

THE SECRET OF THE TREE OF LIFE

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A reoccurring symbol that is found throughout the ages and mythologies of the world is the Tree of Life. It is an object and an experience that is related to both wisdom and immortality. According to the Biblical account, the first man and woman were banished from the garden of Eden before they had the chance to discover what this special object was. So what exactly is the Tree of Life?

The first mention of this object appears in the following passage:

And the Lord God said, Behold the man has become like one of us, to know good and evil: and now, he must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever.

—*Genesis 3.22*

This symbol is mentioned again in the Book of Proverbs, where we read that it was an object that was considered to be "righteous," and that those who partake of it become "happy" and "wise."

It is not mentioned again until the last book of the New Testament in the book of Revelation, where we are told that it was a object that was offered as a reward by God for those who have proved themselves worthy. What is especially significant about these passages is that they all describe the Tree of Life in positive terms.

So why then was it forbidden?

The first reference to something resembling the Tree of Life does not actually come from the *Bible*, but from an earlier Mesopotamian (Sumero-Akkadian) story called the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This is significant because the Mesopotamian civilizations played a role in influencing the cultures of the Near East, including the Judeans and Israelites.

According to the story, a king named Gilgamesh set out on a quest for a legendary "Plant of Immortality." However, the Plant of Life was not easy to obtain because the gods (who are referred to in the plural term "Elohim" in the Biblical version) had hidden it away from humankind so that no mortal human may possess its power.

In the Gilgamesh story, we see that what seems to be the Tree of Life is represented not as a literal tree, but rather as a "plant." This is also how it is portrayed in a text found among the Dead Sea Scrolls called the Thanksgiving Psalms as well:

There concealed among the trees drinking water are other trees of life near springs of mystery, which issues shoots of an eternal Plant, and before they flower they expose their roots to the waters of life and become the eternal fountain. . . the rich Plant near the eternal fountain is a park of glory, is Eden.

—*The Thanksgiving Psalms*
(Psalm 14)

In one version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, we are told of not only a Plant of Immortality, but of a sacred *Hulluppu* tree. Like the Plant of Life, this unusual tree was also guarded by a serpent. In this version of the story, Gilgamesh's friend, Enkidu, retrieves the tree but falls into the underworld of the dead—which may be a reference to the unworthiness of Enkidu to receive such a divine sacrament; which of course, is reminiscent of the Biblical story as well.

The Sumerian Hullupu Tree may also be related to the Babylonian/Assyrian *Mesu* Tree. In the Mesopotamian *Erra and Ishum* text for example, there is a report of a Mesu tree that “reach by its roots the bottom of the underworld and by its top the heaven of the god Anu.”

After a series of trials, Gilgamesh eventually locates the elusive Plant of Life; however, just as he is about to take it, it is stolen away by a snake. Although, before this happens we are given a brief description of this mysterious object:

. . . he saw the plant of rich rose color and ambrosial shimmering
in the water like a prism of the sunlight . . .

—*The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Ambrosia is a word that is derived from the original Greek word *ambrotos*, which literally means “immortal.” Ambrosia is known in Greek mythology as the nectar of the immortal gods. The following Vedic Hindu passage tells us that the partaking of the “ambrosia” (or *amrita*, as it is known in Sanskrit) was an experience that was reserved for the gods alone:

. . . promise them that by drinking the ambrosia they shall become
immortal. But I shall see to it that they have no share of the water of
life, but theirs shall be the labor only.

—*The Churning of the Ocean*

The “water of life”—which is the ambrosia that is made from the Tree of Life—was not to be imbibed by the lowly servants of the gods. This special elixir was referred to in the ancient Hindu Vedic scriptures as “Soma.”

The word Soma appears frequently throughout the ancient Hindu scriptures. The exact ingredients of this elixir was known only to the gods and the initiated elite.

One thinks that he has drunk the Soma when they press the plant.
But the Soma that the Brahmins know—no one ever eats that.
Hidden by those charged with veiling you, protected by those who
live on high, O Soma, you stand listening to the pressing stones.
No earthling eats you. When they drink you who are a god, then
you are filled up again.

—*Rig Veda*
The Marriage of Surya

Some of the initiated elite were a class of priests known as the *Brahmins*. It was the Brahmin's job it was to prepare the Soma and to guard this secret of the gods.

Like the Mesopotamian Plant of Life, Soma allegedly had the ability to make the user become wise and live forever. To attain this experience was the ultimate goal of the mystic yogis and holy men of India. According to the Vedic texts, these *Rishis* (“Seers”) ritualistically partook of Soma in order to raise themselves up from out of the world of man and into the sublime realm of the eternal gods.

By drinking that spell-blessed nectar, what godly sensation! What
freedom from earthly bounds.

—*Kularnava Tantra*

Scholars believe that Soma was a drink made of a mixture of milk, honey, and some other ingredient that gave it its special properties. The texts allude to the clue that this extra ingredient may have come from a type of plant:

You plants whose king is Soma, spread out over the earth as you
were sent by Brhaspati: unite your power in this point.

—*Rig Veda*
The Healing Plants

The immortal elixir of life also appears in the writings of the Zoroastrians of Persia as well, where it is referred to as “Haoma”:

Saoshyant with his assistants slaughter ceremonially an ox, from
whose fat and the white Haoma drink of immortality is prepared,
which is given to all men, who become thereby immortal forever.

—*The Bundahish*
(Book of Creation)

According to the Zoroastrian *Avesta* text, Haoma was made from a special type of "plant." The Zoroastrian *Bundahishn* text (also known as *The Knowledge of Zand*), tells us that Haoma was a liquid that was distilled from the "Gaokerena Tree"; a tree that was said to have the ability to "restore the dead."

The existence of a sacred tree of the gods is not restricted to the cultures of the Near and Far East alone. It is also recorded in the Scandinavian mythologies of the *Edda* text as well (800-1100 C.E.). According to the legend, in his quest to obtain wisdom, the god Wodan (also known as Odin) hung on the *Yggdrasil* World Tree for nine days. During this time, he entered a trance and obtained wisdom and rebirth.

It is a story that is also reminiscent of the experience of the Buddha, who attained enlightenment while "sitting" under the *Bodhi* (wisdom) Tree. It was during this process that the consciousness of the Buddha was awakened and he broke through the veil of delusion and achieved higher states of awareness.

In Buddhist legend . . . the whole sense of the teaching is that one should penetrate that guarded gate and discover that tree—the *Bodhi*-tree, the tree of the "Waking to Omniscience," which is the very tree beneath which the Buddha saw when he opened to mankind the way of release from those same two conditions [desire and fear]

—Joseph Campbell,
The Mythic Image

In the following Buddhist verse, we find a reference to the "nectar of immortality" that gives "life" and awakens "consciousness":

As a blind man feels when he finds a pearl in a dustbin, so am I
amazed by the miracle of awakening rising in my consciousness. It
is the nectar of immortality that delivers us from death, the treasure
that lifts us above poverty into the wealth of giving to life, the tree
that gives shade to us when we roam about scorched by life. . .

—Shatideva,
The Bodhicharyavatara

Based on these findings, we know that the Tree of Life was both a literal organic object, as well as a mystical experience that bestowed "eternal life" and "wisdom." Amazingly, such a substance that can be related to this experience does in fact exist. It is a substance that is classified as an *entheogen*.

The word entheogen is a term that is derived from the Greek root-words for “god within.” An entheogen can be defined by any psychotropic substance that is used for a religious, shamanic, or spiritual purpose. This experience is also more commonly referred to as "psychedelic." The word psychedelic is derived from the Greek word *psyche*, which means soul or spirit, (although in modern-times it has also come to mean the mind as well), and *delic*, from the Greek word *delos*, meaning to “manifest” or to “clarify.”

Benny Shanon, a professor of cognitive psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, published his theory in the *Time and Mind Journal of Philosophy*, that Moses may have been under the influence of entheogens when he was communing with God. He believes that the substance that was used was most likely the bark of the regional acacia tree which contains alkaloid compounds that are psychoactive in human-beings. The acacia tree is also repeatedly mentioned throughout the Old Testament/*Tanakh*, where it is also referred to as *Shittah* or *Shittam* wood (Isaiah 41.19/Exodus 26.15). Professor Shanon came to this conclusion after experiencing “visions that had spiritual-religious connotations” while under the influence of the psychotropic *ayahuasca* plant in a Brazil rainforest.

Indeed, the ancient Egyptians considered the acacia tree to be the Tree of Life. According to their mythology, the first gods were said to have been born under this special tree. Beside the acacia tree, there are also other entheogens that can be found in that region of the world as well. Another possible candidate for the Plant of Life is the “Blue Lotus” (*Nymphaea Caerulea*), which was a flower that could be found along the Nile river in ancient Egypt. The Sacred Lotus Lily is a plant that contains hypnotic alkaloid sedatives that can produce states of euphoria and enhanced perception. The lotus was not only represented in the hieroglyphs of the ancient Egyptians, but repeatedly mentioned as an object that was affiliated with the Buddha and enlightenment. This would also correspond with the account given in the Gilgamesh story of a rose colored plant in the water. However, there may have still been yet other substances that may have been used as well.

In the 1960s, the amateur mycologist, R. Gordon Wasson, examined similar questions when he researched and published his consequential work on the identity and history of Soma. After extensive travels in the Far East, he drew the following conclusion:

In a word, my belief is that soma is the Divine Mushroom of Immortality, and that in the early days of our culture, before we made use of reading and writing, when the Rgveda [*sic*] was being composed, the prestige of this miraculous mushroom ran by word of mouth far and wide throughout Eurasia, well beyond the regions where it grew and was worshiped.

—R. Gordon Wasson,
The Divine Mushroom of Immortality

Although psilocybin-bearing mushrooms are not indigenous to the arid regions of the western Middle-East, the conditions would have been favorable in Eden, the artificial garden type of environment that was located in the Biblical “land between two rivers.” This could explain why access to the Tree of Life was not possible for the first man and women outside of the garden environment.

Perhaps a reason why the mushroom was related to a tree may have come from its propensity to sprout up on old or dying trees. This may be what is referred to in the previously cited extra-Biblical *Thanksgiving Psalms* text, in which an “eternal Plant” said to have been found in the watery springs of Eden, “concealed among the trees.” Although, the most likely reason is that the true identity of this substance needed to be protected in order to preserve the divine secret, which would explain why so much symbolism was used. This policy of secrecy is what the Buddha referred to in the following verse:

the [Dharma Flower] sutra is the treasury of the Buddha’s secrets and essentials. It must not be distributed or falsely presented to people. That which the Buddha’s, the World Honored Ones, have guarded from the distant past until now, has never been explicitly taught.

—*The Lotus Sutra*

References to the great secret can be found in the Hindu record as well:

That which is hidden in the secret Upanishads of the Veda, Brahma knows to be the source of Brahman [God]: The ancient seers who knew it shared in its nature and became immortal.

—*Svetasvatara Upanishad*

The ancient texts indicate that the Tree of Life made the user become “immortal” and “live forever.” What exactly does this mean? We know that it was not literal physical immortality, but something that was related to mind and spirit.

. . . blessed be he . . . to whom he gave the Torah of truth, the Tree of Life. Whoever takes hold of this achieves life in this world and in the world to come.

—*The Kabbalah Zohar*

The Tree of Life has the ability to reveal the spiritual self and perhaps even aspects of the spiritual world; the same realm that Jesus referred to as the eternal abode of his Heavenly Father—i.e. the realm of “everlasting life.” It is a world that seems to be transcendent of the physical decay of matter, hence the references to immortality. Indeed, the Soma ceremony was not only described as a “righteous” experience that was used for “healing” and to “drivest death afar,” but a substance that was “nutritious for the soul,” which signifies that there was a spiritual element to this experience. Indeed, clinical studies have shown that the LSD entheogen may have some valuable potential as a means to facilitate spiritual awareness.

The following passage, which is found in an ancient Hermetic text (*circa* 3rd century B.C.E.), reinforces the idea that immortality is not physical, but rather both psychological and spiritual:

Leap free of everything that is physical, and grow vast as that
immeasurable vastness; step beyond all time and become eternal;
then you will perceive God. Realize that nothing is impossible for
you; recognize that you too are immortal and that you can embrace
all things in your mind; . . .

—*The Egyptian Hermetic Essays*

The concept of immortality in relation to the Tree of Life not only seems to pertain to the spirit, but to the psychological state of mind that is brought about by the entheogen.

Everyone already has the lamp of mind, but it is necessary to light
it so that it shines; then this is immortality.

—*Secret of the Golden Flower*

The Opening of the Mysteries of the Golden Flower

It is not only a spiritual and mental experience, but an emotional one as well.

This is the King Soma, the food of the gods, and the gods eat it
When someone eats that food . . . , from him one comes into being
again.

—*Chandogya Upanishad*

The human kings and shamans of ancient Earth were apparently using the Tree of Life to awaken their consciousness and raise themselves up to the level of gods—which is reminiscent of the Tower of Babel story. This would explain the Elohim's reluctance to allow the early human beings to partake of such a profound experience at such a primitive stage.

It is necessary to also consider that the Tree of Life was not the first divine object in the garden of Eden. The first was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. According to the Genesis story, the (symbolic) "serpent" character showed Eve the "fruit," and she saw that it was "pleasant" to the eyes," and that it was a "tree to be desired." Eve partook from the tree and gave to her husband." And the "eyes of both of them were opened," and they realized that they were naked. The experience then compelled them to sew fig-leaves together to cover themselves. We know that this was a reference to sexual intercourse because not only was it a seduction experience that was to be "desired," but they covered their naked bodies after words. Another clue that brings us to the same conclusion is that the Biblical term for sex was to *know*—hence the term "tree of *knowledge*":

And Adam *knew* his wife; and she conceived and bore Cain.

—*Genesis 4.1*

The appendix title: “of good and evil” is a reference to the Biblical sense of this term, where good was equated with obedience, and evil defined as disobedience.

It can therefore be concluded that the two so-called "trees" in the book of Genesis, relate to sex and so-called "drugs." In fact, the ban on (pre-marital) sex and psychedelic stimulants coincides with the practices and beliefs of the religious devotees of this tradition to this very day.

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