notable changes and increases in complexity as time moved on.

Sacred Tree iconography provides a fruitful case study in the nature and complexity of the LB to IA shift in that, while the goddess-tree association that was widely popular in the LB carries over into the IA, the motif accrues additional layers of significance that suggest at least two shifts in thought. First, changes in the appearance and use of the Sacred Tree motif suggest that iconography's communicative potential is heightened during this transition. The rich "lexicon" of symbolic language that informs ancient Near Eastern iconography expands exponentially in the first millennium, as new communities assign new associations and meaning to the symbols of former times, most often retaining ancient associations alongside new ones. First millennium Sacred Tree iconography is a prime example of this phenomenon, as it is marked by a dramatic increase in the presence of layers or strata of possible meaning, applied by craftsmen in a way that exponentially increases a work's capacity to express complex ideas and associations. The most notable addition is the Sacred Tree's association with kingship, which is especially pronounced in the iconography of Mesopotamia.⁵³

The second shift that the Sacred Tree motif exemplifies is a shift in orientation toward the divine, specifically a decentering of the mother-goddess who provides agricultural well-being and the simultaneous elevation of the chief male deity who provides political well-being. The goddess-tree association persists, but is either placed alongside or dominated by the new association of the Sacred Tree with male deity or king.⁵⁴ Early first millennium iconographers express this thinking by adjusting not the image of the Sacred Tree itself, but its supporting motifs. The two main differences between Sacred Tree iconography of second and first millennia are the increased frequency of male figures, both royal and divine, and the increased frequency of cherubs, genii, and other

51 Cline, *1177 B.C.*

52 Cline, *1177 B.C.*, 176.

53 Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 44.

54 For example, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 299, 340–341, 345, 347, 351, 355, 812, 879.

protective hybrid creatures as flanking motifs, often in place of the caprids of earlier times.⁵⁵ Occasionally the emblem of a male deity appears atop the tree, but rarely in the IA does one find an example of the *female*-tree hybrid or *female*-tree juxtaposition of earlier eras. In contrast with previous trends in Sacred Tree iconography, first millennium forms of representation place the power over the bounty of the earth directly into the hands of the king, and indirectly into the hands of the deities he serves.

In this context, the mothering attributes of the Sacred Tree are reconfigured. In the process of accruing significant layers of symbolism and meaning, sometimes the goddess connection is “buried,” but it is often the case that the goddess connection intersects these new layers in a way that is integral to understanding the entire web of symbolism at hand. The goddess-tree or neuter Sacred Tree no longer acts alone as provider and protector of all who live under her branches; instead her blessing is provoked and protected by the word and deed of the king or being(s) who tend her. Furthermore, the increased presence of guardian creatures implies that the tree is in need of protection, but at the same time underscores its sacredness.⁵⁶ For all of the changes introduced in the first millennium, the Sacred Tree retains its ancient position as the symbolic, compositional, and sacred center of the works in which it is featured, communicating that kings, deities, and viewer alike are to dedicate themselves to its service. Perhaps the most emblematic example of this shift is the Nimrud reliefs of the ninth century BCE.

3.1 *Mesopotamia*

In the middle of the second millennium, Mesopotamian iconography of the Sacred Tree underwent a series of aesthetic changes that produced the highly

55 E.g., Eric Gubel, “Multicultural and Multimedial Aspects of Early Phoenician Art, c. 1200–675 BCE,” in Uehlinger, *Images as Media*, fig. 6, 8, 21, 25, 27; cf. Buchholz, “Kyprische Bildkunst zwischen 1100 und 500 v. Chr.,” fig. 9d. Cherubs, griffins, and sphinxes are parallel traditions of a hybrid, winged creature who protects the sacred from danger—including human interference. For more on the symbolism of hybrid creatures, see Giovino, *Assyrian Sacred Tree*, 39–45; Izaak J. de Hulster, “Of Angels and Iconography: Isaiah 6 and the Biblical Concept of Seraphs and Cherubs,” in *Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: An Introduction to Its Method and Practice*, ed. Izaak J. de Hulster, Brent A. Strawn, and Ryan P. Bonfiglio (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 156–159. The Stand A from Taanach is a good example of a piece that incorporates both caprids and cherubs rather than one or the other; Pirhiya Beck, “The Cult-Stands from Taanach: Aspects of the Iconographic Tradition of Early Iron Age Cult Objects in Palestine,” in *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel*, ed. Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na’aman (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1994), fig. 1–2.

56 Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 44.

stylized and culturally specific Assyrian Sacred Tree.⁵⁷ The hundreds of examples known exhibit a great deal of variation, yet all have characteristic features that mark them as belonging to the same motif: a crown, usually a palmette, a trunk, a stone base or stand, and a network of intersecting, horizontal or diagonal lines (with or without nodes where the branches intersect) that end with palmettes, pinecones, or pomegranates.⁵⁸ The consistently straight and tidy appearance of the tree supports the interpretation that the Assyrian Sacred Tree is in fact a cultivated palm, and since palm trees were (and still are) cultivated not from seeds but from genetically identical basal offshoots, the Assyrian Sacred Tree is an effective symbol of both dynastic succession and eternal life.⁵⁹ The repetition of these characteristics across exemplars, however, does not necessarily make it easier to gain insight into the complexities of Sacred Tree symbolism, but it does increase the incentive to uncover its layers of meaning.

Described by Barbara Nevling Porter as “one of the classic problems of Assyrian art history,” the famous “Nimrud reliefs” of Ashurnasirpal II’s Northwest Palace picture the Assyrian Sacred Tree approximately 200 times, yet the exact use and nature of the symbolism remains one of art history’s most elusive mysteries.⁶⁰ Built when king Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BCE) relocated the capital of Assyria from Ashur to Nimrud (Kalhu) in 879 BCE, the Nimrud reliefs debuted a new palatial design characterized by interior walls lined with large slabs of alabaster, carved in relief and painted.⁶¹ These reliefs are the most written about exemplars of Sacred Tree iconography and are at the center of a decades-long, interdisciplinary debate over the meaning of the Sacred Tree image throughout the region, with each scholar contributing his or her own

57 Parpola, “Assyrian Tree of Life,” 163.

58 Parpola, “Assyrian Tree of Life,” 163–164, 200–201. Kepinski-Lecomte, *L’Arbre Stylisé en Asie Occidentale au 2^e Millénaire Avant J. C.*; cf. J.E. Curtis and J.E. Reade, eds., *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 59.

59 Norma Franklin, “The Assyrian Stylized Tree: Propagation Not Pollination” (paper presented at the American Schools of Oriental Research Annual Meeting, Denver, CO, 16 Nov 2018).

60 Porter, “Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II,” 129; William R. Osborne, *Trees and Kings: A Comparative Analysis of Tree Imagery in Israel’s Prophetic Tradition and the Ancient Near East*, BBRSup 18 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 70. History of interpretation has focused largely on three competing possibilities: date palm, cult object, and artificial tree. For a full analysis of the debate, see Giovino, *Assyrian Sacred Tree*.

61 Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Assyrian Relief Sculpture” wall plaque. In previous eras, the walls of palaces were simply painted rather than lined with stone.

nuance to the conversation.⁶² Despite all that scholarship has yet to conclude or to understand about the Nimrud reliefs, they are perhaps the strongest examples known today of multivalent symbolism in ancient Near Eastern iconography, and constitute a fruitful case study of the interplay between the themes of kingship and the divine feminine in the iconography of the Sacred Tree.

The connection of the scenes carved upon the Nimrud reliefs to the divine feminine is by no means obvious to the modern eye, nor was it necessarily the first association that came to mind when ancient officials and dignitaries entered Ashurnasirpal II's throne room. Through the interplay of convention and innovation, the reliefs of the throne room express a vision to honor Assyria's rich past by reconstituting the kingdom's traditions in new ways.⁶³ All of the artistic motifs witnessed within the throne room are rooted in a deep iconographic past that carries over from the third and second millennia into the first millennium BCE, yet it is not until the throne room of Ashurnasirpal II that craftsmen bring them together as a unified whole and upon the new medium of carved wall relief.⁶⁴ It is here, in the most important room of the aspiring empire, where the Sacred Tree surrounds its audience on all sides and is a major, if not central, motif on every available panel. This emphasizes the central importance of the Sacred Tree for Assyrian self-understanding, but especially the self-understanding of the king, his staff, and his guests.

The continuity of the Assyrian Sacred Tree image, including the continued incorporation of aspects of the date palm, implies a certain degree of continuity in the symbol's association with abundance and well-being, specifically as enacted through the celestial and terrestrial activities of Ishtar. The idea that the Sacred Tree continues to be associated with the goddess is further supported by a minority of panels within the corpus of Nimrud reliefs that portray the tree as flanked by two female or perhaps androgynous genii who bear items associated with the cult of Ishtar.⁶⁵ Other Neo-Assyrian images of the Sacred Tree include anthropomorphic representations of Ishtar herself, often

62 Here I focus on the main themes of the discussion thus far, as it is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a full summary or account of the status of the question of the Assyrian Sacred Tree. Additional information may be found in references cited.

63 On the Nimrud reliefs as an example of the interplay between convention and innovation in ancient Mesopotamian art, see Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," 8–9.

64 Brian Brown, "Kingship and Ancestral Cult in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud," *JANER* 10 (2010): 23–24.

65 P. Albenda, "The Beardless Winged Genies from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud," *SAAB* 10 (1996): 67–78.

with the eight-pointed star positioned above her head for iconographic clarity and emphasis (fig. 2.3–5).⁶⁶ Yet even if the viewer associates the Sacred Tree of the Nimrud reliefs with Ishtar, its supporting motifs simultaneously detract from and highlight the tree, as the “mirror” or semi-symmetrical composition of the individual panels and the position of the figures therein work together to direct the viewer’s eye from center to periphery and back again.⁶⁷ It is possible that the Sacred Tree may also be understood as a more generic symbol of the nurturing, regenerative, and life-giving powers of the cosmos, but the interpretation of the Sacred Tree as goddess is supported within the panels in a variety of ways. Although she is not always directly represented, the goddess and tree are never disentangled in Mesopotamian thought.

Among the Nimrud reliefs that feature the Sacred Tree, the most common supporting motif is a pair of genii, often portrayed with a pinecone-like object in one hand and a bucket in the other.⁶⁸ These genii echo the caprids and cherubs that appear in the Sacred Tree iconography of earlier periods, with caprids representing the tree’s protective nature and cherubs representing its sacred nature.⁶⁹ Like most Mesopotamian iconographic symbols, the genii and their tools each bear multiple affiliations. Genii are immortal, hybrid creatures with anthropomorphic bodies, bird-like wings, and heads that are either human (usually male) or resemble a bird of prey. The bird aspects of genii speak to their protective and powerful nature, as well as their innate ability to foresee both fortune and danger, while their divinized anthropomorphic aspects and accoutrements suggest the understanding of a sage.⁷⁰ Genii are further affiliated with rituals of purification and protection.

66 Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, SAA IX (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997), xxvii, fig. 8–9; cf. Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 773. Using Assyrian prophetic texts, Parpola argues that Assyrian royal ideology, mythology, and iconography are all intertwined with the cult of Ishtar, with the central symbol of the prophetic cult being the Sacred Tree; Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, xiv–xv. Many scholars either reject or question the validity of his conclusions, yet they remain an active point of discussion in scholarship on the Sacred Tree. For example, see Cooper, “Assyrian Prophecies,” 430–444.

67 On various options for understanding the compositional arrangement of Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, see Chikako E. Watanabe, “Styles of Pictorial Narratives in Assurbanipal’s Reliefs,” in *Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art*, ed. Brian A. Brown and Marian H. Feldman (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 345–368.

68 E.g., British Museum Collection Database, “Stone panel from the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (Room 1),” museum number 124583, www.britishmuseum.org/collection.

69 For example, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 271, 273, 276, 383, 395, 402.

70 Some suggest that genii represent the Seven Sages in human guise. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 87–88.

In the case of the Sacred Trees of Nimrud, the tools that the genii most often use are the bucket and pinecone, referred to in texts as *banduddû*, “bucket,” and *mullilu*, “purifier.”⁷¹ Historically, modern interpreters have assumed that the association of the implements with purification meant that the genii are purifying the tree, which begs the question of why the Sacred Tree might need to be purified.⁷² More recent scholarship suggests that the genii are not purifying the tree or providing it with beneficent attention; because the tree has its own apotropaic and purifying qualities, it is possible that the genii are instead collecting power from the tree that then enables them to purify other objects in other reliefs, such as doorposts, other hybrid creatures, and even the king.⁷³ However, it is also possible that the symbolic action works in both directions, meaning that the purification process involves reciprocal action on the part of both genii and Sacred Tree.

The reciprocal, cyclical nature of the cone and bucket symbolism is also suggested by the fact that this form of ritual mimics the process of artificial fertilization for actual date palms in which farmers shake male inflorescences into the female flower that they may, in turn, reproduce.⁷⁴ The symbolic nature of this purifying and fertilizing gesture, and of the stylized Sacred Tree itself is further emphasized by the fact that it is unclear whether date palms could actually grow in the northern region of Mesopotamia, where Nimrud is located. Such context amplifies the gendered resonance of the Sacred Tree and bucket-cone pairing, especially when combined with a gendered reading of the date (female) and conifer (male), thus drawing attention to the femininity of the Sacred Tree and its position as the center of attention for genii, king, and viewer alike.

Another supporting motif that appears in Sacred Tree iconography of the first millennium is the solar disc.⁷⁵ The incorporation of the solar disc into

71 Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 46.

72 Giovino, *Assyrian Sacred Tree*, 51, 56–58.

73 John Malcolm Russell, “The Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud: Issues in the Research and Presentation of Assyrian Art,” *AJA* 102 (1998): 691. The idea that the beneficial energy moves from the tree to the implement is also inferred by the observation that trees are often an important component of Mesopotamian purification rituals; Osborne, *Trees and Kings*, 69.

74 On the debate over the Sacred Tree and date fertilization, see Giovino, *Assyrian Sacred Tree*, 31–112; see also George Sarton, “The Artificial Fertilization of Date-Palms in the Time of Ashur-nasir-pal B.C. 885–860,” *Isis* XXI (1934): 8–13; Winter, “Tree(s) on the Mountain,” 117.

75 E.g., British Museum Collection Database, “Alabaster wall relief, Nimrud: Palace of Ashurnasirpal II,” museum number 124531, www.britishmuseum.org/collection. The solar disc is

Sacred Tree images marks a continuation of the use of astral figures in the third and second millennia, but the more stylized version known by the specific term “solar disc” also bears a political aspect. Some variations, including those attested in the Nimrud reliefs, feature a male anthropomorphic deity sitting within the disc.⁷⁶ This deity is almost unanimously interpreted as the god Assur, chief deity of Assyria.⁷⁷ It then follows that in instances where the Sacred Tree and solar disc appear together, the image of cosmic fertility is politicized—it is not the Sacred Tree that stands at the center, but *Assyria's* Sacred Tree.⁷⁸

In the Sacred Tree iconography of earlier millennia, the celestial and terrestrial come together through the combination of Sacred Tree and astral motifs; with the addition of the solar disc, the celestial and terrestrial continue to come together, but with more specificity. The connection of the Sacred Tree to the fate of Assyria is made explicit through both solar disc imagery, which appears only occasionally in the Sacred Tree Nimrud reliefs, and the context in which that imagery appears—the king's palace in the new capital. The combination of Sacred Tree and solar disc may represent a beneficent kingship in which the celestial and terrestrial (or cosmic and social) come together for the purposes of furthering the kingdom of Assyria, a concept best expressed through Assyria-specific iconographic language.⁷⁹ On this reading, the solar disc does not usurp the Sacred Tree's central position but complements it, bringing cultural specificity to an image of cosmic importance.⁸⁰

Finally, perhaps the most rare but significant of all of the supporting motifs of the Assyrian Sacred Tree is the king himself (fig. 2.14). From the amount of

another symbol in ancient Mesopotamian art whose precise meaning continues to elude scholars, despite the volume of writing dedicated to it.

- 76 For an example of a solar disc with a male deity perched over a date palm, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 747, 812, 879.
- 77 Lambert and others identify the solar disc in the Nimrud reliefs as Ashur or, perhaps, Ninurta; W.G. Lambert, “Trees, Snakes, and Gods in Ancient Syria and Anatolia,” *BSOAS* 48 (1985): 438–439.
- 78 Michaela Bauks, “Sacred Trees in the Garden of Eden and Their Ancient Near Eastern Precursors,” *JAJ* 3 (2012): 279.
- 79 Celestial and terrestrial: Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning in Neo-Assyrian Relief Sculpture,” 87; cosmic and social: Bauks, “Sacred Trees,” 279; on the status of the Nimrud reliefs as a classically Assyrian art form, Irene J. Winter, “The Program of the Throneroom of Assurnasirpal II,” in Harper and Pittmann, *Essays on Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology*, 15.
- 80 Lambert and others describe the solar disc as dominating the Sacred Tree because it is hovering above it (Lambert, “Trees, Snakes, and Gods in Ancient Syria and Anatolia,” 439). One example of why this is not necessarily the most satisfactory interpretation comes from the glazed brick panel of Sennacherib's palace, where the Sacred Tree is placed above the solar disc.

scholarship on the relation between king and Sacred Tree in Ashurnasirpal II's palace, one might assume that the king and tree appear next to one another on the majority of panels. In reality, images of the king flank the Sacred Tree on only two panels—one positioned directly behind his throne, and one positioned directly across from the side-door that connects the ceremonial room to the throne room.⁸¹ These two strategically placed reliefs both speak to the king's role as the chief-priest of Assyria who is tasked with representing and furthering the powers of life—in particular, Assyrian life—and elaborate upon the Standard Inscription incorporated throughout the room in which Ashurnasirpal calls himself “attentive prince, worshipper of the great gods.”⁸² In contrast with Sumerian and Akkadian literature, which describes kings as the Sacred Tree's gardener, its possessor, or as the tree itself, iconography portrays the king solely as the tree's attendant and as one who is attended to by genii or other divine beings in this venture.⁸³

On this interpretation, the king's success in his role as priest and advocate on behalf of his community depends on his ability to enter into and maintain a reciprocal relationship with the nurturing aspects of the cosmos or goddess symbolized by the Sacred Tree. The genii, protectors and sages of old, support the king in this matter but only the king himself can fulfill the obligations of cult and country that ensure that the divine powers will indeed provide for the prosperity and well-being of the king's people. The force of this nuanced understanding of Sacred Tree symbolism also explains the scene's wide popularity in Assyrian art, including its appearance on royal garments, jewelry, ivories, and contemporary cylinder seals belonging to royal officials—some of which include the eight-pointed star of Ishtar.⁸⁴

81 Winter, “Program of the Throneroom of Assurnasirpal II,” 16–17; the panels picturing the king are rich in detail and highly stylized, with each element of his dress signifying an aspect of his office. According to Mehmet-Ali Ataç, there are enough differences between the two figures of the king (which are otherwise symmetrical) to suggest that these are two different images of the king(s) or kingship; Ataç, *The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 125–129.

82 Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 269–290; on the Standard Inscription as an organizing principle, see Winter, “Program of the Throneroom of Assurnasirpal II,” 24–25. For an in-depth analysis of Winter's proposal, see Russell, “Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud.”

83 On literature, see Geo Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion*, UUA 4 (Uppsala: Lundequist, 1951).

84 On popularity, see Barbara Nevling Porter, “The Meaning of the Assyrian Tree Image: Iconographic Evidence,” in *Trees, Kings, and Politics: Studies in Assyrian Iconography*, OBO 197 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 21–30; on cylinder seals, see Irene

Thus, the complex web of associations borne by the symbol of the Sacred Tree as exemplified in the Nimrud reliefs, both on its own accord and in conversation with various supporting motifs, is best understood as an interweaving of cosmic and terrestrial concerns for the well-being of all life, particularly Assyrian life, and the king's special role as mediator between the particular cosmic deities and human communities that he serves. In bringing together numerous multivalent motifs in close proximity to one another, the designers of the Nimrud reliefs both amplify the more ancient significance of the Sacred Tree as the cosmic and terrestrial provider of the people, and add to that significance a more specific meaning about the office of kingship and the kingdom of Assyria that was particularly relevant to a Mesopotamian audience in the early first millennium BCE.

3.2 *Levant*

The land, cultures, and social systems of the MB and LB Levant were particularly hard hit by the difficulties of the twelfth century BCE, leading to the destruction of the cosmopolitan city of Ugarit and the overall diminishment of Levantine populations and material culture. Among many aspects of life, this situation affected the quantity and types of iconography that people produced. In IA I (1200–1000 BCE) and IA IIA (1000–930 BCE), the connection between the Sacred Tree and anthropomorphic goddess is not as explicit as it is in earlier periods, opening the possibility for viewers to interpret the tree as a generic symbol of abundance and provision or to associate the tree with male deities.⁸⁵ However, the association—even identification—of the Sacred Tree with the mother-goddess persists.

A prime example of the ambiguous nature of the Sacred Tree image in the Iron Age Levant and the ramifications of interpreting the motif one way or another comes not from the archaeological record, but from the biblical text. The author of 1 Kgs 6:29–35 describes the interior of Solomon's temple—all of its cedar-lined walls, the two olivewood doors of the nave, and the two bi-fold cypress doors of the inner chamber—as completely covered with engravings of “cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers” (6:29, 32, 35) overlain in gold. In light

J. Winter, “*Le Palais Imaginaire: Scale and Meaning in the Iconography of Neo-Assyrian Cylinder Seals*,” in Uehlinger, *Images as Media*, 65–68, fig. 13–14; Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 340–341, 345, 347, 351, 355, 879; on garments and jewelry, see Parpola, “Assyrian Tree of Life,” 163; for examples of ivories, see Gubel, “Multicultural and Multimedial Aspects of Early Phoenician Art, c. 1200–675 BCE,” fig. 21, 27, cf. fig. 25.

85 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 42.



FIGURE 2.10 Cylinder Seal, Bet-Shean, IA IIB (Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*, fig. 90)

of comparative materials from the ancient Near East, many interpreters suggest that the tri-fold symbolism of hybrid-creature (cf. Mesopotamian genii, Egyptian sphinx), palm, and flower draw upon contemporary Sacred Tree iconography.

Yet, regardless of whether Solomon's temple was a historical reality or the literary creation of a later author, it is not clear why one would symbolically envelope he who enters the holy place of Yahweh's temple with images of the Sacred Tree. Perhaps it was to demonstrate the monarch's regard for the divine feminine, perhaps it was to bring Yahwistic or king-centered imagery into the confines of the holy place, perhaps it was simply to inspire Yahweh to grant bounty and long-life to the people of Israel, or perhaps it was simply for aesthetics. Depending on one's interpretation of the iconography, allusion to the Sacred Tree motif may serve as a point of either criticism or praise, but sometimes ambiguity is the author's point. The biblical description of the interior of Solomon's temple to Yahweh simultaneously foreshadows, sets precedent for, and reflects the presence of a Sacred Tree tradition witnessed in the archaeological records of Israel and Judah.⁸⁶

The iconographic record of IA IIB includes a few examples of Sacred Trees accompanied by male deities, which may serve as evidence for the masculinization of the Sacred Tree image during this period. For example, Othmar Keel interprets the depiction of young male deity holding a palm tree in each hand,

86 Strange, "Idea of Afterlife in Ancient Israel," 36.

carved upon a bone handle excavated at Hazor, as a representation of Ba'al, and a cylinder seal from Bet-Shean as possibly El and his *asherah* (fig. 2.10).⁸⁷

However, most examples from IA IIB–IIC (930–730; 730–600 BCE) that depict male or androgynous figures show them *facing* the Sacred Tree, either seated with gestures of blessing, standing in supplication, or even dancing.⁸⁸ Some scholars have interpreted the addition of the male figure as a masculinization of the feminine Sacred Tree image, but iconographically these male figures never *become* the Sacred Tree.⁸⁹ They are associated with the tree through their proximity and behavior toward it, but they are not physically incorporated into, identified with, or equated with it as were the goddesses of earlier eras. This leaves room for the Sacred Tree to continue functioning as a symbolic representation of the goddess or as a generic symbol of provision, with male deities or rulers positioned by her side. Furthermore, examples of the goddess-tree association never fully disappear from the iconographic record.

Throughout IA I–IIB, images of female divinities increase in number with a wide variety of regional variation, particularly as one moves from the Mediterranean coast into the central highlands. Along the Phoenician and Philistine coast, nudes accompanied by a variety of supporting motifs, sometimes branches, are the preferred form of goddess representation, while those in the highlands prefer to depict the goddess as a Sacred Tree, replacing the divine nudes of other contexts with images of stylized trees.⁹⁰ Extant images from the central highlands are few, but the pieces that are available—mostly scarabs and early Judean pillar figurines—suggest yet another transition in Levantine Sacred Tree iconography. As part of a larger IA IIB movement toward distancing animal motifs from the sphere of the goddess, partly through depicting animals without gender and partly through removing them altogether, iconographers no longer depict the Sacred Tree as flanked by caprids or cherubs.⁹¹ Instead, the tree towers over two human beings, thus adjusting the message of the iconography so that it now stands as an appeal to or declaration of Sacred Tree devotion rather than a general statement about the nature of the deity invoked (fig. 2.11).

Such generalized images of the Sacred Tree begin to appear in IA I and become more widespread, even mass-produced, in IA II.⁹²

87 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 43–44.

88 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 42–46.

89 On the addition of male figures as a masculinization of the Sacred Tree motif, see Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 42–46.

90 Bloch-Smith, “Acculturating Gender Roles,” 6; Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 41–42.

91 Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 278.

92 Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, 39–41.



FIGURE 2.11

Scarab, Beth-El, IA IIA (Keel, *Goddess and Trees*, fig. 72)

Judean pillar figurines perhaps function similarly. Given the archaeological and textual evidence for the continued worship of at least one female deity who may have been associated with some form of Sacred Tree, it is possible that the Judean pillar figurines serve as three-dimensional combinations of the goddess and her Sacred Tree.⁹³ If this interpretation is correct, then the Judean pillar figurines constitute a new form of Sacred Tree iconography. Not only are they three-dimensional and made inexpensively enough to be found in domestic contexts, but more importantly they are devoid of supporting motifs. The figure's trunk like body, often top-heavy composition, and gesture of offering her breasts, leave the viewer with but one interpretation: partake of what the Sacred Tree has to offer. These figurines appear in the archaeological record starting with the tenth and ninth centuries BCE, and become widely popular in the eighth and seventh centuries, especially in the area of Jerusalem.⁹⁴ It is likely not a coincidence that the increased popularity of the pillar figurines happens to coincide with a renewed interest in goddess worship throughout the highlands.⁹⁵

Any resurgence in goddess worship and the use of Sacred Trees, whether images or live plants, would have been at odds with attempts at the nationalization and forced expansion of the cult of Yahweh in Judah and Jerusalem in the eighth through seventh centuries BCE. Throughout the Torah and the parts of the Deuteronomistic History that are set in the more ancient past, trees and

93 Bloch-Smith, "Acculturating Gender Roles," 10–13. Additionally, Bloch-Smith compares the truncated bodies and offered breasts of the pillar figurines to earlier images of sycamore-Nut in which the tree trunk forms her lower body and she offers her breast(s) to supplicants. For examples of Judean pillar figurines, see Israel Museum, Jerusalem, "Astarte figurines," accession number 68.32.4, 64.67/3, 64.67/4, www.imj.org.il/en/collections.

94 Bloch-Smith, "Acculturating Gender Roles," 13.

95 There is an ongoing debate about the nature of Levantine religious life in the IA. One major point of contention is the existence and extent of goddess worship, specifically that of the goddess Asherah. Relatedly, scholars are also divided as to whether such a goddess was associated with a form of Sacred Tree or whether the association is a modern construct. For a summary of this debate, see William R. Osborne, *Trees and Kings*, 87–97.

plants serve as an important element in the religious lives and ritual actions of Israel's leaders.⁹⁶ However, the imperial stressors and political threats of the eighth through sixth centuries BCE both effected and inspired change in Judah, including strong-handed attempts to promote worship of the national deity at his central shrine.

According to ancient Near Eastern ideas about national deities, strengthening the cult of Yahweh would have strengthened both king and kingdom in turn; therefore, those kings under greatest threat make it a priority to promote the centralized cult at all costs. As part of this larger project, two of Judah's kings made sweeping prohibitions and took action against all non-Yahwistic, non-centralized worship, including the use of the Sacred Tree. The reforms of both Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:3–8) and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:1–27) include “cutting down” cult objects known as *asherah/asherim*, which again may have been a type of Sacred Tree, and also the cult of the goddess Asherah (2 Kgs 23:4), who may have been associated with trees as symbols of agricultural plenty.

However, the success of these reforms appears to be short-lived and localized, as religious affairs return to their former state by the time of the next king and are certainly not enacted beyond Judah's borders. In fact, King Manasseh, successor of Hezekiah, was an avid supporter of non-Yahwistic religion and did much to promote its flourishing in the aftermath of Hezekiah's reform (2 Kgs 22:2–9). As late as the sixth century BCE—a century marked by exile and return throughout the Levant—stylized trees, with or without the motif of caprids, retain their identification with the mother-goddess.⁹⁷ Thus, the symbolism of the divine feminine persists in the Sacred Tree iconography of the Levant from the MB through the IA and beyond, surviving the rise and fall of many kingdoms and cultures, including ancient Israel and Judah.

3.3 *Egypt*

As early as the late third millennium BCE, the Egyptian Pyramid Texts speak of the tree as a life-giving principle from which gods may be born.⁹⁸ For example, the jackal-god Wepwawet is said to have emerged from a tamarisk, and Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, is said to have come forth from the acacia; yet the idea that trees have the power to enliven even the divine is most promi-

96 For example, Gen 18:1; 30:37–41; Exod 3:1–5; Josh 24:26; Judg 4:5, 9:37; 1 Sam 31:13; 1 Kgs 19:5; Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 40–41.

97 Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 43.

98 Billing, *Nut*, 224. A similar statement is made of the *mesu*-tree in various Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian texts.

ment in the mythology and iconography of Osiris.⁹⁹ Osiris is best known as the primeval king who taught the first Egyptians how to govern, create law, and work the land, and for the story of his death and resurrection. According to Osirian mythology, Osiris is the firstborn of Geb and Nut—earth and sky, respectively—and his success as king over humankind stirs great envy in his brother, Set. This inspires Set to trick Osiris, seal him in a wooden chest, and drown him in the Nile. Isis, Osiris' wife and sister, later finds the chest in Phoenicia, where it is enclosed by a *tcheret* (tamarisk or willow) that has been incorporated into the architecture of the king's palace. Isis receives permission to take Osiris home, where she revives him and conceives their first son, Horus. Once Set hears that Osiris is back in Egypt, he finds his body, cuts it into thirteen pieces and buries them throughout the land, but Isis again finds the body and revives Osiris through magic. At the end of the story, which is replete with references to agriculture, natural cycles, and seasons, Osiris' peers judge him as pure and upright, and appoint him as ruler over the dead, while Horus assumes his father's position as earthly king.

The Osiris story serves as an origin story for civilization, law, agriculture, and kingship, with an emphasis on the ability of these institutions to endure persecution and hardship. The official theology of divine kingship begins here, with the idea that the kings and pharaohs of Egypt are incarnations of Osiris' firstborn, Horus, and are therefore direct descendants of the primeval deity who first brought order and governance to humanity. There is even iconographic evidence that the king himself was associated with Sacred Tree through his intimate relation to Horus and Osiris (fig. 2.12).¹⁰⁰

Like all myths, this one developed over time, and its popularity waxed and waned throughout the three and a half millennia that Osiris figured prominently in Egypt and abroad.¹⁰¹ Osiris' association with trees, however, remains a constant part of his identity as god of regeneration and natural cycles. There are other male deities, such as Thoth and Amun-Re, who are associated with trees in various texts and prayers, but in the realm of iconography it is Osiris who dominates the motif.

For many centuries, the Sacred Tree appears as two parallel and complementary traditions, with Nut and her sycamore on one side and Osiris and his willow

99 Oakes and Gahlin, *Ancient Egypt*, 333. The combination of the idea that trees may bear deities and the practice of carving divine images out of wood may have given rise to the practice of including wood carvings of the deceased within tombs.

100 Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 262.

101 Bojana Mojsov, *Osiris: Death and Afterlife of a God* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

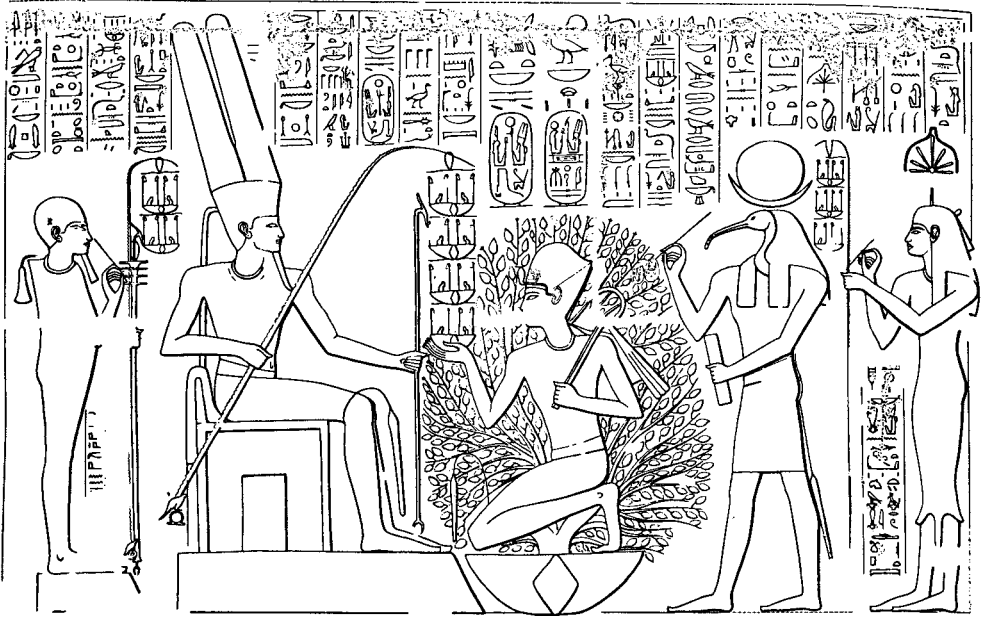


FIGURE 2.12 Sandstone relief: Complex of Ramses III, Medinet Habu, ca. 1165 BCE (Keel, *Symbolism*, fig. 352)

on the other. As the first son of the mother-goddess Nut, as one who is protected by a tree in death, and as the god of afterlife, resurrection, and regeneration, it then follows that the mythology and iconography of Osiris would overlap with that of Nut, including their mutual association with trees. For example, sycamore-Nut's acts of revivification, provision, and protection on behalf of the deceased are also performed by Osiris but in the form of spells and prayers, and as Nut is associated with the sycamore and portrayed as a goddess-tree hybrid, so too is Osiris associated with the willow and portrayed as awaiting resurrection, nestled within its trunk and branches (fig. 2.13).¹⁰²

Relatedly, just as live sycamores were placed near tombs as a symbol of Nut, so willow groves were planted at presumably empty tombs marking traditional sites where parts of Osiris' body were once buried (fig. 2.14).¹⁰³

102 For examples, see Pierre Koemoth, *Osiris et les arbres: Contribution à l'étude des arbres sacrés de l'Égypte ancienne*, *Ægyptiaca Leodiensia* 3 (Liège: Université de Liège, 1994), 83, 141, 144, 146, 150, 155.

103 Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art*, 117; for examples, see Koemoth, *Osiris et les arbres*, 103, 172.

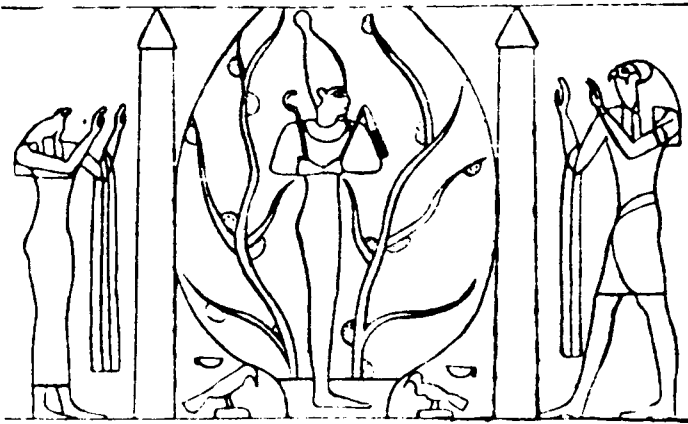


FIGURE 2.13 Painting on a sarcophagus, Dynasty 23 (Koemoth, *Osiris et les arbres*, 144)

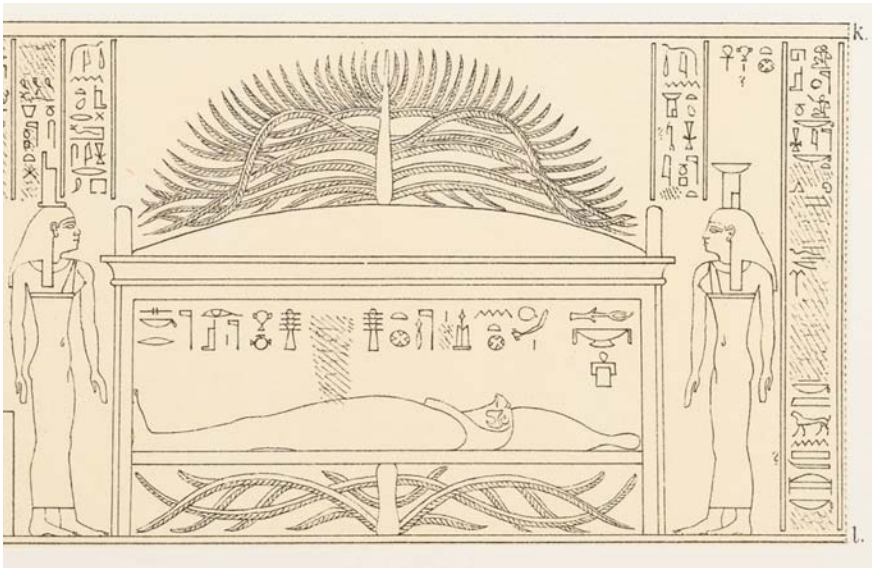


FIGURE 2.14 Painting of Osirian mound, New Kingdom (Mariette, *Dendérah*, vol. IV, pl. 66)

These groves served as the location for the annual “raising of the willow” ritual celebration, which included libation offerings at the base of the tree and encouraged Osiris to bring forth vegetation in season.¹⁰⁴ In iconography

¹⁰⁴ Oakes and Gahlin, *Ancient Egypt*, 333.

and perhaps also in reality, these tombs consisted of a chamber covered by an earthen mound with *tcheret*-trees growing beside or on top.¹⁰⁵

While it is Isis who receives credit for revivifying Osiris in Osirian mythology, funerary contexts attribute his revivification to Nut, his mother.¹⁰⁶ Recall from the previous section that Nut, in her dual identity as both primeval mother-goddess and inner sarcophagus, is responsible for the absorption and regeneration of the deceased, in addition to their provision. This responsibility applies to deceased humans and deities alike, thus marking Nut and her sycamore as having utmost power over natural cycles, including the life-cycles of the gods. Through divine genetics and turns of events, Osiris inherits some of Nut's powers but he never supersedes her in her role as mother-goddess over all life.

Yet over time, the sycamore of Nut, as well as many other species of tree, become associated exclusively with Osiris and resurrection. One reason is the steady decline of the use of funerary texts and objects, where sycamore-Nut figures most prominently, beginning in the twenty-first dynasty and coming to an end by the twenty-second (945–715 BCE).¹⁰⁷ The main reason for the shift in Sacred Tree iconography, however, is the ever-increasing popularity of Osiris throughout Egypt and abroad. The process of what Pierre Koemoth calls the *Osirianisation* (“Osirianization”) of the Sacred Tree motif may be glimpsed as early as the New Kingdom, with a few examples appearing in the twentieth and twenty-fifth dynasties (1186–1169; 780–656 BCE).¹⁰⁸ Throughout the Third Intermediate Period (1069–656 BCE), the number of temples dedicated to Osiris increased and with them the number of rituals involving trees. For example, some temples practice a form of tree-cult in which officiants place libations and food offerings under trees within sacred groves, many of which were planted near canals or other waterways symbolically reminiscent of the life-giving waters of the Nile.¹⁰⁹ The goal of these and other offerings and rituals is to elicit Osiris, who dwells in the netherworld, so that he may promote vegetation growth and revivify hibernating plants using seasonal floodwaters.¹¹⁰

These ritual actions and contemporary images of *tcheret*-Osiris receiving offerings from devotees speak to a turn in the symbolic language related to

105 Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art*, 117; Koemoth, *Osiris et les arbres*, 292–293.

106 Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 169–173. In some texts, Nut rebirths Osiris in the form of the sun, which adds yet another connection between Osiris and the natural cycles of “death” and regeneration.

107 Mojsov, *Osiris*, 95.

108 Koemoth, *Osiris et les arbres*, 179–224.

109 Koemoth, *Osiris et les arbres*, 162–163.

110 Hays, “There is Hope for a Tree,” 52–54.

Sacred Trees. Although the scenes are quite similar in terms of aesthetics, the action of the scene is opposite of that witnessed in sycamore-Nut iconography of the New Kingdom in which the deity-tree actively provides nourishment to supplicants, rather than the supplicants providing nourishment for the deity-tree. Through these subtle differences, the message of the image shifts. Rather than communicating the nurturing nature of the deity who for all eternity provides for and protects all who rest under her shade, Sacred Tree iconography now communicates that offerings to Osiris, presumably at the local temple, are necessary for a season of agricultural well-being.

This new orientation toward the Sacred Tree is part of a gradual increase in the popularity of Osiris, beginning in the New Kingdom and leading to the full Osirianization of the Sacred Tree motif by the Greco-Roman period.¹¹¹ Alongside the flourishing of the Sacred Tree motif, with both Nut and Osiris as its center, the New Kingdom also saw the rise and fall of the world's first known attempt at monotheism. Introduced by Amenhotep IV, who later renamed himself Akhenaten (r. 1352–1336 BCE), the sole worship of the sun-god Aten disrupted Egypt's longstanding traditions in which Osiris figured prominently, and was rejected upon the king's death. However, as Bojana Mojsov states, "[Akhenaten's monotheism] had such a profound effect on religious thought that it became impossible to return to the old ways without attempting a reformation."¹¹² Thus, reformation is exactly what Akhenaten's young successor, Tutankhamen (r. 1336–1327 BCE), enacted, with the rejuvenation, development, and spread of the cult of Osiris as his primary point of activism. Over the next 1,400 years, the popularity of Osiris shifted numerous times, along with the stability of the region and the state of politics in Egypt and the ancient world in general. By the Late Period (664–332 BCE), Osiris and his trees figured prominently throughout the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, while images of sycamore-Nut remained literally underground until their excavation in the nineteenth century CE.

4 Conclusion

Ancient Near Eastern images of the Sacred Tree are symbolic entities where the lived experience of nature meets the iconographic imagination, and there flourishes a semiotic language, ripe with meaning and always open to yield-

¹¹¹ Koemoth, *Osiris et les arbres*, 179–224.

¹¹² Mojsov, *Osiris*, 69.

ing more. At its most basic level, the Sacred Tree symbolizes the relationship between the natural cycles and processes necessary for human life and flourishing, on one hand, and humankind's dependence on the nurturing, protective activities of the divine realm, on the other hand. From place to place and era to era, this symbolism takes on different nuances and associations, and does so in a way that does not diminish its core definition but rather enhances it by meeting each audience anew—including the innumerable audiences of Genesis 2–3, where the Sacred Tree becomes known as the “tree of life.”

To use the tree's own metaphor, the symbol of the Sacred Tree is rooted in an ancient past while her branches sway in the shifting winds of history. This ancient past is one in which the terrestrial concerns of sustenance and protection, and the role of cosmic activity in addressing those concerns are central in the iconographic imagination. As time moves forward, these concerns endure and to them are added concerns over the fate of particular communities, kingdoms, and empires. This shift is evidenced by the changes in Sacred Tree iconography at the dawn of the first millennium BCE, when iconographers bring together for the first time the themes of kingship, the divine feminine, and cosmic provision. The fact that the Sacred Tree is accompanied by a wide variety of supporting motifs and is found on special objects dating from the fourth millennium onward, from professional seals, to household devotional objects, funerary objects, jewelry, sacred architecture, and more, speaks to the ability of the symbol to move fluidly through space and time, and to accrue new layers of significance in a way that renders it ever more timeless. It is fitting, then, that like all of the Sacred Tree's iconographers, the biblical authors would maintain the symbol's basic connection to eternal life and divinely sanctioned abundance, and at the same time add their own layers of significance, rendering it anew for their intended audience.

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