

TREE OF LIFE

CULTURAL INSIGHT

The tree of life is a common symbol in the ancient Near East and in the Bible. In the ancient Near Eastern cultures that surrounded the Israelites, it is often associated with goddesses and fertility. Its most famous appearance in the Old Testament is in the story of our first parents in the garden, where the tree is protected by cherubim. It appears in the temple in the form of the lamp stand or menorah (the King James Version anachronistically uses the term “candlestick” instead of “menorah”) in the Holy Place. Although there is no specific kind of tree associated with the tree of life in Genesis, in Exodus 25:31–40 it is described as an almond tree. This is likely because the almond tree is one of the first trees to bud in the spring, making it a potent symbol of life and fertility. Further evidence of this connection is Aaron’s rod that is placed in the tabernacle and buds into almonds in Numbers 17:6–9. In Proverbs, the tree of life is associated with wisdom, which was sometimes personified as a woman.

Related verses

Genesis 2:9

Genesis 3:22–24

Exodus 25: 31–40

Proverbs 3:18

Proverbs 11:30

Proverbs 13:12

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