

## **The Tree of Life in Ancient NOK Civilization: Unmasking The Matrix of the Garden of Eden in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

The Garden of Eden in Genesis, Proverbs and Revelation has been a matrix over the years as scientific studies of the Bible emerged. The search through the tree for the knowledge of good and evil, which the first inhabitants of the Garden ate, has not been able to solve the matrix. It becomes enormously significant that biblical scholarship engages an unconventional dimension of the quest as an attempt to read through the tree of life and to trace the landmarks of the Garden of Eden. Using a biblio-cultural perspective, this work discusses the tree of life from the ancient Nok culture and civilization in connection to historical interlude in Egypt with the intent to expose the tree of life and the Garden of Eden.

**Keywords:** Garden of Eden, Tree of Life, NOK Culture, Civilization, Afro-culture, humanity, Egypt, and Africa

### **Introduction**

Africa has been known for its culture, values and civilization even in its 'marginalized state'. Unveiling the Garden of Eden, the tree of life and its historico-theological significance have been challenging over the centuries (McKeown 33). Of the trees in the Garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has attracted attention of many people over the centuries and has failed to show us the path and landmarks for the Garden of Eden. It becomes necessary that the search for the Garden of Eden be derived from the tree of life.

In a study which tried to unveil the African situation within the socio-political matrix of the Garden, Ali A. Mazrui, a Professor of Political Science at University of Michigan, underscores the Garden of Eden to be situated in Africa and that Africa is probably the first home of humanity but it is the last to be made truly habitable (2). Mazrui reveals the effort put by archaeologists and depicted the Garden of Eden to be in Africa in the literal sense not metaphorical and that the first man was black ... and that there are increasing evidences to vindicate the claim that the first man was an African (11-2). Such statements have high decorum among the African people in connection to African ancient civilization.

In a more recent study, Olusegun Obasanjo studies the situation of man in Africa and states that Africa being the very home of human beings and of the earliest civilization has never been in doubt (29). The usage of the definiteness 'very' makes the assertion to depict a sense of belonging in relation to the statements of Mazrui above. As such, it becomes more feasible that the search for the boundaries of the Garden of Eden and the tree of life should involve the African continent. Despite this fact, efforts have been put around the Middle East because of the presence of the two depicted rivers in Genesis 2:10-14. Quite a number of searches on the Garden and the origin of abundant life have been done. One of

the most recent searches has been depicted in the movie; *The Tree of Life* in 2011. It is an American experimental drama film directed by Terrence Malick. The movie is a search for the origin of life and the meaning of life, which is connected to the imagery of the origins and the collapse and demise of the world and the commencement of life on the face of the earth.

The Bible has given answers in connection to the primeval historical monument through what has been revealed to Moses (Fuller 6-7; Wolf 51-8). Such classical chronicles and searches have not been able to satisfy the scientific mind of the modern man within theological configurations on the search through the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A reflection of the concept of the tree of life has given a dimension that will be dependent on the Bible with clear injunctions by the beloved disciple John within prophetic eyes in the Book of Revelation 22.

Since all biblical references have not been able to supply solution to the matrix of the Garden and the tree of life, this work is supplying unconventional prescriptions to quench the lasting thirst of scholars. These are connected to Egypt, which are believed to concern the Garden of Eden as a tree of life is situated there. A more recent discovery in the Nok culture and civilization has unveiled a tree of life, which has carried a binding nexus on the biblical accounts on the tree of life and will contribute as a sidewalk for the search for the tree of life and the Garden of Eden.

### **The Edenic Tree of Life: Location**

The word 'Eden' is used twenty times in the Bible. Seventeenth references are for geographical place(s), while three references as a proper noun, names of people. Predominantly, Eden was a geographical location; a term derived from the Sumerian and is considered to be the cognate of the Sumerian *Edin* (steppe Country) but recently linked with an Aramaic term, which means to "enrich, make abundant" (Millard 103-6). And later, Akkadian, *edinu* came to mean a plain (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush 19). Such an understanding gave rise to the Ugaritic usage to mean the "garden of abundance". Babylonian god, Enki, and the Canaanite El are all connected with rivers (Walton 232-38). Such idea is reflected in the Old Testament in Ezekiel 28:2 "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas".

The Bible has recorded that there was a garden in the land of Eden (Gen. 2:8). The word for garden in Hebrew is *gan*, which means a piece of land with trees. John H. Walton considers it as a landscaping and suggests that gardens of this sort were common features in palace complexes in the ancient world and they contained fruit and shade trees, watercourse, pools and paths, plants and animals (166).

Geographically, the scene of the Old Testament started with the Garden of Eden, which Mazrui suggested to be the first home of human beings and the last to be made truly habitable (2-22). This included the four rivers; Pishon, Gishon, Euphrates and Tigris (Gen. 2:10-14). Walton states that in the ancient world, they had words that modern translations translate "sources", "springs" and "headwaters" but they believed that the true source of all fresh water was the *apsu*, the subterranean waters they believed the earth floated on (168). It was the place of God's abode and the source of life-giving water for the earth that flowed through the rivers (Walton 169). The idea is grossly connected to the four streams, which flowed in the earth. At the palace of Zimri-Lim at Mari, a portrait of two goddesses holding jars and out of each flows four streams of water going off in different directions. Ashur of the thirteenth century gives a portrait of a god and out of him

in the middle flowed four streams of water and flanked by two sacred trees and two winged bulls (Stager 38, 41).

Of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis, only two rivers (Tigris and Euphrates) can be traced today. The identification of Pishon and Gihon has been an archaeological challenge among scholars. Researches link them with the Mesopotamian (Balikh, Diyala, Zab etc) or the Nile, Indus, Ganges or with Persian Gulf or the Red Sea. It is also possible that these rivers might have dried up in ancient times in 3500-2000BC (Walton 169; Sauer 52-7, 64).

### **The Idea of Garden**

For God to have a Garden in Eden as recorded in the Bible was quite familiar to the ancient world. Archaeological discoveries have unveiled and deciphered that the idea of gardens was a common practice of kings, who engaged in creating their gardens in the ancient world. K. Gleason summarizes that Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076BCE) had a zoological park and arboretum of exotic animals and trees. Ashurmasirpal II (893-859BCE) made a park at Nimrud, where he diverted water from Upper Zab River to water his plants and animals. This was also captured by Sennacherib (704-681BCE) at Nineveh. Sargon II (721-705BCE) had a palace park at Khorsabad with a variety of trees, pavilion and proto-Doric columns. Merodach-Baladan II (721-710BCE) had a garden with vegetables and herbs. Ashurbanipal's palace depicts the abundance and pleasures of peace after bravery in battle (2, 383; Stager 36-47).

Archaeological findings show that these gardens were presented as offerings to the gods. Fruits from the gardens were meant to be sacrifices to the gods. It is reasonable to say that Adam and Eve were also giving produces from the Garden to Yahweh even before his children got the sacrificial initiative (Tambiyi 17; Walke 363-72; Kafang 6-7). Such understanding of gardens were closely connected to sanctuaries as reflected by James McKeown, "Many Babylonian sanctuaries were surrounded by gardens. Other evidence of gardens in Mesopotamia include Nebuchadnezzar's legendary Hanging Garden of Babylon" (32). One can see why God would always come and have fellowship with man while he was in the Garden (Gen. 3:8).

The idea of gardens was also connected with the Sumerian myth in the land of Tilmun, where no beasts or prey or no illness was witnessed. The sun-god had to supply them with water for fertility whereby eight herbs sprang. Also, it is said that there is a garden where a 'plant of life' grows. A garden provides resources, whether food to eat, wood to burn as fuel, flowers for decoration or space to relax. Secondly, a garden is to be maintained as a thing of beauty.... Third, a garden is a place where humans can be creative –by working with the natural processes, beauty can be enhanced and artistic statements can be made. Fourth, a garden is to be kept for future generations (Walton 56).

The Egyptians also understood the need and functions of gardens. There were garden parks, with trees and flowers and were associated with love poetry. A fifteenth century wall depicted Queen Hatshepsut returning from punt with trees for transplanting in her royal gardens (McKeown 32).

The garden in the ancient world was planted where the land was surrounded with lots of water. Walton suggests that the Garden adjoined Eden because the water flows from Eden and waters the Garden. So it can be seen that Eden is the source of the waters and the residence of God, and the garden adjoins God's presence (168). Could this also change the understanding of Eden as a reference to a river not really a geographical place?

## **The Garden of Eden and its main Features and their Implications**

However, such a connection of gardens with the ancient kings has created a link to say that God created the Garden for Adam and his offspring and it was surrounded by bodies of rivers as landmarks demarcating the boundaries of the Garden. It was meant to be the meeting place between God and Adam; something more of a sanctuary where fellowship was held between God and Adam as the presence of the Lord was always felt.

The common features of the Garden of Eden were the two trees. The fact that only the two trees are mentioned does not mean that there were no other trees in the Garden of Eden. These two trees are the only two trees denoting the knowledge of good and evil and of life. The main idea of God creating the earth was for fruitfulness, multiplication and filling of the earth. Man was supposed to dominate the whole world (Gen 1:28; 6:1; 9:1). If this was the agenda of God, then to say there was only one kind of each of those trees would limit the intention of God for man to multiply and fill the earth. The off-springs of man were supposed to spread and dominate the earth. Life was the main part of the divine plan for man not death. The multiplication to fill could account for reasons behind having similar trees of life in other regions so as to encourage life in other parts of the earth.

Another depiction about the Garden was the characteristic associated with it. According to Walter Brueggemann, the Garden was an act of utter graciousness. But the trees disclose the character of that graciousness (45). But why would a garden have such a dangerous tree in its middle has been a thing of concern. Unlike the tree, which symbolizes freedom of choice over good and evil (Harrison 556), the tree of life remains a vague tree as long as the account is concerned. Life in Eden was ideal and it was a creation of a peaceful life, which was shared between God and man (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush26).

Between the two trees and other undisclosed trees in the Garden, the tree of life is known in scriptures but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is only in Genesis creation account despite that the entire Bible is a struggle to restore the damage caused by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 3. The Bible says of the serpent as most crafty, prudent and cunning among all the beasts of the field, which the Lord God has created. Satan's attempt was to destroy the work of God and take charge of the earth, which was under the domination of man. He lured man to eating the forbidden tree (Briscoe 58; Tambiyi 14). The eating and gaining knowledge of discernment by man was disastrous that God prohibited man to touch the tree of life (Gen. 3:22).

The tree of life is known to have fruit that extends life rather than instantly grants immortality. At first, the tree was not forbidden to Adam and Eve. It has been argued that "The evidence proves that Adam and Eve could not have eaten from the tree of life before they were cast out of the Garden of Eden because the tree had not yet produced any fruit. The tree, being Yeshua the Messiah, was unable to give his fruit of eternal life until after his death and resurrection" ("Why not eat"). However, it should be said that there is no proof that the first parents did not eat from the tree of life since it was in the Garden and it served as their source of life contrary to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which brought death.

When they ate of the forbidden tree, they disobeyed because man was not to eat it (Gen. 3:22). A decision was taken, which was in antagonistic to the intent of God in the tree of life. Instead of living forever, the days of man were cut short (Gen. 3:22) for the eaten tree of the knowledge of good and evil was to bring death instead of eating the tree of life for life sustenance. One sees prohibition instead of sustenance. After the prohibition according to the command of Yahweh, Adam and Eve were chased out of the Garden and

an angel was put to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). They lost access to eating it when they were cast out of the Garden. One sees why death came and has dominion over man. It might suggest that life was sustained by constantly eating from the fruit of the tree of life. As soon as they stopped eating from the tree of life, death came and disrupted the plans of God for man.

Alfred Edersheim dissects the disobedience of Adam in connection to the tree of life that the "tree of life" was probably a symbol and a pledge of a higher life, which we should have inherited if our first parents had continued in obedience to God (13). Edersheim also states that even when the first parents left the Garden of Eden, it was not without hope, nor into outer darkness. They carried with them the promise of a Redeemer, the assurance of a final defeat of the great enemy, as well as the Divine institution of a Sabbath on which to worship, and of the marriage-bond by which to be joined together were laid in Paradise (14). Life, which is given by Jesus Christ in abundance, is as a result of the daily eating of the flesh and drinking the blood of the Master as often as we can eat it to sustain our lives in him (Matt. 26:26-30; Lk 22:17-20; Jn 6:35-57; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; 15:54-57). Life on earth now, generally, has been surrounded by this tree of the knowledge of good and evil as God was searching for means to restore man to the initial state, which was supposed to be fed by the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. It was for this search that Jesus incarnated in bodily form (John 1:14; Phil. 2:5-11).

The tree of life has had important depictions and virtues in the Bible, particularly in the book of Proverbs. According to Brueggemann,

While the metaphor undoubtedly has mythological origins, in the Book of Proverbs it is used to refer to anything which enhances and celebrates life. ... The particular identity of the tree is not pressed in our narratives. Its presence by name suggests an earlier story, royal in intent. In Revelation 2:7, the tree of life refers to fellowship with God" (45).

We found wisdom and understanding being given human attributes as a tree of life (Prov. 3:18) and it is a blessed thing to have wisdom (Prov. 3:18). Ron House and Gitie House see the tree of life in the context of great virtues, which grows in the hearts of men and such virtues are; justice, unity, friendship, truthfulness, reliability, Consideration, joyfulness, modesty and that the tree grows according to its seed. They see the tree of life to contain the Spirit of the Lord (7-20, 39-41). The fruit of the righteous has been compared to the tree of life (Prov. 11:30). Fulfilled longing or desire was compared to the tree of life (Prov. 13:12). The tree has sustained attribute of healing as the Bible teaches that a tongue which speaks healings and good tidings is a tree of life (Prov. 15:4).

The tree of life was meant to extend the life-span of man in Genesis and Proverbs. Walton relates the extension of life by the tree and that "Extension of life is the issue in the four references to this tree in Proverbs. In 3:16-18, the tree is parallel to 'long life' as one of the benefits wisdom has to offer. In 13:12 and 15:4, it stands in contrast to behaviour that would demoralize and thereby take its toll on a person" (170). Walton concludes that the Israelites considered the tree as a tree of youth rather than as a tree of immortality (170). In other words, Adam and Eve were to be young every day as a result of relying on the tree of life.

One of the ancient witnesses for the tree of life came from the Epic of Gilgamesh whereby a plant is discovered to be the "plant that makes the old man young" (Watson 184). Walton also elaborates that the Tale of Adapa, though does not mention a tree, but states how Adapa was commissioned to bring the art of civilization to humans. Adapa broke the

wing against Anu and was advised by Ea not to eat anything offered to him. Eventually, he followed the advice but later discovered that what he rejected was the 'bread of life' and 'water of life,' which would make him immortal (184). The whole epic on the tree symbolizes a pre-Fall indication of God's grace, which shows that death existed in the rest of the created world prior to the Fall and offers extension of life (Watson 184). Old age was prohibited at first but inaugurated when disobedience came up against the command of Yahweh. But the Israelites had high regards on the tree of life particularly a source for rebranding man; making him young daily.

Just like the concept of the Garden of Eden as reflected in many cultures, there were quite a number of trees of life depicted in many cultures besides the Babylonian's Gilgamesh epic of Adapa. According to Ed Young, the "...Tree of Life is a Complete Mystery" ("The Tree"). There is also the tree of life in Assyria (Parpola 161-208). Such understanding can be seen to reflect in many regions.

Also, in a careful study, David Littlefield studies the tree of life in the book of Genesis 2 and compared it with John 15 where Jesus spoke as being the true vine. In contrast and searching for a broader meaning to the tree of life, Littlefield also discusses the Lehi's tree of life, the seed of faith, the mustard see, the olive trees, the menorah and the cabalistic tree of Life ("The Tree"). To Littlefield, "The Tree of Life represented the love of God, redemption, and total healing through Christ" ("The Tree").

Such an understanding of Genesis account on the Garden of Eden and the tree of life has been broadened by Walton that "The tree of life indicates that though the human body was created mortal, it was not God's original plan for us to feel the constant burden of impending death" (185). Walton adds that "Both trees offered something in their fruit, not just in a choice they represented. The tree of life was not designed to offer Adam the choice between life and death. The text implies that there was actually a quality in the fruit that provided life" (185).

Recently, in line with Walton on the fruit providing life, some fruit in Archaeobotany have shown that they increase human lifespans. People now are urged to rely on different kinds of food supplements which are predominantly fruit and herbs. Quite a number of other trees have been studied and considered to have the same characteristics with the tree of life. Konstantinos Mouroutis sees the tree of life as a source for good health against fear of illness, disability, or suffering is a major destroyer of peace ("Tree"). Lee Heathman and Mildred A. Tillotson embark on a study of the leaves and believe that the leaves are good for healthy living couple with exercise, fresh air, rest and trust ("Leaves from the Tree"; Doolittle and Brunet 1-7). Such understandings of the tree of life in the Bible are reflected in the various cultural and geographical understandings of the tree of life in Ancient Near East.

### **The Prophetic Tree of Life**

The book of Revelation also has references to the tree of life. In Revelation, the tree of life has been set as a reward for faithfulness, holiness and hard work in the Lord. One of the common references is that there is a tree of life in the paradise of God (Rev. 2:7) and only victorious people in the battle or Christian race against the evil generated by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will eat it. Rick Joyner states that "Between the fruit of the two trees lies the focal point of the dichotomy between the Kingdom of God and the present evil age" (9-12). This dichotomy is closely related to the context of Revelation 2 in the first century Asia Minor during the wicked reigns of Roman kings and emperors.

An expanded approach to the tree of life has been connected to the river of life (Rev. 22:2), which might be translated as Eden; hence, the word 'Eden' meant source or fountain of water. The leaves of the tree were for the healings of the nations (Rev. 22:2) as many leaves today supplementing life for many people. However, only those who clean their robes will have right for the tree of life (Rev. 22:14). Only those who denied themselves the pleasure of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil despite the hunger will have access to this tree of life as a cure for their endurance with large shares in heaven (Rev. 22:19).

Being in the prophetic spirit of the book of Revelation and the understanding of the tree of life as depicted, it dawned on me that reliance on Revelation 22 to be a remedy to our low socio-economic standard of living, which is the major cause to most of the false teachings and practices in that many ministers are anxious to escape but end up proliferating wrong ideas. God will create a new heaven and a new earth. The New Jerusalem, the Holy City of God, will descend from heaven to the new earth (Rev. 21-22). And of course, then Christians would experience equality of life whether rich or poor and there will be no more tears, death, sorrow, hunger, pain, murderers, adulterers, idolaters, liars, and our joy will be complete. They will all be perfectly sanctified with transformed bodies and we will live in this city eternally. This will be a place of great beauty, abundance of joy in the presence of God and will enjoy eternal fellowship and see the fulfilment of all the longings we have ever had to know perfect love, peace, joy, truth, justice, holiness, wisdom, goodness, power and glory (Tambiyi 391).

The Garden of Eden shows that God has created all humanity and gave them the gift of life. Lasor, Hubbard and Bush also capture it that "There is no evil, either physical or moral, in that garden. Nor is there any distress in human experience. Sin does not yet exist" (26). Whatever they needed was provided for in the Garden. Although the idea of the rivers do not give us such meticulous significance, Ezekiel 47:1-12 tells us of a hope for food and healing. The rivers also play significant role as the tree of life as being a source of food and healing for the nations (Rev. 22:1-2). "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" who is the creator (Matt. 4:4).

Lucio Florio considers the tree in its philosophical and theological sense and also stated the relationship between the tree and Christian theology particularly the cross of Jesus. Florio writes, "In the Christian tradition, communication of divine life from the mystery of the cross of Christ was illustrated precisely under the image of a tree of life. The apse of the Basilica of St. Clement in Rome provides an interesting example" (15-27). Life is sustained by the creator and with daily source of nourishment and health. It can be stated that:

Our existence is one of life's greatest mysteries. The shape of a tree is very symbolic as it represents life from a single point growing from seed, rooting, and connecting deeply with the Earth while branching out and multiplying into the heavens. To know the tree of life physically is to understand a principal concept, life stems from itself, and we are the direct result of our ancestors. To know the tree of life spiritually is to understand our beliefs interconnect with our planet and its divinity ("The Tree of Life").

God is the source of all life in the natural world but within that world he gives a special gift of life. This gift of life, according to Wilkinson, is placed in a context of beauty and fruitfulness that is in the Garden of Eden. Eden represents a closed and fertile area for cultivation.... The trees show diversity, beauty and are good for food (52).

The cross of Christ fertilizes the earth, the different human and religious activities. Joyner, "The tree is the source of life which is Jesus" (9-12). Thus, both creation and the human world are nourished by the new life transmitted through Christ (Furio 15-27).

### **The Afro-Cultural Tree of Life**

The idea of sacred trees was popular in the Ancient Near East. Quite a number of sacred trees have been envisaged to have played vital roles in the lives of the ancients. For example, King Ashurnasirpal is depicted to be standing on either side of a sacred tree (Mckcown 33). The tree of life in Genesis suggests that the human beings were mortal but that eternal life was within their grasp while they lived in the Garden of Eden.

Africans also have such an understanding of life as being sustained by the leaves of specific mystical trees. Such an ancient reliance on the tradition sense would lead this study to underscoring the tree of life in Coptic tradition in Egypt and the Nok people and their civilization in search for relevance to the quest for the Garden of Eden and enlarging the knowledge of the tree of life.

### ***The Tree of Life in Egypt***

Africa has had a long history of civilization and has been the home of man and the Garden of Eden according to Mazrui (2, 11-2) and Obasanjo (29). Gardens were associated with sacrifices as the fruit of the gardens were offered to the gods. It can be stated that Adam and Eve were also engaging in offering the produce to God. Their children imitated the act of sacrifices. Tambiyi states that Genesis 4 reveals "the first act of worship in history.... Cain and Abel appeared to engage in worship to the Most High which was an initial act of priesthood. They brought offerings and offered to the Lord." (17; Walke 363-72; Kafang 6-7).

Within such an African reasoning underscored by Mazrui concerning the origin of humanity to be Africa and Tambiyi on Cain and Abel's act of worship, it would appear that priesthood has African origin as the first man is said to be black and maintained its consistent place in the early days until the days of Nimrod. Worship was inaugurated in the Ancient Near East in the Garden of Eden. God deserves the worship of His creatures and puts worship thoughts in man and it has overwhelmed the hearts of men throughout the history of the world. No wonder, man wants to worship anything everywhere and always. It does not matter what is worshipped. Africans are said to be notoriously religious. Today, people worship different gods and such has clear indications on the polytheistic nature of the African people. God, Buddha, Confucius, Allah, spirits and objects are being worshipped. There was angelic worship even in the Bible (Col. 2:18). The God of heaven has also been worshipped through the offering of animal sacrifices and now through offering our bodies to the Lord as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1) as Jesus did.

Such an ancient acts of worship is connected to the act of worship recognized in the Garden of Eden. Africans revere sacred sites and sacred objects even in the traditional religious understandings. It is believed that Jesus and his parents (Holy Family) went to Egypt (Matt. 2:11-16) in their effort to flee from wicked king Herod. During their stay in Egypt, they encountered a tree, which had served significant role and has become a sacred tree to the Egyptians.

The Copts in Egypt have always believed that Jesus came to their land despite the disagreements and denial of the passage by the historical-critical scholars such as the Jesus Seminar for lack of multiple attestations (Keener 68; Tambiyi, "A Critical Appraisal" 40-1, 96; Evans 48-51; Guthrie 243-7; Weren 263; Boring 9). Such a belief generated many



legends over the centuries. In the same line of reasoning, William Lyster observes that sites in Egypt became sacred because they are believed to have been touched by the Holy Family to include miraculous hand- or foot-prints of the Child, unusually shaped trees thought to have sheltered the Virgin (Perry 9, 13), or healing springs where the family quenched their thirst (Lyster 1).

Also, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* does not relate the story with Hermopolis instead the Family encountered the tree in an unspecified location in Egypt before they got to Hermopolis (Davis 142). However, the tree in the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* only received permission from Jesus not bowing down to Jesus (Davis 140-3). Lyster has this to add about the sites and the wonders that happened:

Most of the sites associated with the Flight reflect some tribulation overcome by the Holy Family: walking in the heat of the day, they find shade under a tree, which is blessed; when they are hungry, a palm tree bows down, offering its dates; their thirst is quenched by locals well or, in more dire circumstances, by springs brought forth by the infant Jesus; while pursued by thieves, a tree opens up to hide them; and if there is no room in the inn, they slept in a cave that miraculously appears (2).

Another miracle is the provision of bread to his mother (Ibrahim 7; Suci 438). According to the tradition, in El-Matariyah there is also an aged, large tree that houses a cave in one of its large roots. Tradition purports that the Holy Family concealed themselves within this tree root cave from thieves attempting to steal from them. Affirming this, it is stated that "The Holy Family fled to Egypt to save the infant Jesus from Herod. They are said to have rested under a tree in Heliopolis" (Pfeiffer 216-7).

In Egypt today, sycamore trees are associated with the Virgin Mary and the Holy Family. The oldest sycamore tree is located in Mataria, Egypt, known as Virgin Mary Tree (Smith 101-28). Mataria was a popular pilgrimage site in the Middle Ages with a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary closer to it. The tree was thought to have healing powers. Pilgrims took its leaves and there is also a sweet-water spring which the infant Jesus is known to have caused to appear ("The Holy Family"; "The Tree of Life").

The Copts discovered the tree, which gave shed and rest to the Holy Family to have been a tree of life, which was one of the most important religious Egyptian symbols in the mythology of ancient Egypt. The tree of life was housed in the temple dedicated to the sun god, Ra, in Heliopolis, Egypt. The tree was also called the sacred Ished Tree which had strong identity with the Persea Tree. The fruit of the Tree of Life was a source of Eternal Life and the Knowledge of the Divine Plan and served as a map of destiny. The fruit of the Tree of Life was not available to mortals, only in the rituals relating to eternity in which the gods refreshed aging Pharaohs. The Tree of Life was a prophetic puzzle and it was the Seat of the mythical Benu Bird (Fletcher, "The Osiris Legend").

The Tree of Life was very important to ancient Egyptian symbols and icons in the overriding mythology and legends of Egypt. It provides eternal life and the understanding of life cycles with association to the Sun God, Ra, in the temple and protected by a mighty Cat (as Mau). During rituals, the names of each Pharaoh were written on the leaves by Thoth, the secretary of the Sun God. This was a guarantee of eternal life since the tree was believed to have knowledge of the Divine Plan or map of destiny. It was the home of Benu Bird (Fletcher "The Osiris Legend").

The Egyptian World Pillar had been considered to be the centre of the universe with the source of the four rivers believed to be situated at the foot of the tree to provide water to

the world. These four rivers are stationed in the spirit of the cardinal points with four elements: Water in the North, Fire in the South, Air in the East and the Earth in the West. It has the inscription, "I am the plant which comes from Nu" in the ancient Egyptian texts. It should be known that the symbol for plant (three sacred lotus lilies) means the Tree of life (Fletcher "The Osiris Legend").

### *The Tree of Life in Nok Culture*

It has been said that the inhabitants of Nok Village in Sothorn Kaduna of Nigeria made up the oldest culture found in sub-Saharan Africa following the discoveries of the ancient culture of Nok, which is believed to have been for over 2500 years. The Nok people are culturally and socially well-structured people ("The Nok Culture"). The Nok Terracotta (dated 500BC to 200BC) has been of significance in exposing the culture of the people. The shapes of the terracotta are unique with some ranges of expressive depictions of health and beauty.

The concept of the tree of life is also culturally understood among the Nok people. The Nok Culture and civilization has been the oldest extant culture and civilization in the Sub-Saharan Africa with a tree, which is deciphered to play a vital role just as the tree of life described in the Bible and in the Egyptian mythology, which carries some mysticisms of life. According to Nok tradition, the tree does not grow again. Its height has been stagnated over the years. It has never increased or reduced. Birds don't find shelter from the leaves and animals like monkeys don't climb the branches or go close to the tree. It is so sacred and traditionally honoured by the Nok people.

The leaves are medicinal. They have used them for the healings of many outbreak of diseases in the community. The Nok people had a traditional hospital where incoming patients will wait, a doctor's office who will heal people using the leaves of the tree and a labour room. The record keeping was done traditionally using colouring. The cave has many dots, which are coloured. Red was for the number of people who came to the hospital injured. Black was for the people who have died in the hospital and white was for the number of children, which were given birth to in the community. This is an organized structure as one will expect in a modern hospital.

Purity was highly required to be able to touch the tree. Only virgins have access to the tree. Even the chief priest, who traditionally has access to the tree must stay away from his wife and abstain from impurity when approaching the tree. To visit the site of the tree, it is important that one get permission from the chief priest of the community. The tree repels and cries out when no proper permission taken from the chief priest to visit the tree.

### **Africa as Part of the Garden of Eden**

The connection between the tree encountered by the Holy Family in Egypt and the monumental tree in Nok culture and Civilization is generating the beliefs that the boundaries of the Garden of Eden had an African tie. It is believed that River Gihon has strong connection to Africa (Gen. 2:13; Zech. 3:10). McKeown states that River Gihon mentioned in connection with the Garden of Eden flowed to Cush (33). The four rivers associated with the Garden of Eden served as sources of water to many geographical locations in the ancient world. Africa had Gihon (and possibly Pishon) as its source of fertility to many parts of the Garden. However, McKeown opines that the watering of the ancient world does not help with the location of the Garden of Eden (33). Such understanding is disastrous to ancient history. Historical interlude concerning the rivers

will give a guide to the understanding of the Garden of Eden.

Particular geographical framework has been considered as Ancient Near East. It means that a wide range of land was covered by the Garden. It is good to state that the Garden was not supported by the land mass but by the rivers, which surrounded it. Genesis account narrates rivers that surround the Garden not really and primarily a source of water to the entire world. Inferring the Garden means using the location of the rivers, which helps with the provision of the landmarks of the Garden. Since Gihon flowed into Africa and it can be argued that the river served as a *boundary* for the Garden in Africa, it is likely that the Garden encompasses some parts of Africa.

### Conclusion

This paper looks at the tree of life in different perspectives; the biblical Eden, the prophetic Eden, the afro-cultural Eden. It is understood that God created the Garden for Adam and his offspring and it was surrounded by bodies of rivers as landmarks demarcating the boundaries of the Garden. It was meant to be the meeting place between God and Adam something more of a sanctuary where fellowship was held between God and Adam as the presence of the Lord was always felt. If this was the agenda of God, then to say there was only one kind of each of those trees would limit the intention of God for man to multiply and fill the earth. The off-springs of man were supposed to spread and dominate the earth. Life was the main part of the divine plan for man not death. The multiplication to fill could account for reasons behind having similar trees of life in other regions so as to encourage life in other parts of the earth.

With the tree of life in Nok civilization and the Coptic Christian tradition, which reflects the understanding of the tree of life in the biblical account of the Garden of Eden, the boundaries of the Garden could be inferred, in this work, to have covered a vast land in Africa. This is a search out of the conventional searches since the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has not been able to unveil the boundaries of the Garden. Also, since the rivers were landmarks in ancient times, river Gihon has also helped in contributing to the knowledge of the Garden and the tree of life. That is to say there is a need to inculcate such understanding into the conventional quest to clarify the obstruction accumulated for the past centuries.

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