

ABSTRACT

The Biblical Tree of Life in Modern Literature and Art

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Ever since antiquity, trees have been used as symbols and literal embodiments of religious beliefs for mankind. One special symbolic tree shared by many cultures is the tree of life. This thesis will attempt to explicate the meaning of the tree of life from a few examples of modern literature and art in order to understand the purpose in its representation. One goal of this thesis is to recognize and trace elements of the Christian tradition and the themes of nature and grace through the modern tree of life symbol. The following chapters will explore historical interpretations of the tree of life, and where characteristics of the biblical tree of life appear in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Terrence Malick, and Bruce Herman. The overall argument of this thesis is that through the tree of life theme present in each of these works, there is a showing of man's desire and propensity to engage in a relationship with divinity, oftentimes that being Christ.

THE BIBLICAL TREE OF LIFE IN MODERN LITERATURE AND ART

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	iii
PREFACE.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
DEDICATION.....	vii
Chapter	
1. A SURVEY OF PROMINENT THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS, BOTH BIBLICAL AND NON-BIBLICAL, OF THE TREE OF LIFE.....	1
Biblical Interpretations of the Tree of Life	
Non-biblical Trees of Life	
2. THE TREE OF LIFE IN TOLKIEN’S FAIRY-STORIES.....	17
The Lights of Valinor and the Light of the World	
The Fruit of Telperion and Eternal Fruition in Christ	
3. A CHRISTIAN FOUNDATION IN <i>THE TREE OF LIFE</i> FILM.....	32
Prayer, Light, and Water	
Grace Embodied	
Nature’s Relationship with Grace	
4. THE BIBLICAL TREE OF LIFE IN BRUCE HERMAN’S “SPRING” AND “WINTER”.....	49
The Beginning and End in “Spring”	
The Image of Christ in “Winter”	
“Spring” and “Winter” Together	
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	67

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Bruce Herman, "Spring/Earth/Childhood"51
2. Bruce Herman, "Winter/Air/Old Age"56

PREFACE

Ever since antiquity, writers and worshippers of all kinds have set trees apart from other wonders in nature. Trees have stood not only as symbols, but also as literal embodiments of religious beliefs. Perhaps they are revered so especially because they grow taller than flowers that man has to stoop downwards to appreciate, yet they are shorter than the cliffs and mountains that force him to commit much time and energy to conquer. They live longer than flowers that grow and shrink with each season, yet they are not eternal like the mountains seem to be. Compared to flowers and mountains, trees are closer to man's own nature. His nature has bound itself to trees throughout millennia through religions—this seen expressed in literature and art. One special symbolic tree shared by many cultures is the tree of life. The tree of life is thought by some to be a literal tree, by others to be only a symbol, and still others to be both. Whatever the tree of life is in reality, the large variety of ideas of its nature thread throughout the world's history. Since the tree of life has such universal persistence, it is important to research what it means to people today. This thesis will attempt to explicate the meaning of the tree of life from a few examples of modern literature and art in order to understand its purpose. A historical perspective is necessary, since modern writers and artists derive their ideas in some way from past interpretations.

My first chapter will explore the tree of life as seen in biblical and non-biblical literary representations. From the first chapter, the reader may see the

themes of immortality, reward and punishment, paradise settings, and man connecting with divinity through the tree. These principal elements of the tree of life extend through the ages and are on display in modern artistic and literary works. One goal of this thesis is to recognize and trace elements of the Christian tradition and the themes of nature and grace through the modern tree of life symbol. The second chapter will be devoted to exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's Trees of Valinor, and the similarities these have with the biblical tree of life. Then, my focus will turn to the tree of life as seen in the recent film by Terrence Malick. The film's attention to the themes of nature and grace is especially revealing of Malick's adaptation of the symbol. I will show how the characters in the film represent the tree of life and its elements of nature and grace indicative of the Christian tradition better than any physical tree does. Finally, I will analyze Bruce Herman's paintings "Spring" and "Winter" and their connections to T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* in order to reveal the tree of life characteristics made evident by the artist. Similar to Malick, Herman's artistic representation points to the biblical tree of life through the human subjects themselves and their representations of universal human experiences. The overall argument of this thesis is that through the tree of life theme present in each of these works, there is a showing of man's desire and propensity to engage in a relationship with divinity.

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DEDICATION

For

Annabelle, a self-less tree-loving soul,

and

Fiona, who loves the living, no matter how small.

CHAPTER ONE

A Survey of Prominent Themes and Interpretations, Both Biblical and Non-biblical, of the Tree of Life

The tree of life has served a vast array of religious and nonreligious thought as a symbol of different meanings. This chapter is by no means an extensive historical survey, but it attempts to provide a sufficient background for analyzing the later literary and artistic products of such interpretations. The biblical and non-biblical traditions that include the tree of life, or even comparable sacred trees, show themselves to be similar in certain ways. Biblical and non-biblical interpretations alike emphasize the vital aspect of the tree and the possibility of it imparting eternal life to the consumer of its fruits. It is usually set in a type of paradise or a sacred grove, which may also be the place of initial creation. Christian and Jewish scriptures emphasize the aspect of the tree of life as a reward for the righteous. Non-biblical interpretations use the tree of life as a model of attaining divine status. An overarching theme seen in all of the interpretations dealt with here is the connection between the tree of life, man, and divinity. In Christianity this is most evident in Christ, and for other religions it is evident in the role of kings or tree-dwelling spirits.

Biblical Interpretations of the Tree of Life

An overarching characteristic of the tree of life as depicted in Genesis is its role as a symbol of vitality, as its name suggests. This characteristic is emphasized by the physical surroundings of the tree. The tree of life and the tree of knowledge

of good and evil both grow in the Garden of Eden. God's warning to Adam and Eve, which says if they eat of the tree of knowledge they will die, naturally juxtaposes the two trees even though they are both "pleasant to the sight, and good for food" (*New Revised Standard Version*, Gen. 2:9). The prohibition placed on the tree of knowledge heightens the mystery of the tree of life that stands beside it and the vitality it represents. In Jewish tradition, *The Zohar* says the tree of life "extends over a journey of five hundred years, and all the waters of Creation branch off below" (*Zohar* 1:35a). According to this tradition, the waters come from above and flow through the tree of life into the oceans and back into the streams on earth. This cycle of water through the tree of life links the tree to the life cycles occurring everywhere on earth. Water is inextricably connected with the tree of life, as it grows by a river in Psalm 1 and in Revelation 22. In *The Zohar*, then, the life element of water emanating from the tree emphasizes its vitality and its "journey of five hundred years" shows longevity. Both of these elements contribute to the tree of life's symbol as a proponent of life. Jewish tradition further illustrates the tree's characteristic of life by its marriage to the tree of knowledge (*Zohar* 1:35a, note 1428). The cycle of life is present here, too, as is suggested by this marriage and the act of procreation occurring within it that marriage implies. Among Christian interpreters remains the question of the actual power of the tree of life, if the tree is believed to be more than a symbol and a literal tree.

Calvin and Augustine differ in their views on the nature of the tree of life, whether it is only a symbol, or a literal tree as well. Augustine interprets the account in Genesis to portray a literal tree with actual vital power: "Shall we hesitate

to believe that by the fruit of a tree, in view of its higher meaning, God gave to man protection against physical deterioration through sickness or age and against death itself?" (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 8.5). The context of this rhetorical question is clearly "no." Aquinas qualifies Augustine's claim in his *Summa Theologica* by explaining the possibility of the tree of life's fruit to provide a man physical immortality for a definite period of time (1095; Pt.1, Question 97). Calvin, on the other hand, interprets the tree of life not as a literal tree, but as only a symbol: "He gave the tree of life its name, not because it could confer on man that life with which he had been previously endued, but in order that it might be a symbol and memorial of the life which he had received from God" (116). Calvin further explains that after Adam is banished from the garden and the tree, even should he have somehow taken hold of the whole tree, if it were not in God's will for him to have life immortal, then he could not have it by any means (184). As seen in these examples, while some take the tree of life as depicted in Genesis to be a literal tree, other commentators believe it to be only a symbol of life. Whether literal or not, the tree remains a symbol of life both before and after the Fall. The consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience against God also links the tree of life to punishment and deprivation.

Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden results in their separation from the tree of life, thereby causing deprivation to be a part of its history. God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden "lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever" (Gen. 3:22). Their choice to eat from the tree of knowledge results in mankind's curse of death. Since this is the case, God

bars Adam and Eve from the tree of life until paradise is regained. While this is an act of grace, preventing from acquiring immortality while remaining in sin, man is separate from a reward nonetheless. Jewish tradition also says that Adam's sin results in the divorce between the two trees that were thought to be married, showing that the consequence of his disobedience extends beyond his situation alone. According to Kabbalistic teaching, the tree of life is represented by *Tiferet*, a symbol of heaven, and the tree of knowledge by *Shekhinah*, a symbol of earth (*Zohar* 135:a, note 1428). This divorce of their marriage further shows the element of deprivation and punishment by the consequential separation of heaven and earth. Yet the tree of life is given as a reward to the righteous according to God's stipulations, therefore the tree of life does not remain connected to loss and punishment for long.

The tree of life is depicted in apocalyptic settings in a way that shows its fruits to be a reward for those entering Paradise. This is seen explicitly in Revelation: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7); "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city" (Rev. 22:14). Augustine interprets the cherubim guarding the way to the tree of life in Genesis as a sign of conditions needing to be met before man can reach the tree: "No one can come to the tree of life except by these two ways, that is, by endurance of troubles and the fullness of knowledge" (*Against the Manichees* 2.23.35). In Exodus, a Jewish legend of the tree of life also shows the tree functioning as a healing reward for obedience. Moses makes the

bitter waters of Marah sweet to drink by throwing a branch into the river.

According to Jewish legend, the tree from which the sweetening branch comes is the tree of life (Makiri, Prov. 3.4b). After the branch sweetens the water, God promises to heal his people and keep them from disease if they obey him (Exod. 15:26). In this example, reward comes by way of the tree of life by its branch. Another apocalyptic example of the tree of life as a reward is in *The Book of Enoch*, where the archangel Michael says the fruit of the tree of life is reserved for the righteous, holy, and elect (25.4-5). God says something similar to Adam in the apocryphal account of Adam and Eve, after God refuses Adam's plea for a taste of the tree's fruit before leaving the Garden of Eden (*The Life of Adam and Eve* 28:4). As evidenced from these passages, the tree of life stands as an object of hope for the life to come.

The tree of life is often equated with wisdom and also stands as a metaphor for different showings of righteousness in Judaic and Christian tradition. Proverbs, especially, exemplifies its connection with wisdom, righteousness, and hope. "[Wisdom] is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her" (Prov. 3:18); "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life" (Prov. 11:30); "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12); "A wholesome tongue is a tree of life" (Prov. 15:4). All of these metaphors relate the tree of life to divine things, as Augustine interprets it as a source of sacrament—"Man, then, had food in the other trees, but in the tree of life there was a sacrament" (*Literal* 8.4). "Sacrament" is used by Augustine here to mean a sign that signifies divine things. Wisdom, in particular, is a significant metaphor for the tree of life. Augustine especially emphasizes the tree as

representing wisdom: “So that the tree of life would seem to have been in the terrestrial Paradise what the wisdom of God is in the spiritual” (*City of God* 13.20). *The Zohar* also equates the tree of life with wisdom, or “good insight” (1:8a). Furthermore, it extends to represent the Torah (1:8a, note 358). As noted above, the Kabbalah tradition connects the tree of life to *Tiferet*, which means Written Torah. In the same tradition, it is said that the man who obeys the Torah is “actualizing the divine.” Christianity makes a similar comparison by connecting wisdom with Scripture. The connection between the tree of life and wisdom is indicative of the Christian teaching of the tree of life as a symbol of Christ.

In many commentaries and homilies, Christ is the tree of life. Augustine compares a Paradise scene of the tree of life to several aspects of the Church: “Thus Paradise is the Church...the four rivers of Paradise are the four gospels; the fruit-trees the saints, and the fruit their works; the tree of life is the holy of holies, Christ” (*City* 13.21). Augustine’s interpretation also draws from the tradition of Christ as the tabernacle. Within the tabernacle is a lampstand that is an important figure in the holy of holies. An appropriate interpretation of this lampstand, described in Exodus 25, is the tree of life (Ryken, et al. 486). The tree of life also serves as a symbol of Christ and simultaneously a symbol of the grace God has sealed for man, as explained by Calvin (184). Hilary of Poitiers’s “Homily on Psalm 1” equates the “tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season,” with Wisdom, that is, Christ. Later, as a part of the medieval tradition, Bernard of Clairvaux uses the imagery of trees in Song of Solomon as an opportunity to teach that Christ is the tree of life (Sermon 48). St. Victorinus

combines the meaning of the tree of life with future reward, life, and Christ's redemptive act in his *Commentary on the Apocalypse*: "The tree of life on either bank sets forth the Advent of Christ, according to the flesh, who satisfied the peoples wasted with famine, that received life from One by the wood of the Cross, with the announcement of God's word." As seen in these examples, Christian commentaries interpret the tree of life in Genesis as a prefiguring symbol of Christ, Christ's life as a showing of its fruits, and the scene in Revelation as the advent of grace for believers. From these traditions, we have a holistic view of Christ as the Tree of Life.

The apocryphal tradition also provides insight into the connection between Christ, Wisdom, and the tree of life. Wisdom as personified in Ecclesiasticus 24:12-30 says that God rested in her tabernacle; she is eternal, and the truth and hope for life; she compares herself to several different types of trees found throughout Scripture; finally, she says that those who eat of her will not hunger and those that drink will not thirst. Let us relate Wisdom's claims to symbols and sayings of the Church. As noted above, the tabernacle is a symbol for Christ in Christian tradition. Christ calls himself the truth and the life in John 14:6, and he is the Bread of Life and Living Water—providing everlasting satisfaction. By evidence of these connections, Christ himself is indeed personified through Wisdom in this passage from Ecclesiasticus.

Note also the different types of trees used for comparison. Since Wisdom in this passage can be interpreted as Christ, and Christ embodies the tree of life, then the trees in this passage appear to function as multiple trees of life. This connection may shed light on non-specific trees in Scripture that may be glossed as trees of life.

For example, the cultivated olive tree in Romans 11:24 may be interpreted as the tree of life into which both Jews and gentiles may be grafted. Similarly, the “plant of renown” in Ezekiel 34:29 may be a tree of life, too, since the context suggests the subject of salvation for the nation of Israel – a subject that is linked to the explicit tree of life through the connections between Wisdom, Christ, and the tree of life. That the variety of trees mentioned in Scripture possibly portraying the tree of life are used in ways that point to characteristics of Christ serves to widen the space for different interpretations of the tree of life. It comes as no surprise, then, that other traditions and cultures have a tree of life symbol for themselves.

Non-biblical Trees of Life

The tree of life and its symbolization are certainly not restricted to biblical interpretation and application to Christianity and Judaism. Classical tradition, Islam, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures, to name a few, have traditions of the tree of life. These are most especially seen in portrayals of a paradise setting. The tradition of the tree of life reaches so far back that its significance, especially seen in art, is not always explained. Instead, the use of a tree of life as a symbol is more likely to be part of an oral tradition, and its meaning common knowledge to the culture. Neither is a symbolic tree always a tree of life, but it may also be a general “sacred tree.” Sacred trees bear resemblances of other ideas of the tree of life in their sacred grove setting, and in the way that the people regarding them as sacred believe them to have special powers or serve as a habitation of spirits. This part of this chapter will

attempt to show how people even in very different cultures have similarly thought of trees as connections between man, nature, and divine beings.

The tree of life is explicitly present in religious or cultural traditions that also have a belief in a paradise setting much similar to the Garden of Eden in Genesis or Paradise in Revelation. Islam calls its tree of life Sidra, and it presides in the seventh heaven, next to the right hand of God. This tree does not only remain in the Koran, but it is present literally in the form of the Sidra tree, or a wild plum tree, found in Arabia and India (Lechler 369). Another tree of life is seen in Babylonian tradition and grows in Eridu, the place of creation. Lechler claims that this tree, whose fruit is thought to grant eternal life to the eater, is the source of the tree of life from the Bible (Lechler 369). This tree is a palm tree, is called a tree of “plenty,” and has the name Ea, which means “father of the gods” (Lechler 381). Another tree of life growing in a divine setting is seen in the Epic of Gilgamesh that describes a holy tree, a cedar, growing in the sanctuary of Irnini or mountain of the gods (Lechler 381). Lechler discusses several other trees of life from other cultures that all vary in some slight degree, whether that is their tree species or their place of growth, or their purpose and function. The trees mentioned here, however, are only common in their place of growth. The connection extends beyond places of a deified paradise, however, and also exist in Classical tradition and other cultures that revere a sacred garden or grove.

The idea of a sacred garden or grove extends all the way back to the Classical tradition, especially present in the place of Arcadia. Evident in the tradition founded in the plethora of pastoral poetry developing since the Classical period, Arcadia is a

“secular version of the Garden of Eden” (Grafton, Most, and Settis 58). A telling characteristic is the harmony of nature and man in Arcadia. This theme is prevalent in the theme of the tree of life and sacred trees. Similar to the theme of abundance found in the tree of life tradition, in the garden of Arcadia “nature provides for all human needs, spontaneously and abundantly” (Grafton, Most, and Settis 58). Traditionally, Arcadia does not house a specific tree of life, but its model as a garden of gods that is a harmonious place for nature, man, and deities correlates with the Garden of Eden found in Scripture. The tradition of the sacred grove or garden is inextricably connected to humanity’s deification of trees, and its attention to the tree of life.

Frazer’s *Golden Bough* pays much attention to tree worship, and through his studies he also finds the sacred grove to be an important factor in understanding the relationship between divinity and trees. Sacred groves were places of worship wherein the sacred tree grows. These groves and especially the trees growing in them were heavily protected by the devotees. Worship rituals often involved sacrifices of animals. According to Frazer, the Volga tribe hung the hides of their sacrifices on the branches of trees in their sacred grove. The sacred tree stood in the middle, “beside which everything else sank into insignificance” (Frazer 111). These sacred groves are often heavily protected, and grave punishments await those who damage or disrespect it. The element of the sacred grove surrounding the sacred tree is similar to the holy ground upon which Moses stands before the burning bush in Exodus. In this story, the burning bush wherein God temporarily dwells is similar to non-Christian beliefs in sacred trees wherein deities reside, as

will be explained later in this chapter. First, though, the protective measures taken to guard sacred trees and the punishments to those who damage them deserve a closer look.

The punishments looming for vandals of sacred trees are reminiscent of one of the oldest tree of life traditions. For several tree-worshipping societies, any damage incurred upon sacred trees consequentially brought punishment upon the culprit. Cutting down trees, their branches, or harming the trees in any way resulted in punishments as severe as death. These trees were then protected out of fear of punishment. One such German legend tells of an old woman who uproots an ancient tree said to house an elf. Since the elf died as a result of her action, so did she (Philpot 63-64). The evidence of these practices emphasizes the people group's belief in the divine significance of the tree. As the burning bush from Exodus provides a biblical parallel to the sacred grove, there is a biblical parallel to the punishment from misusing a sacred tree. As discussed above, in Genesis the tree of knowledge grows beside the tree of life, and it is the eating of this tree that brings about the fall of man in Christian tradition. Death is the punishment for Adam and Eve disobeying God and eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge. Furthermore, after they are banished from the Garden of Eden, God places an angel at the entrance of the garden in order to keep man from eating of the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). It appears that eternal life in a fallen state will be a severe punishment for mankind; therefore, as God protects the tree of life we also see forms of protection through impending punishments by people who have and revere sacred trees and groves.

The punishments are not only for the sake of the sacred tree as it is a tree, but more so because of the belief that the sacred tree is the body or home of a spirit.

Vital to the suggestion that sacred trees are the link between man, nature, and the divine is the divine aspect. For the people revering sacred trees, the trees are sacred because of the spirits within them. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer suggests that the worldview of early people led to the animistic belief in tree spirits: "To the savage the world in general is animate, and trees and plants are no exception to the rule. He thinks that they have souls like his own, and he treats them accordingly" (Frazer 111). Frazer argues that this "common savage dogma" incorporates itself into religions such as Buddhism, in which Siamese monks teach that breaking the branch off of a tree is much the same as breaking the arm of an innocent human being since the trees have souls (Frazer 112). The development of belief in tree spirits eventually moves from the trees having a soul themselves, to the tree being the temporary dwelling of a separate spirit. This spirit can be a god or the soul of an ancestor (Frazer 115). Much like the Siamese monks whose beliefs likely stemmed from a more simple belief prior, the treatment of trees as temporary dwellings for gods shows an historical and cultural development, too (Frazer 116). Philpot says this idea is closely related to the characteristics of gods worshipped in antiquity. The gods are not "ubiquitous, unconditioned spirit[s]," but are instead subject to physical limitations and require dwelling places such as trees and groves in which to remain (Philpot 25). According to Philpot, the implication of these dwelling places is that the tree is then a method by which humans can approach the god. Without an earthly dwelling place, the god and man are entirely separated. Therefore, the belief

in tree spirits not only explains the sacred aspect of trees for participating cultures, but also reveals an age-long attempt by man to achieve a relationship with the divine.

One way man is able to relate to divinity is through immortality and abundant life. On a smaller scale, successful procreation is one way that man continues his line through the world, and is immortal in a familial sense. Tree-spirits are strongly connected with rituals of fertility, and the belief that associating oneself with the sacred tree will help with childbearing. Associating oneself with the tree may be accomplished by hugging it or hanging a branch from it in the room. As it pertains to fertility and healing, sacred trees discussed here are not far at all from ideas of the specific tree of life. Just as the tree of life is seen in Scripture to bring healing to those able to eat of its fruit, sacred trees in Swedish and African cultures are thought to bring easy child-delivery to pregnant women (Frazer 120). In view of Frazer's study of the relics of tree worship in modern Europe seen in the traditions of the May pole or the May tree, it seems that the Christian spirituality of that time is combined with relics of other religious practices. The May pole or tree is a type of sacred tree, although in the modern age the pole or tree is not thought to house an actual spirit. Still, its use in celebrations of the new spring season every year hearkens back to beliefs in sacred trees that increase fertility in women and the land.

The springtime celebrations usually include children collecting branches from the forest outside the village, and returning while singing a song that attributes the "sprout well budded out" on the branch to be "the work of our Lord's hand"

(Frazer 121). Here, then, is a convergence of Christianity with evidence of a previous tree worshipping ritual. The tree is attributed to God's creative work, but the practices of the people point to earlier non-Christian beliefs. Another example of the convergence of religions comes from Prague, where people lay broken pieces of the May tree behind Christian holy pictures in their rooms. Furthermore, bushes set up on Palm Sunday are left for a year before being burnt and replaced (Frazer 125). In Bohemia, a tree is decorated as a woman and called "Summer" on the fourth Sunday during Lent. "Summer" replaces a puppet called Death, which is thrown into the water (Frazer 125). This tradition is yet another example of the connection between the use of the tree tradition as a symbol of life. Other rituals signify the revival of vegetation, and the beginning of springtime. It would not be a stretch, then, to see these rituals as a link to the Christian belief in the Resurrection with the yearly spring revival and connections with Easter. Although resurrection and renewal is not limited to Christianity, and other cultures and religions include the same themes in their beliefs regarding the tree of life. Throughout time man is consistently seen seeking a fulfilled and extended life, usually trying to attain a better life through divine assistance.

One way in which the tree of life, or a sacred tree, is thought to be a link between divinity and man is the notion that a king is this very link. Assyrian imperialistic art leads us to this idea, and portrays this connection via finer details. In a detailed study on the Assyrian tree of life, Simo Parpola investigates the appearance of the tree in ancient Assyrian art. He notes that since the tree of life's use as an art motif reaches as far back as the fourth millennium BCE, the symbol's

meaning is timeless and complex. It is often seen depicted on imperial garments in the middle of the second millennium, therefore an imperial ideology may be attached to the tree (Parpola 163). What this means for the culture is not entirely clear, but Parpola has ideas for its meaning based on his study of Assyrian kings. The Assyrian tree of life may be linked to the idea of the king as the “Perfect Man” and the belief that the king is a god in human form, since in Assyrian art the king is often seen as taking the place of the tree of life. The king’s personification of the tree of life lends him a divine aspect with which Assyrian kings were viewed (Parpola 167-68). Ancient kings often portrayed themselves as divine in order to gain respect and obedience from their people. By replacing his image with the tree of life, and vice versa, the king connects himself with the divine and a symbol that already permeates the culture of the time. By tracing back the meaning of the divine king to the tree of life that he personifies, it is apparent that in this way the tree of life itself is thought to serve as a link between gods and man.

In the same essay, Parpola investigates the Sefirotic tree of life present in Kabbalism, a Jewish mystic religion. He makes the argument that the Sefirotic tree is actually derived from the Assyrian tree of life that comes prior. The Sefirotic tree of life is more like a diagram in which the attributes of God are arranged according to their prominence and the potential for people imitating these characteristics. Parpola’s essay shows how the multiple Assyrian gods and their own attributes match up with the Sefirotic tree. Parpola explains these similarities in a way relevant for our topic here.

The Sefirotic Tree, like the Assyrian, can also refer to man as a microcosm, the ideal man created in the image of God. Interpreted in this way, it becomes a way of salvation for the mystic seeking deliverance from the bonds of flesh through the soul's union with God. (Parpola 173)

Therefore, the Sefirotic tree of life is another way that man can connect with the divine. This type of connection, however, differs from the Assyrian tree of life since the Sefirotic model also works as a meditative model. The Kabbalistic mystic devotes himself to imitating the characteristics of Ein Sof shown in the model, and thereby attempts to unify himself in such a way as he becomes a likeness of the divine. This is different from the Assyrian tree of life that depicts a king already connected with the divine. Nevertheless the interchangeability between the systems supports Parpola's conclusion that the Assyrian model is more like a religious system than a depiction of several different divinities. The tree of life is used in both to illustrate the connection points between god and man.

As seen from this section, the tree of life has been illuminated by many interpreters and religions to signify different meanings. The application of these beliefs have appeared in different ways since the interpretations. Literature and art are two modes that serve to continue the traditions of beliefs. From the basic outline of the tree's signification in the past in different religions and cultures, we may now turn to see the way it is illuminated in literature and art in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

The Tree of Life in Tolkien's Fairy-stories

In what modes is the tree of life seen in contemporary society? A recent upsurge of tree pendants and motifs on t-shirts, stationary, and even iPhone cases seems to suggest that people are appreciating the beauty in wide spreading branches. In the America I know, the greater environmental awareness today encourages more thoughtful and responsible approaches to trees and botany. I observe this through increases in recycling efforts, urban gardening coalitions, and other such measures. Not only in Portland are people making a concerted effort to return to their roots—or return roots to them.¹ As we know from the previous chapter, this icon is not really anything new, and the tradition of revering trees dates back to ancient practices. The tree of life reveals itself in modern literature and art in more or less explicit ways. This chapter will highlight one of recent English Literature's most well known tree-lovers and his use of the tree of life.²

Readers of Tolkien cannot help but notice his strong emphasis on trees. J. R. R. Tolkien speaks of his own "tree-love" that is one upstart to writing his story *Leaf by Niggle* (Letters 199). Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and *Lord of the Rings* portray his love for trees through the special roles they play in the narrative and characters they

¹ As reported by ABC News, John Fogel of Portland rents live Christmas trees, roots still intact, to families so that they may enjoy a live tree with the knowledge that it will be replanted after a week. Retrieved from: <http://www.kvue.com/video/featured-videos/Living-Christmas-trees-new-fad-in-Portland-136105568.html>

² Tolkien's love for trees is apparent in the number of tree characters he employs in his literature. His emphasis on trees has spawned analytical works that look deeper into the nature and purpose of his trees, such as *The Ecological Augury in the Works of JRR Tolkien* by Liam Campbell.

embody. In view of his mythopoeia explained in his essay “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien’s trees play as strong a role in Middle-earth as the Valar who sub-created them and the Elves who love them. For Tolkien, there is far more to myth than idle fantasy-speak. In his own words, “...in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory” (*On Fairy-stories* 59). Through his use of trees, Tolkien even points readers to Christianity.

Christian writers celebrate the works of Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald among others, for their mythology points to a greater reality found in the Christian story.

Their imagined worlds are shaped worlds not to be intellectually examined but rather to be received and celebrated. They give us anticipations of that ‘better country’ which is the true home of triumphant souls. Great myths affirm that a glorious end awaits life successfully lived. Joy awaits. Something within us is deeply stirred. (Hein 19)

The trees, as a part of Tolkien’s entire work, are geared to point to truth and to anticipate the ‘better country.’ It is this chapter’s lofty aim, in the spirit of Tolkien and his faith, “to see the day-illumined, and renew / from mirrored truth the likeness of the True” (“Mythopoeia” 90). While Tolkien may not have explicitly connected the Trees of Valinor to the tree of life in correspondences or his notes on Middle-earth, this essay intends to reveal a greater reality behind his special trees.

My aim is to work from a Christian perspective and draw Tolkien’s trees into the Grand Christian Narrative without imposing unnecessary allegory. A biblically founded interpretation of the Trees of Valinor is certainly not the only possibility, for it is well known among Tolkien scholars that he was influenced by Norse

mythology as well as other non-Christian myths for certain stories and characters. Tolkien's trees may indeed have some foundation in the World Tree of Norse mythology.³ Still, the Trees of Valinor contain meaning that is easily connected to the virtues of the biblical tree of life even though they are not allegorical representations of the biblical Tree of Life. Ralph C. Wood reminds readers that Tolkien's work is not allegorical, a point made by the author himself. Instead of supplying a one-to-one comparison of Christian themes, Tolkien instead embeds his story with "huge theological significance" (Wood 4). Wood's own analysis of Christian themes will be explored below, as it relates to a vision of the tree of life in Tolkien. He shows how the relationship to Christian themes is evident in Tolkien's story, but it is not apparent from "heavy-handed moralizing or preachifying" (Wood 4). For example, likenesses of Christ are seen in several characters, not only one, and this signifies Tolkien's belief that "every Christian is meant to take on the form of Christ" (Wood 6). In view of Wood's claims, what we have in Tolkien's literature is a Christian iconographical system that underlies his mythology.

What must first be noted is the meaning of trees as such in Tolkien's work. Critical research has shown how Tolkien exalts a virtue of slowness through his attention to trees and his characters the Ents. Trees' lives are usually significantly longer than humans, and their growth is very slow. In *Lord of the Rings*, Treebeard reminds Merry and Pippin a number of times to not be "hasty" (*Two Towers* 468). The Entmoot discuss their plan of action for a very long time, speaking very slowly

³ See Marjorie Burns's *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. Print.

to one another, causing Merry and Pippin to grow rather impatient (*Two Towers* 484). Some impatient readers think Tolkien's narrative itself to be slow due to the time he takes to describe landscapes. The natural or scenic beauty, however, is not to be sacrificed for Tolkien as it is essential to weave images for the reader of his sub-created world. It often relates to the narrative purpose, too. For example, Tolkien's attention to detail and how it functions in his narrative is seen in his descriptions of the two forests of Rivendell and Lothlorien. These forests function as places of rest and vital information exchange for the Fellowship. Rivendell and Lothlorien are also characterized by different modes of light that speak for their functions as The Last Homely House for Rivendell, and the natural, beautifully enchanted Golden Wood for Lothlorien. Even the usual trees in Middle-earth are described with precision and detail, so much that when Tolkien weaves a narrative around specific trees or tree-like creatures, such as the Trees of Valinor, Treebeard the Ent, or Old Man Willow, the reader should know to pay attention to these important characters. Trees, for Tolkien, are not to be used as mere scenery, but loved, appreciated, and cared for as fellow creations that may also lift our eyes and minds to higher truth.

Correlating some of Tolkien's critics helps to interpret meaningful images and characters more correctly. Anne Petty, along with other critics such as Verlyn Flieger, enlightens readers as to the meanings behind light and darkness as iconography. Another critic Ralph Wood remarks that the beginning of *The Silmarillion* alludes strongly to the beginning of Genesis with its account of the creation of Middle-earth. For this essay, I am proposing that an iconographical view

of the Trees of Valinor may suggest an image of the Tree of Life. That is, if we look at the Trees of Valinor not merely in the context of their immediate narrative environment but in their wider context as possible icons, it is reasonable to see them in the image of the Tree of Life. Currently there is little to no scholarship that I have found connecting the Trees of Valinor to the Tree of Life. This may be the case because Tolkien explicitly avoids allegory in his work. Also, while Valinor is much akin to Eden and Paradise, there are two trees that both seem to parallel the Tree of Life: Telperion and Laurelin. However, there is certainly not a symbol of the Tree of Knowledge in Valinor just as there is not a fall comparable to that of Adam and Eve. Telperion and Laurelin may indeed work together to point to the Tree of Life if the reader approaches the text with Tolkien's view on myth and his Christian influences in mind.

Anne Petty's view of Tolkien's iconography suggests that the Trees of Valinor are indeed more than just trees. Petty describes iconography in Tolkien's work as both "a body of images (icons) in a given context, plus the general and specific meanings they carry" (Petty 47). She gives due attention to the pagan influences apparent in his work, but insists that these are combined with Tolkien's Christian faith in such a way as to preserve the mythic aspects that lead the reader beyond the text and into a greater reality. In reference to Christian iconography in Tolkien, Petty suggests a strategy for interpreting signs in Tolkien properly: "Sometimes a waterfall really is just a waterfall. But when it actively affects how events play out, it signifies something beyond the mere physical geology of the setting" (Petty 64). Indeed, there are other beautiful trees in Tolkien's work, such as

the mallorn trees of the Golden Wood, so what makes Laurelin and Telperion so special? The Trees of Valinor affect very important events in *The Silmarillion* and *The Return of the King* that will be explored below. Furthermore, it is expressly the lights emanating from them and the fruits they bear that point to a higher significance. With these characteristics, these trees may be seen as types of the Tree of Life.⁴ By acknowledging Tolkien's goal—to reveal the Grand Narrative of the Gospel through his mythology—and the “theological significance” of his text to which Wood refers, the Trees of Valinor point to the biblical tree of life. In the following sections, this chapter will explore how Tolkien provides for his readers a glimpse into the truth of the Gospel through the characteristics of the Trees of Valinor and the role they play in Middle-earth.

The Lights of Valinor and the Light of the World

Now that the overall importance of trees in Tolkien's work is acknowledged, we may look specifically at the Trees of Valinor. Perhaps the most important aspect of the Trees is their function as a great source of light. The aspect of light immediately hints at a common idea of enlightenment or divine revelation. Verlyn Flieger's scholarly work, *Splintered Light*, explores the philosophical and anthropological connections of the splintering of light from the Lamps to the Trees to the Silmarils in *The Silmarillion*. Her interpretation of the first lights in Valinor and Middle-earth draws a striking comparison to the light of God and Christ. Before

⁴ The first chapter of this thesis provides examples of biblical interpretations of the Tree of Life. The most popular Christian interpretation is that the tree symbolizes Christ. The Gospel is inextricably connected with the Tree of Life, for Christ is the “way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Therefore, the presence of the Tree of Life symbol in Tolkien's narrative serves to point toward the death of Christ on the cross, providing grace for mankind.

closely studying the light in *The Silmarillion*, let us first acknowledge the role of light in Middle-earth and its travelers' lives as a whole. The contrast of light and darkness, and good and evil, plays prominently through *The Lord of the Rings*. Places of rest and hope are well lit, as in Rivendell and Lothlorien, while places of fear and evil are unlit, as in the Old Forest and Shelob's Lair. Petty interprets the light in the Balrog scene of *The Fellowship of the Ring* as a symbol of Christ:

In mythic terms, creatures from the dark side of magic cannot abide the light of day, so the Fellowship will escape if they can just get out into the daylight. To cast this image as specific Christian iconography, the Sun is equated with Christ, and those bathing in his light will be saved from Satan's minions. (Petty 57)

Here we also have an example of iconography at work in Tolkien's narrative. The sun is a beacon of hope for the fellowship as they run from their enemies and provides safety since the evil pursuing them cannot follow them outside into its light. The Bible also provides hope for Christians in Christ. Quoting from Isaiah, Paul reminds the church in Rome that "the root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope" (Rom. 15:12). This verse not only shows Christ as a symbol of hope for all peoples, but also names Christ using language that reminds us that Christ is the Tree of Life. He is the "root of Jesse" and hope for the world. Christ is also light: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Christ, as the light of the world, offers hope. The Trees are the lights of Valinor and their light provides hope for Middle-earth, as will be explored next.

A closer look at the workings of Valinor's light sources reveals significant evidence for connecting the Trees to the tree of life. Flieger describes the Trees as a "diminished brilliance" in comparison to the first Lamps. She explains the Lamps as

“something not far removed from the primal light of God” (Flieger 61). Through the Trees, the primal light of the Lamps is now “tempered, filtered through the life of the world, and brought softly into being” (Flieger 62). While Flieger takes this interpretation in an anthropological direction, a more direct Christian interpretation of the Lamps and Trees may see God’s glory signified by the Lamps, and Christ figured in these Trees as the lights of the world. In Genesis, God is said to be “walking in the garden,” which suggests that he is present on earth in a way that Adam and Eve more clearly perceive until they are banished from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8). The Lamps are very clearly perceived before Melkor’s destruction of them, too. Melkor’s destruction of the first Lamps made by Aule brings about the necessity of a new light, akin to the necessity for a new Presence that arises from the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. After the Fall, Christ is eventually present on earth in a form in which people directly perceived him. His divine glory was—as Flieger described the Trees’ light—“filtered through the life of the world” (61-62). While the Trees exude a “diminished brilliance” as compared to the Lamps, Christ’s divinity is not entirely “diminished” in the sense that he loses his Godhood. Rather, he is clothed in humanity so that man may look upon him. Here we see how the movement of light sources from Lamps to Trees in *The Silmarillion* is similar to the difference in earthly presence of God and Christ before and after the Fall. To further the connection between the Trees and Christ as light, Flieger describes the cyclical light of the Trees as a “hesitation and pulsation” that is inscribed in the world’s character as created (Flieger 62). In a similar way, Christ took on the nature of man and the characteristics of creation even though he is in part the Creator: “And the

Word became flesh and lived among us...[and] all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3, 14). Both Christ and the Trees are worldly in the sense that they participate in the cycles and characteristics of creation and humanity. Through the nature of the light pouring forth from the Trees we may see a vision of Christ who is "the light of all people" (John 1:4).

What is to be said, then, of the destruction of the Trees? Does this destruction continue to support our comparison, or does it end here? As is the nature of Tolkien's mythos and its connection to the greater reality, hope remains despite all things. Before the Trees are extinguished, their light is preserved in the Silmarils. Another hint toward the divine nature of this light is the fact that no man or evil can touch the Silmarils without experiencing severe pain: "And Varda hallowed the Silmarils, so that thereafter no mortal flesh, nor hands unclean, nor anything of evil will might touch them, but it was scorched and withered" (*The Silmarillion* 67). The holiness of the Silmarils, and the consequence of mortal flesh touching them, reminds us of Uzzah's death after touching the Ark of the Covenant. In 2 Samuel, Uzzah touches the Ark in order to keep it from falling, but the holiness of the Ark is too great for an unholy man to touch, so God strikes him dead (6:7). The Ark of the Covenant signified God's presence among his people, and on account of its holiness destruction or death occurred when someone unclean handled it. Herein lies a similarity with the Silmaril's light that has divine characteristics. Furthermore, the Silmarils hold meaning for the future of Middle-earth just as Christ's foretelling his second coming holds meaning for the future of the world:

“Mandos foretold that the fates of Arda, earth, sea, and air, lay locked within them” (John 14:1-3, *Sil* 67). Out of these three precious jewels for which battles are fought, one remains and becomes a morning and evening star called Earendil. As Flieger says, “No longer a pervasive presence, the light [of Earendil] has become only a reminder and a promise, a sign of what has been and yet may be” (Flieger 89). The divine reflection of this light remains present in this part of the story since Earendil is the Morning and Evening Star, just as Christ himself is called both the Morning and Evening Star. Finally, both the light of Earendil and Christ’s promise to return provide hope. The light remaining in the only Silmaril to be seen from Middle-earth keeps the Elves from despair: “its glory is seen now by many, and is yet secure from all evil” (*Sil* 259). Just as Christ ascended promising the Holy Spirit to his followers to guide them, so also is there a remaining light in Middle-earth not constrained to the heavens (John 14:26). By these numerous examples, it is made evident that the relationship with the divine that we recognize in the light of the Trees is not discounted by their destruction, since the light lives on in the Silmarils.

Sandra Miesel offers more evidence regarding the continuation of the Tree’s light in Middle-earth. She writes about the life-giving element found in the strong female characters such as Yavanna, sub-creator of the Trees, and Galadriel. Extending her ideas into the narrative action, the “life-giving ladies” are also light-giving ladies. Miesel reminds us that Galadriel is the giver of the vial to Sam that holds within it light from Earendil’s Silmaril (Miesel 148). It is by this light that Sam defeats Shelob in her dark lair. The light of Valinor not only lights Middle-earth, but it extends into dark reaches where all hope seems lost. Here, too, is more evidence

for the presence of a relationship between Christ and the Tree of Life seen through the element of light. The Edenic Tree of Life, much like the Valinor trees, and the physical presence of God Incarnate is “what has been,” and the vision of the Tree of Life in Paradise and the second coming of Christ is what “yet may be.” True to Christian tradition, Tolkien’s work offers an ideal beginning, a failure, and hope for the future. This reflection is not only seen in major elements such as the images of Christ in Aragorn, Gandalf, Frodo, and Sam, but also in smaller themes such as trees and their relationship with light.

The Fruit of Telperion and Eternal Fruition in Christ

A seedling of Telperion appears in a scene at the end of *The Return of the King* that functions in a way as to reflect similar characteristics found in the Christian Tree of Life. As explained in an earlier chapter, the tree of life for many cultures is connected to kingship, blessing, and immortality, and this is no different for Christianity. Christ is simultaneously the King of Kings and the Tree of Life for the Christian Church. The re-appearance of Telperion as a sign for Aragorn’s marriage may serve a greater purpose for the reader than simply the fulfillment of Aragorn’s desire. Much has been said in connecting the character of Aragorn to the promised Messiah.⁵ Aragorn is widely acknowledged as such, since he is the king prophesied to bring Gondor back to glory. His humble beginnings as a wandering Ranger link him to Christ’s birth into poverty and early ministry. When he dies, the Aragorn is

⁵ Perhaps the most poignant picture of Aragorn reflecting Christ is his coronation. Wood beautifully explicates this scene in terms of the hope that Aragorn brings to Middle-earth in “The Lasting Corrective” chapter of his book. Being one of the three Christian virtues, the presence of hope despite trials in *Lord of the Rings* strongly supports the Christian themes in the story.

described as “an image of the splendour of the Kings of Men in glory” (*Return* 344). This image may remind readers that man is created in the image of the True King in full glory: “God created humankind in his image” (Gen. 1:27). Yet Aragorn, unlike Christ, is not an eternal king, and he and his wife Arwen depart into death and their kingdom is left to wane (Wood 143). He is not a replica of Christ, but Aragorn’s role as king and his connection with trees reveals meaning in Telperion that reflects the Tree of Life.

When he sees the offspring of Telperion growing on Mount Mindolluin, Aragorn receives the sign of the blessing for his marriage to Arwen for which he is waiting. As Gandalf and Aragorn are discussing Aragorn’s rule beginning the Dominion of Men, Aragorn seems less than hopeful for Gondor having a queen. The Tree of Gondor that used to blossom in the Court of the Fountain is “withered and barren,” signifying the demise into which the kingdom has fallen (*Return* 249). While on the mountain, Gandalf instructs him to “look where all seems barren and cold,” and “alone there in the waste a growing thing stood” (*Return* 249). Indeed, Aragorn is surprised to find “a seedling of Galathilion, and that a fruit of Telperion of many names, Eldest of Trees” (*Return* 250). Aragorn receives this showing as a sign of his awaited marriage.

Similarly, in the book of Revelation the imagery of the Tree of Life is paired with the marriage of Christ and the Church. In Revelation, the author witnesses the marriage of Christ and the Church, or the new Jerusalem. The “holy city, the new Jerusalem, [comes] down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). In the next chapter, the author also recognizes the Tree

of Life bordering the waters in Paradise: "On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit...and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). In both *Return of the King* and Revelation, a tree is present in a marriage of a king and his bride. Whether or not Tolkien had this biblical scene in mind, Telperion's appearance as a sign for Aragorn's marriage to Arwen may serve as a reflection of the biblical tradition. In both cases, a sacrifice is made in order for a marriage to be consummated. Aragorn and Arwen's ability to marry depends on Arwen's sacrifice of her immortality, since she is an elf and Aragorn is a mortal man. Christ does not lose his eternal nature, but enters into the realm of time in a human body in order to marry the Church to himself by his death and resurrection. He humbles himself, and through Christ God "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). For Christians, it is only the act of the perfect union of nature and grace in the body of Christ, the Tree of Life, which allows the possibility of mankind having eternal life in Paradise. For Aragorn, it is the appearance of the fruit of Telperion that gives him assurance for his marriage to Arwen and hope for the future of his kingdom. The combined examples of a prophesied king and a long-awaited marriage that is signaled by the growth of a tree strongly suggests the presence of the biblical tree of life tradition in Tolkien's work.

For readers of Tolkien who resist the Christian themes present in his works, perhaps a more obvious argument connecting Middle-earth and Christianity is necessary. If there is a character, for example, with a more direct correlation to Christ than Aragorn, then perhaps the Trees of Valinor may derive more significance

from their role in the story. In the culmination of his book, Dr. Wood shows the reader how Tolkien's consummation of Middle-earth would be the incarnation of Iluvatar and his entrance into Arda. Wood found this prophecy in a work by Tolkien called "The Debate of Finrod and Andreth" (Wood 157). He follows this debate as it shows Andreth, a very wise woman, convincing Finrod, a very wise elf, that death is not the final purpose of Men; Death, brought about by Melkor, forces the separation between body and soul, whereas the perfect union of body and soul is essential to the intended nature of Men (Wood 158-9). Andreth then explains that the only way to heal Arda would be for a "new kind of man" to enter the world to "overcome the curse of Melkor called permanent death" (Wood 161). According to Wood's interpretation, this "new kind of man" who will bring about the transformation of Arda is Iluvatar incarnated. The incarnation of Middle-earth's God-figure Iluvatar directly correlates to Christ who is God Incarnate and through Christ "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54). Therefore, "this Tolkienian prophecy of the incarnation of God in Middle-earth is deeply Christian" (Wood 161). Wood goes on to explain that Iluvatar's prophesied incarnation shows that Tolkien affirms the Christian claim that God's Incarnation is a "wondrous fulfillment and completion" of human dignity (Wood 162). We may also say that Tolkien further dignifies his own characters and the reality of Middle-earth's history by intending Iluvatar's incarnation. Symbols and themes in the rest of the work are connected to a greater reality, too. As we know, the church interprets the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden as one of the prefigurations of the eternal Christ. Similarly, Middle-earth is given a tree whose fruit lives on for ages. The entrance of sin into the world

removes man from the Garden and the Tree of Life. Yet he will be restored to it in Paradise on account of the Incarnation and Resurrection, as we have seen in Revelation 22. For Middle-earth, the evil Melkor destroys the Trees, yet by the fruit and flower Yavanna hopefully coaxes from the remains, light and hope for the future is provided for all of Middle-earth.

The presence and functions of the Trees of Valinor in a world in which they are connected to goodness portrayed by light, a king's return and marriage, and language of sowing, allows room for the possibility of a Tree of Life figure in the text. If the goal of this chapter has been met, then readers will recognize the relationship between the biblical tree of life and Tolkien's literature. The vital sign of success in Tolkien's fairy-story is that it points to a greater reality by the act of the author's sub-creation. By his sub-creation, trees are able to walk and talk, however slowly, and shine forth light from within their trunks and branches. With this example from modern literature of the Tree of Life in a different form and mode, we may now move on to see interpretations that extend the Tree of Life into human embodiments of its meaning.

CHAPTER THREE

A Christian Foundation in *The Tree of Life* Film

Terrence Malick's film *The Tree of Life* is a modern artistic interpretation of this tree that has become such a ubiquitous world symbol today. The major themes present in the film suggest Malick's adherence to the Christian interpretation of the symbol of the tree of life. The biblical theme in the film is made evident in the first lines spoken by the character of Mrs. O'Brien. Nature and grace are immediately juxtaposed: nature is said to "have its own way," while grace "accepts insults" and "injuries." This introduction finishes with the phrase, "love is smiling through all things." In this film's vision of the tree of life, the characters play the largest role in relating its theme of nature and grace.

Throughout the film, the characters Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, and two of their boys Jack and R. L. embody the qualities of nature and grace. Their interactions with one another portray Christian beliefs of these qualities. Nature and grace in this film often conflict, but not always—much like the roles nature and grace play in a Christian's life, as the ebb and flow of disobedience and repentance occurs. Intimate, tender scenes occur between the characters representing nature and grace, but they often juxtapose scenes portraying conflict. Yet the representations of nature and grace through the characters are not wholly perfect. Their fluidity supports the realistic quality of the family portrayed in this film, and its relatable meaning for the audience.

This chapter will expound on the hidden, invisible reality behind their characters and connect the characteristics of nature and grace back to the subject of the tree of life. As noted in the first chapter, Christian tradition uses the tree of life as a symbol of Christ. Malick extends this tradition through his film, using not a perfect Christ figure, but characters that appear to be imitating him. The connections between the characters strongly resembling grace and their presence among the world's natural settings indicates a persuasive element in the film that nature as God's creation is good. The nature of man, however, compromised by his own sin, makes grace necessary for a full life. In this film, grace embodied is connected to nature itself; nature embodied is connected likewise to the cultivated garden, the city, and even to business. Where nature and grace meet in harmony, there is baptism, redemption, and resurrection. The film recalls the symbolism of the tree of life as Christ through this theme, since Christ is the perfection of nature and grace. Other Christian elements are also seen in the prayer motif and Malick's use of light and water. These elements will be discussed first before the theme of nature and grace in order to establish the biblical themes that contribute to the understanding of the film.

Prayer, Light, and Water

Voice-overs heard throughout the film contribute to the direction and understanding of the film while simultaneously incorporating a prayer motif. The similarity between the film's prayer motif and Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae* supports the proposal that Malick's tree of life does in fact point to Christianity's Jesus Christ.

Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae* is a meditative work purposed to increase the reader's faith and devotion to Christ. Bonaventure includes prayers within his instruction that the reader can reproduce out of their own heart (142, 146, 154). Within the text, the prayers appear in no certain order, as if Bonaventure himself was moved directly to prayer while writing of Christ's life and passion. His prayers and exhortations to the reader function in a way as to lead the reader to meditate on Christ's life and communicate intimately with him. Malick's *The Tree of Life* is similar to Bonaventure's poem in its meditative and prayer-like qualities. The motif of prayer, meditation, and communication with Christ is evident audibly and visually throughout the film. Similarly to the *Lignum Vitae*, the prayer-like whispers in the film have no certain order, but arise from the characters' circumstances and contribute to the theme occurring at that time in the film. They provide a glimpse into the characters' hearts and internal thoughts.

A linguistic communication between God and man through Scripture and prayer is exemplified in both *Lignum Vitae* and Malick's *Tree of Life*. Whispered words in the movie are recognized as spoken by the characters; some are questions posed to God, but others can be interpreted as Jesus' own words to the characters by their similarities to what Jesus says in Scripture. God's communication through people in this film also implies that certain characters embody Christ. The first whisper in the film is the adult Jack's voice: "Brother. Mother. It was they who led me to your door." Later on, he also says, "You spoke to me through her." Presumably, he is speaking to God in prayer, remembering the lives of his mother and brother who showed him God's love and grace, especially through acts of

forgiveness. Soon after the grown Jack asks God, “How did I lose you,” we also hear a young boy, presumably R. L., whisper, “Find me.” Close to the end of the film, the same boy’s voice says, “Follow me.” Likewise, in each of the four Gospels, Christ tells his disciples, “Follow me.”⁶ Mrs. O’Brien’s voice is heard whispering, “Help each other. Love every one, every leaf, every ray of light. Forgive.”⁷ In these examples, Malick’s characters are speaking the words of Christ in Scripture. Through the interplay of the voice-overs, the audience sees prayer in action and hears answers in the form of the biblical word. This very same practice occurs in *Lignum Vitae*, as Bonaventure meditates on the death of Christ as portrayed in Scripture and responds in prayer. Bonaventure describes Christ and his death on the cross using verses from Hebrews, Matthew, Luke, and the Psalms. His meditation on Scripture leads him to immediately respond to God through prayer:

O Lord, holy Father, look down, then, from your sanctuary,
from your lofty habitation in the heavens;
look, I say, upon the face of your Anointed;
look upon this most holy Victim,
which our High Priest offers to you for our sins
and be placated over your people’s wantonness. (29)

Here we see a similarity in the interplay of communication between God and man, Scripture and word. Malick uses his characters most embodying grace to voice the words of Christ as a response to the questions his characters pose to God in the

⁶ Jesus says “Follow me” in the following verses: Matthew 4:19; 16:24, Mark 1:17; 10:21, Luke 5:27; 18:22, John 1:43; 8:12; 21:19.

⁷ Jesus’ commands in the Gospels are very similar. “And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Matt. 25:40). “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). “And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive” (Luke 17:4).

midst of their struggles for understanding. The film depicts the Christian spiritual practice also exemplified in *Lignum Vitae* by showing God's communication to man through Scripture, and man's communication to God through prayer.

We not only see a depiction of linguistic communication between God and man in the film, but also visual communication through nature and action that corresponds to biblical themes. The grown-up R. L. dies early on in the film, which introduces the biblical Job theme. As the other characters wrestle with the meaning of his death, they are seen questioning God in prayer. Mrs. O'Brien walks among trees in a forest and prays, "Was I false to you? Lord, why? Where were you?" Immediately following her plea, visual images of God's creative work are displayed in a way that parallels the answer God gives to Job when Job asks similar questions. God answers Job with his own presence and his own question:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? (Job 38:1-4)

In a similar fashion, a long visual sequence depicting the creation of the world ensues immediately after Mrs. O'Brien prays her question. God seems to be telling the film's audience his creative story after Mrs. O'Brien questions his goodness. The young Jack asks, "How did you come to me? In what shape? Disguise?" Glimpses of his childhood with his brother appear and he says, "I see my brother. True. Kind." In this instance, the audience receives the answer visually through the shots of R. L. and the grace and kindness he extends to his brother. Jack goes on to say, "You spoke to me through her. You spoke with me from the sky, the trees, before I knew I

loved you, believed in you. When did you first touch my heart?" This question is answered by a scene depicting Jack's birth, implying that mankind is born with an imprint of God of his heart.⁸ The film seems to follow Augustine's teaching that the earth is awash with God's presence on account of being created by him and finding its beginning and end in him. This film suggests that there exists a communication between God and man not only through audible prayers and words of Scripture, but also through creation itself. Overall, noticing the prayers and communication between God and man in this film is unavoidable. Whether audibly or visually, the voice and work of God is heard and seen in conjunction with the prayers of people.

Just as prayer-like whispers move the audience to think on God, so also does the use of light in the film point toward Christian truth by its similarity to biblical themes. The film begins with a light appearing as if it is a being in itself – it is fluid, but it does not move from the center of the screen – alone in the darkness. This same or a similar light reappears a few times more, especially indicating significant transitions or breaks in time, in the film. It appears during the transitions from the O'Brien's home to the city where Jack works, then to the creation sequence. Different lights, such as a lamppost in the darkness or a lone nightlight in a dark room, appear during the other transitions between stages in time. The first light reappears in very last appearance on the screen. The most frequent light featured, however, is the sun. Malick's use of natural light to illuminate his scenes renders beautiful pictures of his actors and the world around them. Whatever source of light he uses, it is usually very pointed – a single flame, the sun seen as small in the great

⁸ Following Augustine's theology that we are created with an innate desire for God.

distance, a solar eclipse. The emphasis on light and the singularity of the lights used throughout the film may move the Christian viewer to think of Jesus' words, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). As the light is present throughout the film, so also is Christ present throughout all of eternity and as the source of all creation. The light in this film may imply that Christ's eternal being (John 1:1) is not only present during the creation of the world, but also during the birth of a child millions of years later. In the creation sequence, scenes depicting the beginnings the cosmos include incredible light pictures. When Jack is born, the screen is awash in sunlight, and the same sun glints behind both the trees and glass ceilings that he climbs as he grows older.

Light also contributes to the theme of nature and grace in the film. The sun shining through the trees is a frequent film shot. If viewers accept the biblical claim that Christ is the light of the world, then they may also equate the sun shining through the trees as a visual representation of Mrs. O'Brien's statement, "love is shining through all things." In conjunction with this connection the Bible teaches that "God is love" (1 John 4:16). With the theology of the sovereignty of God in mind, it may be said that God is shining through all things. *The Tree of Life* supports this notion by the presence of the Job theme. The presence of evil and death does not alter God, for he is eternal and eternally sovereign. While the O'Brien family experiences change, God remains the same as signified by the constancy of the sun. With the image of God and Christ as an inextinguishable light, we may see these images of the sun and trees as the meeting of nature and grace. The trees, however slowly, grow and change in ways noticeable to people around them. Likewise, the

trees represent mankind, as man is by nature inconstant. The tree is grounded in earth like man who was made from dust, and to dust he shall return (Gen. 3:19).

The tree that grows out of the dirt is illuminated by the sun that leads us to think on grace and love. Paul writes of the sin of man in Ephesians and says,

...We were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:3-7)

Paul's words exemplify the relationship between man and God. Man as creation is born out of and into a sinful nature, but is granted grace by The Light of the World so that man, too, may become a light in the world. Jesus says in Matthew, "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:14, 16). The intersection of sunlight and trees therefore provides a visual representation of the intersection of nature and grace in man through Jesus Christ.

Another focal imagery that points to a Christian purpose in *The Tree of Life* is water. In Scripture, water is seen alongside the tree of life in Revelation 22:1, Psalm 1:3, and Genesis 2:9-10. In Revelation, the tree of life grows alongside "the river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1). In the gospel of John, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he gives living water to those who ask for it (4:14). Herein the tree of life is not only connected to water, but also to the grace given by Jesus. Since the biblical tree of life and water are inextricably connected, it is fitting that Malick uses water consistently in his film. Like the light

imagery discussed previously, the film's use of water also contributes to the nature and grace theme. It serves a dual purpose in the film by being an important part of the scenes of birth and death (signifying nature), and baptism and resurrection (signifying grace). When the film depicts the birth of Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien's first son, it shows a young boy, presumably the young Jack, swimming up out of a house underwater. The underwater scene immediately moves to show Mrs. O'Brien dressed in white giving birth in a clean white room. Dr. Peter Candler interprets this scene as a type of pre-birth baptism. He suggests that Malick is implying the theological view that grace may presuppose nature by this scene (Candler). Water is also used in the death of a neighborhood friend with whom the O'Brien boys play. In a moment of fun and play in a natural river setting, a boy unexpectedly drowns. The same element that is present in the birth of a child also plays a role in another child's death. Water is also involved in the hiding of Jack's sin. After he steals a nightdress from a neighbor's house he sends his shame away in the river, releasing the dress to the current. As exemplified in these scenes, birth, sin, and death are strongly indicative of nature and the universal human experience. Water also signifies important Christian themes, and is present in the depiction of these themes in the film. Mrs. O'Brien offers prisoners in town cups of water that she personally holds up for them to drink out of. She exemplifies Matthew 25:35-36, when Jesus teaches his disciples to give drink and attention to the least of people. This water offering symbolizes the grace that Christ bestows upon the world: "...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14).

In the heavenly scenes at the end of the film, the O'Brien family and other characters, some familiar and others unfamiliar, wander contentedly in and out of the shallows of a beach. This is probably not a view of heaven for this film, but it seems to portray a type of post-death reunion for the O'Brien family. Mrs. O'Brien cradles R. L., showing him affection as only a mother who has been separated from her son for far too long can. This scene is accompanied by "Agnus Dei" from "Requiem" by Hector Berlioz, which includes lyrics translated as, "Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, grant them everlasting rest." In consideration of the Christian themes throughout *The Tree of Life*, this water scene likely suggests a heavenly redemption for the characters—something only achievable by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8). It strongly suggests baptism, a Christian sacrament—an outward sign of inward grace. Water, then, not only ties the film and the O'Brien's story more closely to earth and nature, but it is also used to portray grace.

Grace Embodied

Mrs. O'Brien is a righteous character exemplifying to a large extent the incarnation of grace. Her displays of innocence and grace, role as a mother, and her loss of a son point to characteristics also seen in the Virgin Mary. Her character as a representation of grace or even Mary is not hindered by her modernity, since she is also strongly connected to natural creation that reminds us of the earth's primitive beginnings. She is filmed among the trees, in forests. The forests she walks in are very similar to the forests we see the dinosaurs occupying in the creation sequence.

Happy scenes with Mrs. O'Brien usually take place outside when she is seen playing joyfully with her sons. In contrast, the two heart-wrenching scenes including the big family argument over dinner and her learning of her son's death occur indoors. The first we see of her is as the young Mrs. O'Brien; she is smiling out at a field of grass, holding her hand out to a cow, cradling a goat, and looking wide-eyed out at the world. She is portrayed as innocence itself. There is an immediate transition from her younger self to her older self as a mother of three young boys. Directly after seeing her as a young girl, the audience views her swinging in the front yard, playing with her sons. The immediate movement from her self as a child to an adult may indicate her continuity of innocence. This innocence, her child-like heart, reminds the viewer strongly of the young Virgin Mary, who had "found favor with God," approached by Gabriel (Luke 1:30).

Mrs. O'Brien's role as a mother also portrays her as a Marian figure. When her first son is born, she is dressed in white, surrounded by people in white, and in a white room. The stark color symbolizes purity and reminds us of the white lily flower that is used to symbolize Mary in Christian art. During the final scenes she is seen clothed in white again, standing before a white background in soft lighting, and accompanied by an angelic figure and her younger self. The ethereal Catholic aura used frequently in scenes with Mrs. O'Brien supports her connection with the Virgin Mary. Mrs. O'Brien's surrender of her son is the strongest point of intersection Malick makes with her character and Mary. Candler interprets her character as such:

This open transparency to the divine will is evocative of the Marian *fiat* that leads to our salvation: Mary's yes to God, her self-surrender to the absolute generosity of God. This is the precise opposite of 'nature's' self-seeking. It is what the French call *disponibilité*, the formation of the soul to be so disposed to the divine will that it offers it its unhesitating consent. (Candler)

Dr. Candler raises a point here that is important to mention in view of this interpretation of the tree of life. There is much evidence to suggest that Malick is portraying a Christian interpretation of the tree of life – mainly that it is a symbol of Christ who shows perfect grace to the world, in order that sin may be forgiven and mankind reconciled to God. The role Mary plays in our salvation is debated among Christians, but most agree that she can, for many, *lead* us to Christ and salvation through her consent to bear Jesus. The role of Mrs. O'Brien in this film demonstrates how people can exemplify parts of the greatest mysteries of God, her character showing aspects of God's love and grace.

Candler implies that Mrs. O'Brien, like Mary, offers her unhesitating consent in giving over her son to God. He is referring to the ending scene of the film, when she is accompanied by the angel and her younger self, lifts her hands in a gesture of submission and says, "I give him to you. I give you my son." Yet this moment of unhesitating consent did not come altogether easily for Mrs. O'Brien. In the hesitation and questioning of God's purpose and goodness that she whispers throughout the film, Malick crafts her character in a realistic way to portray that even the most grace-filled person may still question God. After the death of R. L., Mrs. O'Brien prays, "Was I false to you? Lord, why? Where were you?" Her questions are not posed in such a way as to suggest her loss of faith, but instead to

show her struggle with the fact of nature seen in death. The questions she asks actually link her more strongly to Mary. After Gabriel announces God's proposal of Christ's conception to her, Mary responds with a question: "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Luke 1:34). Bonaventure interprets her question to be a sign of her intelligence, instead of her doubting God's sovereignty (1.61). In the midst of Mrs. O'Brien's mourning she repeats the prayer of Psalm 23, yet we hear her heartache asking simultaneously, "What did you gain?" The juxtaposition of a prayer of faith and an honest, almost accusatory, question serves to show Malick's focus on the almost unanswerable questions. This theme coincides with the Job theme present in the film. Mrs. O'Brien is faced with gruesome natural acts, yet her faith that corresponds with Mary's is the dominant message at the end of the film.

Mrs. O'Brien's story is connected to Job's in this question of God's purpose and goodness in the face of seemingly unfair circumstances. Ultimately, she responds to grace. Before the creation sequence, Mrs. O'Brien prays, "Was I false to you? Lord, why? Where were you?" She is in a forest, as if it is a sacred grove through which she gains her connection to God in prayer. Her mourning over her dead son is heard in the lamenting "Lacrimosa" that sounds throughout the cosmic scenes.⁹ The problem of evil in this film connects with the tree of life by correlating to Christ as the Tree of Life and the problem of evil evident in his death on the cross. Mrs. O'Brien's questions to God are answered through the creation sequence and the

⁹ The song "Lacrimosa" from "Requiem for My Friend" by Zbigniew Preisner plays throughout the creation sequence. The lyrics mourn the passing of a dear friend, as Mrs. O'Brien is mourning the death of her child. "Ah! that day of tears and mourning! / From the dust of earth returning, / Man for judgement must prepare him: / Spare, O God, in mercy spare him! / Lord, all pitying, Jesu blest, / Grant them Thine eternal rest."

film's allusions to Job and his own questions. When we ask God these questions that seem to doubt his sovereignty, he answers in kind, calling our finiteness to the forefront. In the allusion to Job, the film illustrates the immortality of the tree of life. The Christian belief that Christ is eternal (John 1:1) is the link between the creation sequence that illustrates the beginning of time and the tree of life that is said to give immortality to those who eat of its fruit. The creation scenes, as said before, display God's sovereignty and his ultimate will for the good. So, the film ends up showing a type of journey for Mrs. O'Brien in which she surrenders to God's goodness and trusts in his grace to redeem nature in the end. The final ocean scenes alluding to redemption remind the viewer that there is still redemption despite human struggles occurring in nature's grasp. One critic has labeled the final scenes as "grim" and "lacking in joy," but the reunion and reconciliation of the family suggests otherwise (Hibbs). The final scenes ask, "Is there reason to question God when he offers redemption to sinful mankind through Jesus Christ?" Mrs. O'Brien's mourning ultimately turns to her surrendering her son over to God out of faith in something more eternal than nature.

R. L., the son Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien lose to a war, is another character besides Mrs. O'Brien who symbolizes grace in Malick's film. Like Mrs. O'Brien and the other family members, he is a complex character, but his strongest characteristics are gentleness, forgiveness, and grace. Often contrasted to his brother Jack who symbolizes nature, his gracious character stands out among his brothers and the neighborhood boys. The forgiveness he shows to Jack is especially telling of his grace, and accepting the similarities between Mrs. O'Brien and Mary may lead us to

see similarities between R. L. and Christ. Besides his characteristic of grace, R. L. also symbolizes Christ in his sacrificial death; out of the three O'Brien boys, the one displaying the most grace is the one who dies. At the beginning of the film, we see brief, happy scenes of the family together when the boys are young, then the film transitions to the announcement of R. L.'s death to Mrs. O'Brien via a letter of notice from the military. The adult Jack soon after explains that R. L. dies when he is nineteen years old. He dies in military service, as a sacrifice while serving his country. A likeness to Christ is seen in his death, as Christ died as a sacrifice for all people. No strict allegory exists between the characters and their religious counterparts; R. L. is still most assuredly human and not perfect. He dishonors his father and tells him to "be quiet," yet his gentle character is markedly different from his brother Jack and the neighborhood boys.

In one scene, Jack repeatedly tries to entice R. L. into wrestling with him, but the younger brother refuses. Just as Mrs. O'Brien says that grace "accepts insults and injuries" and it "turns the other cheek," R. L. does not shy away from the possibility of injury from Jack when they are playing with the lamp. The real possibility of electric shock from his brother does not overwhelm his trust in Jack. R. L. trusts his brother to will his good. Yet even when Jack abuses this trust, R. L. does not hesitate to forgive him. Jack tells R. L. to put his finger over the shooting end of his BB gun and proceeds to shoot, hurting his brother. When Jack gathers the courage to return to the house, he is not met by an upset mother or father because R. L. does not tell on him. Instead, R. L. extends forgiveness to Jack, demonstrating this by placing his hand on Jack's shoulder in a loving gesture. He exemplifies the

teaching of Christ to “love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44) and “[forgive] one another...even as Christ forgave you” (Col. 3:13). This gesture of forgiveness and love continues between characters for the rest of the film. Jack is seen demonstrating this gesture multiple times for the rest of the film, as if he is playing the role of a servant who is relieved of his debts by his master and goes away to relieve others of their debts to himself. By extending the gesture of forgiveness and love, Jack portrays the verse, “We love, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Nature's Relationship with Grace

Jack and Mr. O'Brien are the two characters in the film best representing nature as Mrs. O'Brien defines it. According to her narration, Nature likes to “have its own way” and it “only wants to please itself, get others to please it, too – likes to lord it over them... It finds reasons to be unhappy, when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things.” After the scenes focusing on grace embodied in Mrs. O'Brien, the picture turns to the older Jack seen working as an architect in Dallas, TX. Using the city scenes, Malick directly contrasts the city skyscrapers with the tall trees in the O'Brien's town. He also portrays nature conquered and manipulated by showing the planting of trees in the courtyard of Jack's workplace. The sunlight shines through the glass ceiling windowpanes, winking behind the panes much like it flirts with the tree branches. Man has shut himself in from nature, and only allows to be illuminated by grace where and when he pleases. Jack is not entirely shut off from grace, though, as we know by recalling the role his mother and brother play in his life, expounded in the section above on

prayer. While the nature that humans can affect does not remain constant (Malick even uprooted the “tree of life” from its original space for this very film), the sun resembles the Truth found in God and Christ that does remain constant, no matter the changes in beliefs that humans cause. Love truly does shine through all things, even the resistances that nature builds against it.

Through these personifications of nature and grace, the film earns the title *The Tree of Life* by biblical standards. The presence of death in *The Tree of Life* is especially important to note, since the tree of life usually symbolizes immortality and life, historically. Death’s presence in this film points to the Christian belief that something beyond mankind on its own is necessary for a fulfilled life, even if that person is full of grace only as so far as man can be. R. L. for example, is one who is full of grace, yet he suffers death in war. Certain aspects of this film, such as death or lack of familial peace, would not fit as well with a secular interpretation of the tree of life that suggests earthly harmony. Instead, strong suggestions of Christian traditional belief about the tree of life are present that visualize theological beliefs. The contradiction of death in a movie presumably about something life-giving presents the view of Christ as the true Tree of Life. According to this film and the presence of death in it, true life transcends this world as we know it, and the redeemed harmony of nature and grace is the key to immortality. In other words, without the Incarnation that perfects nature and grace, the tree of life would stand simply as a symbol or a plain tree, bereft of its actual effectiveness in granting true life.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Biblical Tree of Life in Bruce Herman's "Spring" and "Winter"

Bruce Herman's *Four Qu4rtets* series features four separate paintings, each illustrating a person paired with a tree. Each painting coincides with T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* poems, as the four are individually titled by the name of a season, which is similar to the tone and content of Eliot's four poems. Eliot's *Four Quartets* demonstrates characteristics of time and brings the reader to wrestle with elements of our nature as beings limited by time, and God's nature as outside of time. In *Dry Salvages*, he says "to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint" (V). Eliot and Herman both explore time and timelessness through their own art forms. Herman uses this theme of time and transposes it through his artwork into a visible form. The four people in the paintings represent well-known stages of human life: childhood, late youth, adulthood, and late adulthood. This chapter will focus explicitly on the first and last paintings in the series. By the life and growth processes by themselves shown through this series of paintings, these trees may represent trees of life. From a Christian perspective, Herman represents spiritual elements within these paintings that connect the subjects to the biblical Tree of Life, and the symbol of the Tree of Life as it points to Jesus. The connections to biblical truth are not accidental, since Herman is explicitly a Christian artist. In an interview, Herman says that he aims to obey Jesus' directive, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16, "Drinks").

Herman's light is his artistic talent and the wise-heartedness he demonstrates by keeping it his goal to paint in order to give glory to God. Through his paintings, Herman leads the viewer to search for the higher truth he expresses, and to determine for himself whether or not he will participate in it. In this case, the higher truth Herman expresses is the image of Christ in man. Our choice to participate leads us to either participate in the image of Christ in ourselves, or to reject this altogether and make ourselves the main subjects of our lives instead.

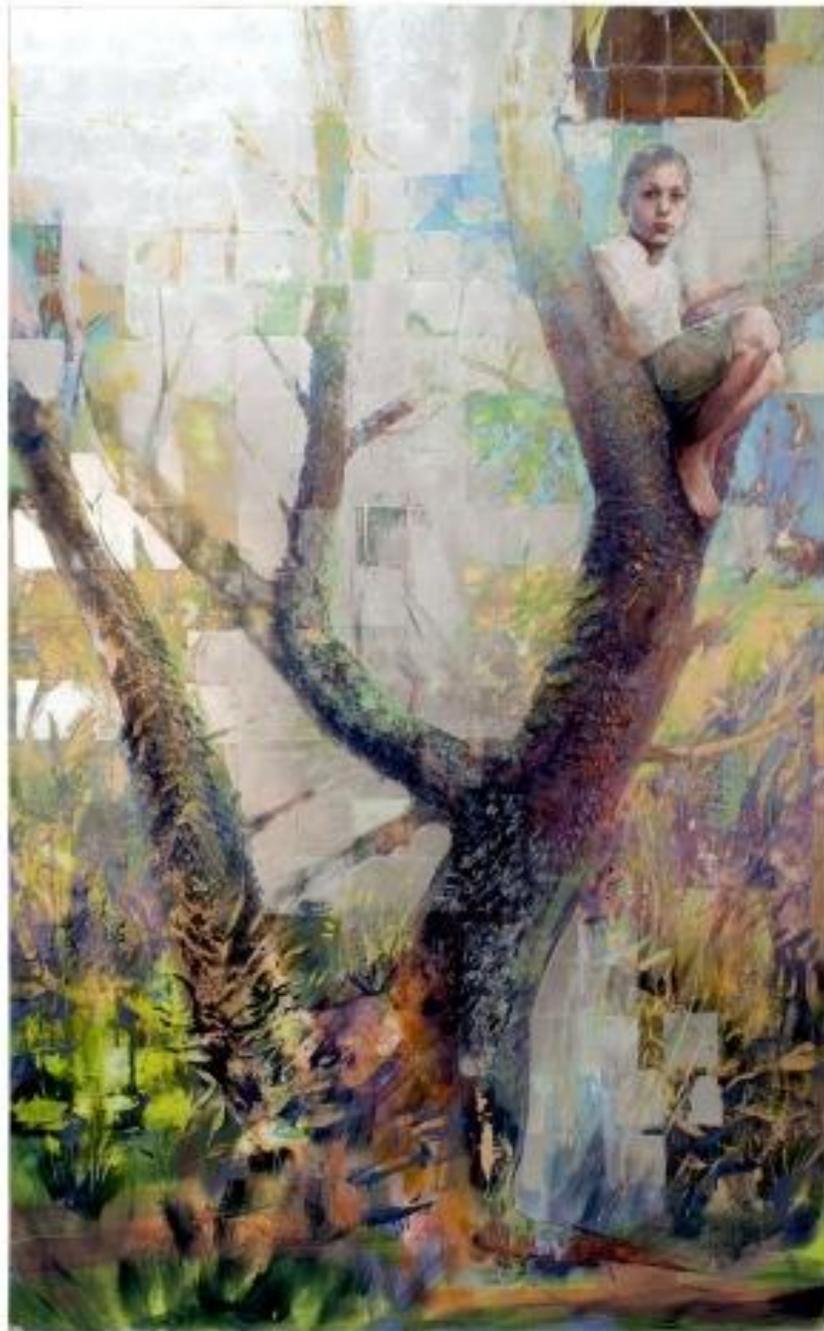


Figure 1: Spring/Earth/Childhood
“And the children in the apple-tree / Not known because not looked for / But heard,
half-heard, in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea.” (Little Gidding V)

The Beginning and End in "Spring"

"Beginning" and "end" signify aspects of time that Eliot weaves into his *Four Quartets*, and Herman reflects the same theme of time in this series of paintings. The first painting, "Spring," is reflective of the end of both *The Four Quartets* and *Revelation*. A line from *East Coker* reads, "In my beginning is my end." Herman chose a line very similar to this from the final stanza of the final section of the final poem, *Little Gidding*, to pair with his painting. The line paired with "Spring" is in a context of the merging of beginning and end. Herman's painting illustrates this by showing a little boy sitting in a tree. In relation to beginnings, the subjects are in their early stages of life. The boy is young, and the tree is young, too. As for the title, the season of spring itself signifies beginnings in that new life abounds after the hibernation and desolation of winter. Beginnings are prominent in this painting. The theme of the "end" is more subtle. A viewer familiar with Eliot's own appearance will recognize that the boy in the tree actually has the mature face of T. S. Eliot himself. The boy's very body is a merging of beginning and end, too. The context of Eliot's line from *Little Gidding* that Herman chose to pair with this painting indicates another type of end. The stanza in which this line is found subtly draws the reader to that scene in *Revelation* where the Tree of Life stands by the River of Life. In this scene from *Revelation*, there is a relationship between the beginning and end of time.

Little Gidding V produces an image of the Church's final end found in God from whom all creation derives their being and their beginning. In his poem, Eliot says that the Church's life on earth will end with a discovery of God: what we shall

“discover / Is that which was the beginning; / At the source of the longest river” (Little Gidding V). The “longest river” is most likely the River of Life from Revelation: “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...” (Rev. 22:1-2). In this verse, we also see the “source” and “beginning,” which is “the throne of God.” God is the source of all creation and the beginning to which the Church returns. The Church’s arrival to Paradise will be, in Eliot’s own words, “the end of all our exploring” when we “arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (Little Gidding V). To “arrive where we started” is not to imply a physical return, as if we existed eternally in Heaven before our earthly birth. Rather, Eliot is drawing from the tradition well rendered by Augustine that explains how man is ultimately sourced in God, who is True Being. Our life, our existence, as lowercase *being*, does not occur without a participation in uppercase *Being*.¹⁰ This little boy actually sits among the branches of the tree, as if he has become a branch himself, instead of standing apart from it like the people in the other paintings. His own closeness with the tree seems to signal his participation in its life. To extend this vision to a spiritual level, it is as if he is sitting in the very lap of Jesus, therefore, participating in Christ’s Being. This is the child who returns obediently when Jesus calls him to himself: “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Mark 10:14). The Tree of Life

¹⁰ I derive this ontology from Augustine’s idea, commonly referred to as the “great chain of being,” found in his *Confessions*.

image, then, is reflected in the painting's undertones of human life participating in divine life. With a biblical view of Eliot's lines connected to "Spring," reflection may lead us to see this painting as an image of members of the Church returning to the Father in Paradise. Their earthly life has ended, but their fulfilled life is just beginning.

The subject's youth allows us to see other aspects of the biblical Tree of Life in the painting's depiction of the value of early life and the theme of humility found in such youth. An earlier chapter in this thesis explored the Tree of Life as reward to the righteous and blessed. So also is this painting tied to divine blessedness, since children are often called blessed in Scripture. We may take from this painting the message that the beginning of life is just as important as its late youth, and early and late adulthood. More than once Scripture refers to the blessedness and blessing of children. Psalm 127:3-5 seems to say "the more the merrier" when it comes to bearing offspring:

Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has
his quiver full of them.

They are a blessing to their parents, and they are especially blessed by God. In Matthew, Jesus implies that special care is given to children by God's angels: "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven" (18:10).

A major reason for the high value appointed to those who are very young is their usually greater quality of humility—a virtue lauded in Jesus, especially by St. Francis and Bonaventure. The virtue of humility and its connection with both children and Christ allows this painting to lead us in thinking on the biblical Tree of Life. Jesus even says that a childlike faith is necessary to enter the kingdom of God. In the book of Matthew, Jesus surprises his disciples again with his response to their question of greatness.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (18:1-5)

Jesus does not even address the question of greatness first, but says that one cannot even enter heaven without becoming like children. He highlights children’s characteristic of humility, which Christ himself modeled perfectly. It is not the grandiose rulers, by their characteristic of “ruler” alone, who will be great. Instead, it is the “poor in spirit” who will be given the “kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

Therefore, when viewing the “Spring” painting, we should regard this child as a blessing, blessed by the Lord, and an example of humility. With these characteristics the painting may be evidently influenced by the biblical Tree of Life: it depicts the new life by the boy of early youth and a link to Revelation, divine blessedness in the child, and a symbol of humility, which is a prominent characteristic of Jesus who is the Tree of Life.



Figure 2: Winter/Air/Old Age
“...hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses; and the rest / Is prayer”
(Dry Salvages V)

The Image of Christ in "Winter"

This painting is the last of Herman's *Four Qu4rtets* series. The combination of a long life, seen in the old man's face, and the presence of the tree guide the audience to think on wisdom. Wisdom is frequently associated with old age, but it is not necessarily so that an old person is indeed wise. According to Scripture, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Prov. 9:10). It is fear of the Lord that leads one to wisdom, instead of accumulated years on earth. Yet wisdom in a person may certainly prolong their earthly years, as the next verse in Proverbs says, "For by Wisdom your days will be many, and years will be added to your life" (9:11). We know very well that not all wise people enjoy many years on earth, but those who seek God's Wisdom, no matter how long their life on earth, will enjoy infinite years in his presence after death. "They that explain [wisdom] shall have life everlasting" (Ecclesiasticus 24:31). The old man's wrinkled face allows the audience to consider the many years of his life, and the Christians themes found within Herman's series leads us to believe that this man seeks true wisdom. Wisdom is not only related to a long life in the scriptures, but it is also personified as a tree, even a tree of life: "[Wisdom] is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her" (Prov. 3:18). In the Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus provides us a look at characteristics of wisdom through similes likening it to trees.

And [I, Wisdom] took root in an honourable people, and in the portion of my God his inheritance, and my abode is in the full assembly of saints. I was exalted like a cedar in Libanus, and as a cypress tree on mount Sion. I was exalted like a palm tree in Cades, and as a rose plant in Jericho: As a fair olive tree in the plains, and as a plane tree by the water in the streets, was I exalted. (Ecclesiasticus 24:16-19)

The presence of the tree, then, is not only tied to the subject matter of life and growth, but it also contributes to the discussion of wisdom, since wisdom is often personified as a tree.¹¹ Furthermore, a section of Psalm 92 voices the worthiness of the aged on account that they are no less able to produce fruit in their Christian life than are those younger than them.

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of the Lord;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,
showing that the Lord is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.
(Psalm 92:12-14)

Herman depicts his “old age” subject in the season of winter, therefore there is no fruit on the tree. Yet this tree is probably still very much alive and able to produce fruit in the coming spring season. As relayed in the section analyzing “Spring,” the age in which a person may produce fruit for the Lord is not limited. Consequently, “Winter” invites the viewer to engage in the conversation concerning old age and the wisdom and fruitfulness that are still very possible in the midst of it.

¹¹ As the reader may recall, chapter one of this thesis explored the relationship between personifications of wisdom and wisdom as a symbol of Christ. Wisdom symbolizes both Christ and the Tree of Life in Christian tradition. See pages 5-7 of chapter one.

The subject of “Winter,” however, does not end at the subject of old age and wisdom. It is specifically in “Winter” that Herman reveals the Incarnate Christ as his main subject matter, more so than the old man or the tree. Not to say that the importance and significance of the old man as an image of Christ is diminished, but the greater truth to which he points inevitably makes the old man a *part* of the painting instead of the *goal* of the painting. In the end, it is Herman’s goal to make Christ the focal point, or the “still point” around which his artwork revolves (Burnt Norton II). He explicitly states this in an interview in which he says, “For years I used my art to call attention to myself...but I have learned my lesson and want nothing more at this point than that my paintings point toward that sacred space of honor for the only one true Artist, who gave himself away in his Creation” (“MAKING”). In his endeavor to communicate with Eliot’s poetry through painting, Herman engages the “still point” Eliot describes in Burnt Norton. The line in which it occurs reads, “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is...” (Burnt Norton II). In a conversation about the “still point” from Eliot’s poem, Herman describes his experience with *Four Quartets*: for the world the “still point” itself has “pointed us towards stillness and waiting” (“Drinks”). The “stillness and waiting” that Herman describes may mean many things. In view of “Winter,” it may be the old man’s waiting for rest from this wearying world. For the Christian, it may be a waiting for Christ’s Second Coming. For the person experiencing tragedy, it may be a waiting for answers. This latter type of waiting is what the artist himself lived through, and the tragedy brought him to study Eliot’s

Four Quartets.¹² In Herman's response to these poems, he begins each painting by laying a clay foundation on each canvas, calling this clay layer the "still point" of the painting series. One may suppose he calls the clay foundation the "still point" because the clay method does not change between the paintings and its common use ties all of the paintings together (much like the communal aspect of his series discussed above). Or else, it may be that the "still point" is the realization that any earthly foundation of man is in fact like clay or dust of the earth; as God told Adam, "...you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). This interpretation may be seen as a "still point" since it is inherently true for all of mankind, and is therefore a point of universal intersection or communion. Whatever the "still point" may in fact be, in this painting Herman provides the viewer an opportunity to experience his own stillness and waiting by observing an old man who is seen perhaps waiting for his final and truest communion with Christ.

Herman's own words about his experience with aged faces and the meaning surrounding the line from Eliot's *Four Quartets* he chose to pair with "Winter" leads us to the conclusion that Christ and our communion with him is the ultimate end or goal of this painting. In an interview, Herman describes his awe when truly seeing his grandparents' faces for the first time: "I saw the history of their entire life in their faces" ("Drinks"). This leads him to an artistic interest in not only faces of older people, but also all faces in general. He recalls his first experience with a work

¹² Bruce Herman talks about his misfortune in the "Drinks" interview. In short, his house and studio containing all of his work caught fire and was destroyed. Makoto Fujimura, the collaborating artist, explored *Four Quartets* in a similar way to Herman after the tragedy of September 11, 2001.

of art, which happened to be a Rembrandt—an artist revered for his talent in painting faces. The details Herman provides about this experience lead us to realize his final purpose in painting the faces of people.

I was just absolutely dumbfounded by the fact that [Rembrandt] could not just paint an effigy or some “likeness” but it was the person that was radiating from the painting. Their presence. The real presence. And of course, now as a theologically more sophisticated person than I was then, I can talk about real presence as the “Real Presence.” (“Drinks”)

With this in mind, it is apparent that Herman is seeking to portray the person as an image of Christ, even inhabited by the Real Presence. Theologian Herbert McCabe summarizes sacramental theology “in saying that a sacrament is a symbol which makes real what it symbolizes” (31). As sacrament pertains to the Eucharist and Real Presence, he says, “We have the body of Christ present just precisely in so far as it is symbolized by the appearance of the bread, but it is made sacramentally symbolized and therefore made real” (McCabe 31). The line Herman pairs with “Winter” guides us in using the term Real Presence as it applies in this painting, for the “hints and guesses” are tied to the Incarnation. The context of Eliot’s line paired with “Winter” functions as an even stronger push toward the theme of Real Presence and the image of Christ in man in the painting.

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time, [...] Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
(Dry Salvages V)

In these lines, Eliot is dealing with the limits of humanity in knowing God through his creation. The “moments” of realization are few and far between, for the earth only provides “hints and guesses.” Natural theology only goes so far, so “the rest / Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action” that leads us to half guess the hint, and half understand the gift. Finally, the culmination is the Incarnation. As Eliot’s poem continues to say, the Real Presence is where “the impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual,” and is “the point of intersection of the timeless / With time” (Dry Salvages V). It appears that this is the final goal of Herman’s painting – to intersect the timeless with time. He does this by painting an old man in whom the Real Presence may reside. If it does, then in this painting are the intersections of time and timelessness, and Christ’s bodily death grants the old man true life in the same paradoxical way that “The end is where we start from” (Little Gidding V). Even the coloration of “Winter” signifies this paradox. The background shades of silver, black, dark yellow, white, gray, and brown are rather gloomy. An easy, shallow interpretation to arrive at by first glance at this painting would be the inevitability of death for man. While this is certainly true, Herman’s faith does not allow him to end there. “Winter” is instead hopeful, just as the season of winter is full of hope for the springtime; just as a Christian in old age is allowed complete hope for a new, glorious, and fruitful life beyond death.

“Spring” and “Winter” Together

The young boy in “Spring” is the only subject younger than the oldest subject in “Winter” who looks directly at the viewer. Whether this is intentional or not, the

boy and the man alike beckon the audience, drawing them nearer, to reflect on the role of youth and age in an American society that often despises both. The boy and the man not only both look directly at the viewer, but also they are both placed to the right side of their trees. The two women in the other two paintings stand to the left of their trees, in contrast. Whether or not this similar placement was Herman's intent, it serves to further connect youth and age.

In contrast to society, Scripture does not despise, but loves both youth and age. Considering the virtues of children and old age that we discussed earlier, it is no surprise that Paul encourages Timothy to be bold in teaching the Gospel despite his youth: "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). Another place in Scripture remarks on youth and old age together.

Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am he,
even when you turn gray I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save. (Isaiah 46:3-4)

That God loves the newly born and the gray-haired alike is exemplified through the communal aspect of these paintings. Herman's *Four Qu4rtets* do not function best when seen as a horizontal or vertical line, but when seen as a complete circle. The similarities between "Spring" and "Winter" help us remember that winter gives way into spring before spring leads to summer and summer to autumn. Herman

provides insight into the communal and cyclical nature of the paintings in an interview in which he describes the process of painting “Spring” and “Winter.”

The painting of the child in the tree (“Spring”) [...] originally [had] four children. When I realized that three of the children had to disappear was when [I was] covering them with silver, which was actually that moon gold which is a kind of cross between silver and gold. That is what gave birth to the painting of the old man (“Winter”). The four paintings only come to conclusion together. (“Drinks”)

The community of Herman’s paintings is another way in which his *Four Quartets* function as biblical art. They portray not only the community of life by pairing people with trees, but the process of their becoming reveals the communal nature of the paintings themselves.

Herman’s paintings are a visual continuation of Eliot’s line in *Little Gidding* - “What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning” (*Little Gidding V*). Themes from the *Four Quartets* are not only present in the paintings individually, but also tie the paintings together as a cohesive whole. This specific theme of beginning and end that connects “Spring” to Revelation and the Tree of Life also exists in the “Winter” painting. The paintings participate in Eliot’s poetry through the themes and ideas, so there exists a community in these works of art. Furthermore, Herman’s paintings share communion with the artist and the audience in a way like Christians participate in the lives of other Christians past and present. In Hebrews, the author describes the Christians living before us as a “great cloud of witnesses” that surrounds those on earth (12:1). The artist, too, is surrounded by witnesses even when he is alone in his studio. In the same interview, Herman tells of his own experience as a graduate student sitting before the

accomplished American painter Philip Guston. Guston tells Herman and his peers that painting is truly a communal experience. Herman paraphrases Guston's words as such: "And he says, 'Y'all wanna know what painting is? This is what it is: You go into your studio and everybody's in there. Francesco Goya is in there. Vincent Van Gogh is in there. Rembrandt sittin' over in the corner saying 'Yeah sonny, let's see what you can do'" ("Drinks"). What Herman took from Guston's pep talk, and what is evident in his life and work, is summed up when he says, "That this isn't about you. This thing is not about you" ("Drinks"). It is as if Herman's work is in itself a tree of life in the way that he produces lasting fruit by his work and it is meant to extend beyond himself. Revelation's Tree of Life produces "twelve kinds of fruit...and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (22:2). The biblical Tree of Life embodies community within itself as it produces twelve different fruits; it also contributes to the community of the nations as its leaves heal not one nation, but all of them. Just as the artist's painting is, in reality, "not about [the artist]," so also is a Christian's life not about him or her. There is a communion with God, as they participate in Being, and a communion with the body of Christ, united by the Spirit: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). This idea of community is also applicable to non-Christian interpretations of the tree of life. Other interpretations of the tree of life often believe it to symbolize the communal nature of the world and that the cosmos is united by virtue of being

alive.¹³ For Christians this is still true, since all things are created by and for God. Yet we have a higher goal, to return to the One who created all life. The Christian perspective of participation in the Being of God, as we are given being that is sourced in God, is the Egyptian gold rendered from this secular worldview.

In conclusion, from these works of art in literature, film, and painting, we are able to derive insight into Christian spirituality by means of the tree of life. Tolkien provides for us sub-creation that points to the Great Reality that permeates all life; Malick shows how people embody nature and grace, reflecting Christ; and Herman illustrates Biblical themes of Wisdom and the Church's return to God in the practice of Christian community. Meditating on this Tree of Life that is Christ draws us to the top branches and bends our necks back that we may look more closely on God the Father. In its own forms and fashions, modern literature and art succeeds in revealing eternal truth and beckons us to ascend spiritual heights just as Christians have all throughout the ages before us.

¹³ For a detailed study on the tree of life in non-Christian cultures, see James, E. O. "The Theme of the Tree of Life" in *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study*. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1966. 245-288. Print.

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