

The Message of the Trees in the Midst of the Garden

Sigve K. Tonstad
Loma Linda University

I. The Trees in the Garden

“The Hebrew Bible is terse, it does not use three words where two or one or none will do,” says Pamela Tamarkin Reis.¹ This view surely applies to the passage concerning the trees in the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis.

Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Gen 2:9)

If economy of words is a feature of the Hebrew Bible generally, it rises to dizzying levels in this passage. Gerhard von Rad, citing an unnamed source, refers to this portion of Scripture as “one of the greatest accomplishments of all times in the history of thought,” adding that “[w]onderful clarity and utter simplicity characterize the representation of the individual scenes.”² His admiration, it must be noted, is primarily of the disproportion between “the meagerness of [the author’s] resources” and the magnitude of the message that is communicated. Nahum Sarna, contrasting the Genesis narrative with other ancient attempts

¹ Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “What Cain Said: A Note on Genesis 4.8,” *JSOT* 27 (2002): 110.

² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, 2nd ed. (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; London: SCM, 1963), 24.

TONSTAD: THE MESSAGE OF THE TREES

to write an account of human beginnings, likewise notes that “[t]he Hebrew account is matchless in its solemn and majestic simplicity.”³

To many a reader, however, this passage is more simple than clear. The economy of words is cause for despair, not praise. While the writer may not use “three words where two or one or none will do,”⁴ the reader may be yearning precisely for the words the author omits.

Three items are specified in the passage that introduces the trees: God has created trees “pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9). It is evident that the two named trees are the author’s particular interest, although they share important characteristics with the unnamed trees. Given that the trees that God made to grow in general terms are said to be “pleasant to the sight and good for food,” we should expect this feature to apply to the named trees as well. This question need not be left on the level of assumption. In regard to the third item on the list, “the tree of knowledge of good and evil,” we are later informed that this tree “was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes” (Gen 3:6). As to beauty and apparent utility, the named trees are not inferior to the other trees in the garden.

The tree of life was “in the midst of the garden” (Gen 2:9). To be at the center in terms of location is also to be at the center in terms of importance. The location of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is not specified at the point where the tree is introduced to the reader, but the text implies that the two named trees are paired. Again, we are helped by information supplied at a later point. In the woman’s answer to the serpent she refers to it as the tree “in the middle of the garden” (Gen 3:2). To the extent that location signifies importance, the tree of knowledge is an item of high priority. The notion that it is “incidental that there are two trees,” as suggested by Walter Brueggemann, is not persuasive.⁵ If, too, there is a movement in the text from the simple to the sublime, an order of priority from lesser to greater, and a trajectory from lower to higher, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil occupies a position of spectacular distinction. This tree seems “good for food, and . . . a delight to the eyes” (Gen 3:6), and it is located “in the middle of the garden” (Gen 3:2).

³ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 10.

⁴ Reis, “What Cain Said,” 110.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 45.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The exceptional character of this tree applies not only to its location but also to its role in the story. A “tree of life” is known in other ancient narratives of origins but not a tree of knowledge. Sarna claims that this tree “has no parallel outside of our biblical Garden of Eden story.”⁶ Attention in the story is focused on this tree even more than on the tree of life, further highlighting its importance.⁷ I am therefore tempted to add one word concerning this tree where the writer thought that none would do, “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and [even] the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9). In order to forestall a ho-hum reading, it may be appropriate to end the sentence with an exclamation mark. In short, we do well to pay attention to this tree and the message it represents.

II. An Expression of Core Convictions

Having ascertained that purpose and priority are in view, we are ready to hear the instruction that is given with respect to the tree of knowledge.

And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Gen 2:16-17)

Where should we place the emphasis in this statement? Considering the statement as a whole, should the focus be on permission or on restriction? Considering the tree of knowledge, is the prohibition not to eat of the tree of knowledge meant as a restriction? What is the message of this unique tree?

A reading that puts the weight on quantitative parameters leaves the impression that the prohibition not to eat of the tree imposes a restriction. In a garden of 3000 trees, choosing this number for the purpose of illustration, one tree is now forbidden territory. The arithmetic is easy. 2999 trees is one less than 3000, and the difference, albeit a small one, signifies a restriction. In quantitative terms, a person is more restricted who has access to 2999 trees rather than to 3000.

James Barr registers a strident objection to the story not only because it is imposing a restriction but also because the alleged restriction lacks

⁶ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 26.

⁷ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 26.

TONSTAD: THE MESSAGE OF THE TREES

even the slimmest of hints at good sense.⁸ His rhetoric is unsparing: Barr refers to “the sheer irrationality of the command,” aggravated by the fact that it threatens with death “the slightest deviation from the slightest divine command”; worse yet, the command is “devoid of perceptible ethical basis”; still worse, God “has made an ethically arbitrary prohibition, and backed it up with a threat to kill, which in the event, he does nothing to carry out.”⁹ Adding up the dubious ingredients associated with the tree of knowledge, God is the one “who is placed in a rather ambiguous light.”¹⁰ This assessment goes beyond a mere quantitative assessment, but one should be careful not to miss the uncharitable and sterile logic underlying it. Deprivation of freedom is the name of the game. The tree of knowledge represents a meaningless restriction to the point that, if it were not stated clearly enough already, God is the person who “comes out of this story with a slightly shaky moral record.”¹¹ The serpent that speaks later in the story (Gen 3:1-5), also operating within a quantitative framework, will not say it better or more forcefully.

If, however, our reading takes the qualitative route, the result will be quite different. What the quantitative measure construes as a restriction has exactly the opposite significance when we measure the tree of knowledge with a qualitative measuring stick. Now it is not the raw number of trees that matters but their meaning. In this scenario the quality of human existence is not to be measured according to material parameters but in spiritual and political terms. Where the quantitative assessment is forced to register a subtraction, placing the tree of knowledge in the column of loss, the qualitative approach sees in the tree an added quality, recording it in the column of gain.

R. W. L. Moberly says of the command as a whole that “God’s words had emphasized freedom—the man could eat of every tree with only one prohibited.”¹² This view is good as far as it goes, but it suffers under the implied quantitative constraint. In other words, freedom is the predominant emphasis, restriction the lesser one, but there is nevertheless a restriction. An unapologetic qualitative reading is altogether different, construing the apparent restriction not as a limitation of freedom but as its confirmation. First, as Sidney Greidanus suggests, “God is good in

⁸ James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 12.

⁹ Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 12.

¹⁰ Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 12.

¹¹ Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 13.

¹² R. W. L. Moberly, “Did the Serpent Get It Right?” *JTS* 39 (1988): 6.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

giving this commandment, for they are free to eat from any tree in the Garden, including the tree of life, with one exception.”¹³ Second, however, and contrary not only to the most intuitive interpretation but also to Barr’s critique, the prohibition is not really intended as a restriction. “This one prohibition is also good because God treats man as a free moral agent,” says Greidanus.¹⁴ The added quality of the forbidden tree is the quality of choice.

In this scenario, consent and choice are set forth as core ingredients of God’s way. When the tree of knowledge is viewed qualitatively, the thought of seeing it removed is more disturbing than the thought of keeping it precisely with respect to the point that is unsettling within the quantitative framework. The latter sees less freedom, the former sees more. Indeed, the qualitative reading sees freedom itself. Remove the tree of knowledge, this logic suggests, and what is thereby removed is not the opportunity to eat but the reality of choice. We might wish to qualify this view by admitting that the author, through the symbolism of the tree, “teaches that the human person is free in all respects but one: determining what is right and wrong solely on the basis of human insight,”¹⁵ but even this admission should not take away from the tree the connotation that choice itself is the primary function of the tree. Here we find the ‘voting booth’ of the Garden of Eden, the place where human beings are freely offered an opportunity to express approval or disapproval with respect to the terms of their existence.

At this point it is appropriate to recall that the text of Genesis, as noted, is a text of few words, placing more responsibility on the shoulders of the reader than the reader feels like carrying. More than one option is available to the interpreter, and many more than the ones that have been sampled so far. Nevertheless, computing evidence that lies on the surface of the text, we cannot treat the two named trees in the Garden of Eden dismissively. The trees share conspicuous characteristics. They are acts of God, located in the middle of the garden. What “the Lord God made to grow” is redolent with intent and importance. The sparse account tells us something about the Person who does these things. In theological and ideological terms, I suggest that the named trees should be

¹³ Sidney Greidanus, “Preaching Christ from the Narrative of the Fall,” *BSac* 161 (2004): 266.

¹⁴ Greidanus, “Preaching Christ from the Narrative of the Fall”: 266.

¹⁵ Paul F. Scotchmer, “Lessons from Paradise on Work, Marriage, and Freedom: A Study of Genesis 2:4-3:24,” *ERT* 28 (2004): 81-82.

TONSTAD: THE MESSAGE OF THE TREES

seen as core convictions of the Agent behind these actions. The acting subject in the account, rather than the narrator, is in the process of achieving not only “one of the greatest accomplishments of all times in the history of thought,” as in von Rad’s version,¹⁶ but a costly and generous ideological commitment. This commitment, in turn, admitting that the Hebrew Bible has left out the explanatory notes that would simplify the task of interpretation, should broadly speaking be seen as the gift of freedom. Limiting the options even more so as to avoid a comprehensive discussion of the elusive notion of freedom, the part of ‘freedom’ that this essay finds enshrined in the tree of knowledge is the absence of coercion.

If this seems like a timid aspiration and a peripheral concern, what follows might prove otherwise. Brueggemann, who sees in the text concerning the tree of knowledge a triplet denoting *vocation*, *permission*, and *prohibition*, finds that little attention has been given to the mandate of vocation or the gift of permission.¹⁷ In the eyes of many interpreters, says Brueggemann, God’s will for vocation and freedom has been lost to the effect that God “is chiefly remembered as the one who *prohibits*.”¹⁸ This is not an exaggeration, nor is it worded strongly enough. God has been seen not only as a God who *prohibits* but also as a God who *coerces*, even though, as the present interpretation sees it, the ideology that is revealed in the Garden of Eden is precisely and emphatically an ideology that eschews coercion. The writer of Genesis leaves it to the interpreter to name the unnamed idea and to ponder its implication, and this is just what interpreters have done.

III. Pursuing the Meaning of the Tree of Knowledge

The tree of life is virtually self-explanatory, but how has the tree of knowledge of good and evil been understood? How should it be understood, knowing the role this tree plays in the remainder of the narrative and the downward course emerging from its conspicuous location in the midst of the garden?

1. The Politics of Paradise. To early Christian interpreters of the Genesis story, the message of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is that human beings are meant to be free moral agents along the lines suggested above. God’s intention for humanity is life as revealed in the tree

¹⁶ von Rad, *Genesis*, 24.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 46.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 46.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

of life, but life as such is not the whole story. Sarna seems to operate within the boundaries of the text when he assigns a subordinate role to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden story, but he exaggerates when he claims that the Bible relegates this tree to an insignificant role and that Scripture, in his words, “dissociates itself completely” from the implied pre-occupation with immortality.¹⁹ One should nevertheless listen to the Jewish point of view that the concern of the story “is with the issues of living rather than with the question of death, with morality rather than mortality.”²⁰

In the eyes of the earliest Christian interpreters, the ideology of the tree of knowledge is the ideology of freedom. Its political corollary entails repudiation of coercion. The tree of knowledge embodies the means by which God’s will is to come to expression in the lives of human beings; it is to happen freely, without compulsion or force. Elaine Pagels has written lucidly about the early Christian understanding of Genesis under the title of “The Politics of Paradise.”²¹ Adopting the political angle, the tree of knowledge stands as a political and constitutional statement whose message is freedom.

If, as suggested above, we see the tree of knowledge as a ‘core conviction,’ it will be worthwhile to listen to what early Christian interpreters say about this conviction in the context of the Genesis creation account, using the Christian apologist Origen (185-254 AD) as an example. According to Origen, God “will subject all rational creatures to himself through *persuasion*, not through constraint, and thus bring their freedom to fulfillment in obedience to the divine will.”²² An individual “should not be compelled by force against its free choice to any action except that to which the motions of its own mind lead it,” says Origen.²³ By these and other statements, Origen is remembered as a leading exponent of freedom, and freedom, as Origen sees it, is “the most general of all the

¹⁹ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 27.

²⁰ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 27.

²¹ Elaine Pagels, “The Politics of Paradise; Augustine’s Exegesis of Genesis 1-3 versus that of John Chrysostom,” *HTR* 78 (1985): 67-99.

²² John R. Sachs, “Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 628.

²³ *Origen on First Principles* (trans. G. W. Butterworth; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936), II.1.2.

TONSTAD: THE MESSAGE OF THE TREES

laws of the universe.”²⁴ The terms of human existence were originally constituted under the rubric of freedom. Until Origen’s time and for another half century or so, declining upon the ascent of the emperor Constantine, this view represents the thrust of the Christian interpretation of the Genesis narrative of the fall.

Further corroboration is in order for this view to be sustained, but on the whole I find it easy to agree with the tenor of the early Christian understanding. Absent the tree of knowledge, a thought experiment I have attempted many times in various contexts, I have not been the only one concluding that human existence would thereby be deprived of choice, consent, and even responsibility. Were the tree of knowledge to be removed, the terms of human existence would be diminished. However, human dignity, important though it is, must not be held as the breaking point. The trees that are specifically named in the Garden of Eden must primarily be seen as statements about God and as representations of God’s core convictions. In the form of the tree of knowledge, God makes willing, intelligent consent an essential ingredient in the divine-human relationship.

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 334-ca. 394) was a great admirer of Origen, but he serves notice that already in his time, early in the Constantinian era, the tree of knowledge is acquiring a negative connotation. Gregory disputes the centrality of the tree in the Garden of Eden on purely geometric grounds. In his line of argument, the notion of two trees in the middle means that the story should not be taken literally and is the first step toward stripping the tree of ideological prestige. Quite simply, Gregory will argue, it is impossible to have *two* trees at the center.

But if another center is set alongside the center, the circle must necessarily be shifted along with its center, with the result that the former center is no longer the midst. Since, then, the Garden in that place is one, why does the text say that each of the trees is to be treated as something separate, and that both of them are at the center, when the account which tells us that the works of God are “very good” teaches that the killer-tree is no part of God’s planting?²⁵

²⁴ René Cadiou, *Introduction au système d’Origène* (Paris: Société d’édition “Les Belles Lettres,” 1932), quoted in Jean Danielou, *Origen* (trans. Walter Mitchell; London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 205-206.

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. in Cant., praef.* (GNO 6:10.17-11.5., quoted in Richard A. Norris, Jr., “Two Trees in the Midst of the Garden (Genesis 2:9b): Gregory of Nyssa

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The ideological shift of emphasis is more subtle than this quotation suggests, but the rhetorical about-face is remarkable. Designating the tree of knowledge as “the killer-tree” stigmatizes it as a negative, with Gregory following through by stating that this tree actually “is no part of God’s planting.”²⁶ Richard Norris points out that Gregory has not given up on the idea of human choice in the sense that “the ‘killer-tree’ becomes a killer only if and when it is chosen by a human agent,”²⁷ but his rhetoric nevertheless has the impact of casting the tree in negative terms. Norris deems Gregory’s attempt to give a plausible account of the origin of evil a failure, finding it unintelligible. The project fails, he says, “because at every point its plausibility depends on the one thing Gregory cannot allow; namely, the existence *apart from human choice* of some factor or reality that by its intrinsic magnetism or attractiveness deceives the mind, overwhelms the will, and so orients human loving away from the authentic Good.”²⁸ This attitude on the part of Gregory means that he resists the dualist implication of the Genesis account, the notion of a real Enemy. By eschewing this option, Gregory deprives himself not only of other ways to account for the reality of evil, but he also cuts himself off from a view that might allow him to see the tree of knowledge in positive and even protective terms. In the present context it is sufficient to conclude that a trend is afoot in the Church to see the tree of knowledge in negative terms.

2. Endorsing Coercion. With Augustine (354-430 AD), there is considerable ambiguity with respect to his interpretation of paradise and his view of freedom,²⁹ but this ambiguity is in itself testimony of the shift that is occurring and of which he is a leading voice. Augustine will condone coercion against the Donatists and other dissenters,³⁰ but he cannot do so except by reconfiguring the theology found in the first chapters of

and the Puzzle of Human Evil,” in *In Dominico Eloquio: Essays in Patristic Exegesis in Honor of Robert Louis Wilken*, ed. Paul Blowers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 220.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Norris, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Puzzle of Human Evil,” 232.

²⁸ Norris, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Puzzle of Human Evil,” 239-240.

²⁹ Augustine’s preoccupation with Genesis is legendary and is not limited to his major works on the subject; cf. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (trans. John Hammond Taylor; New York: Newman, 1982; *On Genesis [De Genesi contra Manichaeos]* (trans. Edmund Hill; New York: New City, 2002).

³⁰ John R. Bowlin (“Augustine on Justifying Coercion,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 17 [1997], 49-70) confirms that Augustine became a believer in, and a promoter of, coercion, but he also downplays its significance as though it is no more than what people might condone or approve of under certain circumstances even today.

TONSTAD: THE MESSAGE OF THE TREES

Genesis. “What earlier apologists celebrate as God’s gift to humankind—free will, liberty, autonomy, self-government—Augustine characterizes in surprisingly negative terms,” Pagels observes.³¹ Exegesis of the text in Genesis is yielding ground to contextual, political pressure. The church, long a threatened minority, is now ascendant; it is in the driver’s seat, so to speak. Augustine revises the map of interpretation to fit the new landscape. The views of earlier Christian interpreters are in decline, as is their emphasis on the ideology of freedom and their opposition to coercion. This trend, says Elizabeth Clark, “made effective in the West the flourishing of a Christian theology whose central concerns were human sinfulness, not human potentiality; divine determination, not human freedom and responsibility; God’s mystery, not God’s justice.”³² Augustine’s theology triumphs, but its triumph requires “the capitulation of all who held to the classical proclamation concerning human freedom, once regarded as the heart of the Christian gospel.”³³ His view of the politics of paradise becomes the political manual not only for his own time but also for posterity. In the words of Peter Brown, Augustine is the man who writes “the only full justification, in the Early Church, of the right of the state to suppress non-Catholics.”³⁴

Augustine is a complex figure. He deserves admiration for the raw if sometimes indulgent honesty of his introspection.³⁵ He deals with human weakness and failings with sensitivity and nuance that surpass his opponents. He perceives the oneness of humanity and has a Catholic vision of inclusion that is exceptional and praiseworthy. And yet one thing does not follow from his sometimes implied and sometimes explicit view of the human condition. If experience confirms that human beings seem powerless against sin, it does not follow that God will remedy the problem by means of coercion. Indeed, if individuals have convictions other than those considered orthodox by the Catholic Church, it does not follow that the Church is free to call on the arm of the state to coerce these individuals into line. The early Christian apologists looked to the Genesis story of the fall to prove the God-given rights of conscience against the intrusive will of the state. Augustine increasingly looks to the same story in order to promote subservience to authority and obedience to the

³¹ Pagels, “The Politics of Paradise”: 78.

³² Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 250.

³³ Pagels, “Politics of Paradise”: 99.

³⁴ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 235.

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

Church. In his interpretation of Genesis, the ideology of freedom is in eclipse.³⁶

3. Sins of Omission. Traveling downstream from Augustine, we find notions of freedom diluted and increasingly on the wane in Christian theology, set on its trajectory by the great Latin father. Theology is preoccupied by the tree of life, increasingly oblivious to the meaning of the tree of knowledge. Anselm of Canterbury, living six-hundred years after Augustine, is remembered as the theologian who wrote an influential treatise on the atonement.³⁷ It is less well known that Anselm in 1099 presented his treatise to pope Urban II, the man who four years earlier launched the most cruel and ill-conceived Christian enterprise of all time, the Crusades. Anselm says nothing about the Crusades. Even when he writes about free will, which he does,³⁸ or about the fall of Satan, which he also does,³⁹ Anselm seems blissfully detached from contemporary reality, and he fails to espouse a notion of freedom that has a bearing on the intensely cruel and immensely consequential atrocities of which the Church of his time is the instigator. The suggestion may seem anachronistic and unfair, but perhaps Anselm deserves to be remembered as much for what he did not do as for his accomplishments. This is to say, when a treatise on the tree of knowledge is needed—when opposition to the Crusades is needed, and when the Church needs to be reminded that the end does not justify the means—the best the leading theologian of this time can do is to produce a theoretical treatise on how the death of Jesus secures access to the tree of life. Indeed, when a treatise is needed to rein in the savagery of the Crusaders, taking the death of Christ to be the most compelling argument against such savagery, Anselm and his contemporaries are so blinded by their presuppositions that they cannot see it.

We revere the Reformation, but it, too, is almost exclusively preoccupied with the tree of life, metaphorically speaking. The early Luther

³⁶ Rowan A. Greer, "Augustine's Transformation of the Free Will Defense," *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996): 471-486; Fred Berthold, Jr., "Free Will and Theodicy in Augustine: An Exposition and Critique," *Religious Studies* 17 (1982): 525-535.

³⁷ Anselm of Canterbury, *Why God Became Man*, in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 261-356.

³⁸ Anselm, *On Free Will*, in *The Major Works*, 175-192.

³⁹ Anselm, *On the Fall of the Devil*, in *The Major Works*, 193-232.

TONSTAD: THE MESSAGE OF THE TREES

speaks forcefully and with exceptional eloquence about freedom,⁴⁰ but he ends up condoning coercion, and he urges his contemporaries to practice coercion of the most blood-curdling and cruel kind against the Jews.⁴¹ Zwingli preaches free grace, but he votes with the city council of Zürich to drown the Anabaptist Felix Manz for committing the sin of believer's baptism.⁴² Calvin teaches grace with conviction and clarity, but he casts his vote with the city council of Geneva in favor of burning the physician and lay theologian Michael Servetus at the stake for the crime of advocating an unorthodox Christology.⁴³

IV. Reclaiming the Ideology of Freedom

1. Roger Williams. There are not a thousand points of light in this landscape, but there are occasional points of light, moments of exceptional perception, insight, and courage. Roger Williams, in a little known booklet entitled *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*, published in 1644, asserts that “an [enforced] uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the Flesh.”⁴⁴ Mainstream renditions of church history will object that the doctrine of the Trinity was enshrined in the beliefs of

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed,” in *Luther's Works* 45; *The Christian and Society* (trans. J. J. Schindel; ed. Walther I. Brandt and Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), 80-128.

⁴¹ Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *Luther's Works* 47; *The Christian and Society* IV (trans. Martin H. Bertram, ed. Franklin Sherman; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 135-305.

⁴² William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 43-48.

⁴³ John T. McNeill (*The History and Character of Calvinism* [London: Oxford UP, 1954], 174) claims that Servetus was drawn to Geneva by “a fatal fascination,” “like a moth to the candle flame,” so as to suggest that Servetus brought the calamity on himself. T. H. L. Parker (*John Calvin* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 121) is even less sympathetic, accusing him of “twenty years of play-acting” and describing Servetus' final and fatal visit to Geneva as “an incredibly foolish thing,” as if on the assumption that it was the victim's responsibility to avoid being executed. The image of an inconsistent and opportunistic personality is belied by the fact that Servetus was willing to die for his convictions, maintaining sufficient composure in the face of the flames to hold his denial of the Trinity till the end. Servetus is said to have prayed, “Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me,” not “Eternal Son of God.”

⁴⁴ Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (London, 1644 [repr. London: J. Haddon, 1848], 2. I have modernized Williams' archaic English. He uses the word ‘informed’ where today we would use ‘enforced.’

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the Christian Church in Nicea in 325, never to be seriously threatened after that. What Williams suggests is a different measuring stick for Christian doctrine, one by which doctrine cannot be severed from the means by which it is promoted and proclaimed. By Williams' qualitative criterion, the New Testament confession that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2) has no meaning when divorced from the qualities and values represented by Christ.

The Protestant reformers urge that the doctrine of justification by faith alone be the doctrine by which the church will stand or fall. It is a great doctrine, but I agree with Lord Acton that another doctrine equally deserves to be accorded this distinction. To Acton, legitimating coercion dooms the most auspicious theological project, making *it*—coercion—"the breaking point, the article of their system by which they stand or fall."⁴⁵

Whether Roger Williams or Lord Acton, the one a Protestant, the other a dissenting Roman Catholic, each promotes standards other than the ones traditionally accepted by which to measure what is important in Christian theology. Each pays attention to the means used to promote the cause of faith, and each insists that the only means compatible with the Christian profession is the one that accepts the constraint of freedom. These rare voices have internalized that the tree of knowledge belongs in the midst of the garden along with the tree of life, and they give the ideology of the tree of knowledge the courageous and principled exposure often denied to it in the history of Christian theology.

2. Ellen G. White. When Ellen G. White (1827-1915), the leading voice in Seventh-day Adventism, comes on stage, her main work is more cognizant of the implications of the tree of knowledge than just about any Christian thinker of which I am aware. Her main contribution, the five volume *Conflict of the Ages* series, begins with the question, "Why Was Sin Permitted?"⁴⁶

This, I submit, is a question that has the tree of knowledge as its frame of reference. Focus on the ideology of freedom is maintained with striking consistency throughout the five books. In the first volume of the

⁴⁵ Lord (Sir John) Acton, Letter to Mandell Creighton, April 5, 1887, in *Lord Acton: Essays on Freedom and Power* (ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb; Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1972), 333. John R. Bowlin (see n. 30, above), in his discussion of Augustine, leaves precisely the impression that one should not hold the Church to a different standard than the prevailing cultural norm. This is precisely the view that is so offensive to Lord Acton.

⁴⁶ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1958), 33.

TONSTAD: THE MESSAGE OF THE TREES

series, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, she strikes the chord of freedom, never to let up in the rest of the series. God “takes no pleasure in forced obedience, and to all He grants freedom of will, that they may render Him voluntary service,” she contends.⁴⁷ In the third volume, *The Desire of Ages*, she writes that “The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government.”⁴⁸ In yet another chapter in the same book, at a critical intermission reflecting on the meaning of Jesus’ death, she goes where Augustine, Anselm, or even Luther do not venture to tread, claiming resolutely that “Compelling power is found only under Satan’s government.”⁴⁹ And in the final volume, *The Great Controversy*, she remembers what her theme is, repeating almost verbatim the statement quoted above from *Patriarchs and Prophets*. God “takes no pleasure in forced allegiance, and to all He grants freedom of will, that they may render Him voluntary service.”⁵⁰ On this point the writer does not mince words, and the ideological commitment is focused, pervasive and wholehearted. Ellen G. White’s attention to this theme has probably not been executed with the same degree of clarity and consistency since the days of Origen. What she brings to light in this manner is the neglected, underexposed, and enduring implication of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

To the contemporary concern that the problem in the consumer societies of the Western World is an excess of freedom and not its absence,⁵¹ the answer should be that the hedonistic perversion of freedom must also be addressed. This concern, however, does not negate the need to pursue the primary meaning of the tree of knowledge or to acknowledge that institutional religion has been, and often still is, on the wrong side with respect to the issue of coercion.⁵² Ideologically and historically,

⁴⁷ White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 34.

⁴⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940 [1898]), 22.

⁴⁹ White, *The Desire of Ages*, 759.

⁵⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1939 [1888]), 493.

⁵¹ Cf. Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

⁵² Concessions on the part of professing Christians to the legitimacy of coercion and torture in the current “war on terror” should be seen as a problem of Christian ideology rather than a question of American values. The shortcoming in Jane Mayer’s account (*The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* [New York: Doubleday, 2008]) is not in the facts but in the notion that the ideals that are in jeopardy are primarily American rather than Christian. This short-

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

freedom in the sense of the absence of coercion has been the hardest thing to accept and the most difficult value to implement. God has indeed been remembered chiefly “as the one who *prohibits*”⁵³ if not as the one who resorts to coercion.

V. No Tree of Knowledge?

The course mapped out for the text concerning the trees in the Garden of Eden in Genesis reaches its final destination in Revelation, in the chapter that makes the ending of the biblical narrative fold back on the beginning.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Rev 22:1, 2)

This text, of course, counts on the reader’s powers of recognition for its force to be felt in full. We have been here before, in our paradise lost. The river of life is in the middle, and there, still in the middle, is the tree of life. Where, now, however, is the tree of knowledge, conceding that there is no mention of the tree of knowledge in Revelation’s description of paradise regained?

Does the omission mean that the tree of knowledge is not there, dug up and discarded at some point during the interim between Genesis and Revelation? Does it mean that the tree of knowledge is there, but it is not mentioned? This might be what my doctoral supervisor at the University of St. Andrews would suggest, in line with his understanding of Old Testament allusions in Revelation. These allusions, says Richard Bauckham, “are meant to recall the Old Testament context.”⁵⁴ When these Old Testament fragments appear in Revelation, we are supposed to see and recall the whole, meaning, we might suppose, that when we read of the tree of life we are meant to see the tree of knowledge, too.

But if the tree of knowledge is not there, considering this option by itself, and if the tree signifies God’s core conviction, does it mean that

coming is understandable, given that the ideals in question have been diluted in the name of Christian ideology.

⁵³ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 46.

⁵⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), xi.

TONSTAD: THE MESSAGE OF THE TREES

God has abandoned a core conviction? If the tree of knowledge is not there, and if the tree is a symbol of freedom, at least in the sense of absence of coercion, does it mean that freedom will not have the emphasis it once had? Does the apparent absence of the tree of knowledge, or its non-mention, mean that God is in retreat on the value of freedom?

In Revelation, apparently, there is only one tree, but its trunk is divided. “. . . on either side of the river is the tree of life,” says our text of the tree that is located in the middle. This detail is not found in Genesis.⁵⁵ Why thus a divided trunk, with its two legs apparently arching over the river of life, apparently to be joined at the top?

Richard B. Hays says of narratives that “if we ask why the events of a particular story are ordered as they are and not some other way, the answer can only be ‘because that is the way it happened’ or ‘because that is how the story is told.’”⁵⁶ The story draws us into its contemplative zone, in puzzled awareness of the many things left unsaid. From the story come our questions, not the other way around.

When it comes to the two trees in the Garden of Eden, the text itself, the varied history of the interpretation of this text, the endangered status of freedom, and the human inclination to act as though the end justifies the means, combine to urge readers of the Bible to take a fresh look at the meaning of the most challenging of the two trees. If, in *Paradise Regained*, it appears that the tree of knowledge has outplayed its peculiar role, that it is not there, or that it is somehow fused to its sister tree, forming an arch over the river of life, we should hesitate to conclude that God will ever be in retreat with respect to the ideology of freedom.

Signe K. Tonstad has served for nearly twenty years as a physician, pastor, and evangelist in Oslo, Norway. He is currently assistant professor of religion and assistant professor of medicine at Loma Linda University. He holds an M.D. from Loma Linda University with a specialty in internal medicine and a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from the University of St. Andrews. His thesis on the Book of Revelation, entitled *Saving God's Reputation*, was published in 2006 by T. & T. Clark.

⁵⁵ Part of the imagery in Revelation is from Ezekiel 47, giving a more complex picture than what an allusion to Genesis alone would entail; cf. Barbara Rossing, “River of Life in God’s New Jerusalem: An Ecological Vision for Earth’s Future,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25 (1998): 487-499.

⁵⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (SBLDS 56; Chico: Scholars, 1983; 2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 195.