

Tree of the knowledge of good and evil



The Tree of Knowledge is on the right.
"The Fall of Man" by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

The Tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Hebrew: עֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע / Etz Ha-Da-At tov Ve-ra,) is one of two trees in the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2-3, along with the Tree of life.

Origins

A cylinder seal, known as the Temptation seal, from post-Akkadian periods in Mesopotamia (c. 23rd-22nd century BCE), has been linked to the Adam and Eve story. Assyriologist George Smith (1840-1876) describes the seal as having two facing figures (male and female) seated on each side of a tree, holding out their hands to the fruit, while between their backs is a serpent, giving evidence that the Fall of man account was known in early times of Babylonia.



A marble bas relief by Lorenzo Maitani on the Orvieto Cathedral, Italy depicts Eve and the tree

The phrase in Hebrew: טוב ורע / tov V'ra, translatable as *good and evil*, may be an example of the type of figure of speech known as merism. This literary device pairs opposite terms together, in order to create a general meaning; so that the phrase "good and evil" would simply imply "everything". It is equivalent to the Egyptian expression *evil-good* which is indeed normally employed to mean "everything". In Greek literature, the concept is also used by Telemachus, "I know all things, the good and the evil" (Od.20:309-10) However, given the context of disobedience to God, other interpretations of the implications of this phrase also demand consideration.

Interpretations

JUDAISM

In Jewish tradition, the Tree of Knowledge and the eating of its fruit represents the beginning of the mixture of good and evil together. Before that time, the two were separate, and evil had only a nebulous existence in potential. While free choice did exist before eating the fruit, evil existed as an entity separate from the human psyche, and it was not in human nature to desire it. Eating and internalizing the forbidden fruit changed this and thus was born the yeitzer hara, the Evil Inclination. Rashi notes that the first sin came about because Eve added an additional clause to the Divine command:

"Neither shall you touch it." [By saying this, Eve] added to the command, and thereby came to detract [from it]. This is as it is written [Proverbs 30:6], "Do not add to His Words."

In the Talmud, several opinions are proposed as to the identity of the fruit:

- Rabbi Meir says that the fruit was a grape, made into wine. The Zohar explains similarly that Noah attempted (but failed) to rectify the sin of Adam by using grape wine for holy purposes.¹ The midrash states that the fruit was grape, or squeezed grapes (perhaps again alluding to wine).
- Rabbi Nechemia says that the fruit was a fig, as it was from fig leaves that they, Adam and Eve, made garments for themselves (Gen 3:7). God then made them "coats of skins, and clothed them." (Gen 3:21) upon expelling them from the Garden: "By that with which they were made low were they rectified. "
- On the other hand, Rabbi Yehuda proposes that the fruit was wheat, because "a babe does not know to call its mother and father until it tastes the taste of grain."^[6] On this, Tosafot there explains, "And this is called the Tree of Knowledge."

In Kabala, the sin of the Tree of Knowledge (called *Cheit Eitz HaDa'at*) brought about the great task of *beirurim*, sifting through the mixture of good and evil in the world to extract and liberate the sparks of holiness trapped therein. Since evil has no independent existence, it depends on holiness to draw down the Divine life-force, on whose "leftovers" it then feeds and derives existence. Once evil is separated from holiness through *beirurim*, its source of life is cut off, causing the evil to disappear. This is accomplished through observance of the 613 commandments in the Torah, which deal primarily with physical objects wherein good and evil are mixed together. Thus, the task of *beirurim* rectifies the sin of the Tree and draws the Shechinah back down to earth, where the sin of the Tree had caused Her to depart.

CHRISTIANITY

In Christian theology, consuming the fruit of the *tree of knowledge of good and evil* was the original sin committed by Adam and Eve that subsequently became known as the Fall of man in Genesis 2-3. In Catholicism, Augustine of Hippo taught that the *tree* should be understood both symbolically and as a real tree - similarly to Jerusalem being both a real city and a figure of Heavenly Jerusalem.¹ Augustine underlined that the fruits of that tree were not evil by themselves, because everything that God created *was good* (Gen 1:12). It was disobedience of Adam and Eve, who had been told by God not to eat of the tree (Gen 2:17), that was obnoxious and caused disorder in the creation, thus humanity inherited sin and guilt from Adam and Eve's sin.

In Western Christian art, the fruit of the tree is commonly depicted as the apple, which originated in central Asia. This depiction may have originated as a Latin pun: by eating the *malum* (apple), Eve contracted *mālum* (evil), or simply because of religious artists' poetic licence.

ISLAM

The Qur'an does not name this tree and it is always referred to as "the tree". Muslims believe that when God created Adam and Eve, He told them that they could enjoy everything in the Garden but this tree, and so, Satan appeared to them and told them that the only reason God forbade them to eat from that tree is that they would become Angels or become immortals.

When they ate from this tree their nakedness appeared to them and they began to sew together, for their covering, leaves from the Garden. As a result of their sin, they were removed from heaven and placed on Earth to live and die. Consequently, they repented to God and asked for his forgiveness and were forgiven. It was decided that those who obey God and follow his path shall be rewarded with everlasting life in Heaven, and those who disobey God and stray away from his path shall be punished in Hell. God in Quran (Al-A'raf 27) states: "[O] Children of Adam! Let not Satan tempt you as he brought your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their garments to show them their shameful parts. Surely he [Satan] sees you, him and his tribe, from where you see them not. We have made the Satans the friends of those who do not believe."

Other cultures

The medieval Pali poem "Tala Vilasam" recounts a legend of the tree that parallels the Biblical account. In it, the Creator Brahma finally allows the people access to the tree- which, in this case, is the palm tree *Borassus flabellifer*.

The American ethno botanist and philosopher Terence McKenna speculated that the fruit of the tree is a symbolic allegory for the entheogenic mushroom *Psilocybe cubensis*, and that the expansion of perceptual and cognitive awareness that resulted from ingestion was responsible for the acquisition of "knowledge".