

THE PARABLE OF THE TREES AND THE KEEPER
OF THE GARDEN IN THE THANKSGIVING SCROLL

by

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In the Thanksgiving Scroll (1QH VIII) there is a description of a garden consisting of "trees of life" ('*atzei chayyim*), "eternal trees" ('*atzei 'olam*), whose roots are nourished by fresh waters, actually "holy waters" (*mei qodesh*). These "trees of life" originate from the stem of a tree of cosmic proportions. The "trees of life" defeat, with God's help, the "trees of water" ('*atzei mayim*) with which they struggle. God guards this garden, "lest a stranger enter it, and draw from the fountain of life, and he must not drink the holy waters together with the eternal trees". The author of the Thanksgivings likens himself to the faithful and devoted caretaker of the garden.

While examining the phrases used by the author as he describes the garden, one can distinguish the ancient elements and images known previously from those phrases which the author originated and introduced into the text. One may even trace the degree to which the ideas and symbols describing the "garden" and its waters have influenced the later apocalyptic literature.

Trees of Life

The author of the Thanksgiving Scroll seems to have coined the plural form "Trees of Life", which we cannot find in Scripture or outside of it. The tree of life is mentioned six times in the Bible, but everywhere in the singular.

The descriptions of the holy tree, the cult tree found in Mesopotamia and the ancient world generally, refer to one tree. I prefer the use of the term "holy tree" because so far we have not come across the explicit mention of "the tree of life" in any ancient texts except the Bible.

We may therefore safely assume that the idiom "trees of life" in the plural, as we find it in the Thanksgiving Scroll, is not a mere literary form. It seems that the presence of the Congregation of the Righteous, the chosen

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sect, impressed the author and so he coined the term "trees of life" which refers to the Qumran community and represents the author and his company: "trees of life in the mystic fount; hidden between all the trees of water, shall bring forth a branch, an eternal plant" (1QH VIII, 5-6).

The author of the Thanksgivings makes extensive use of biblical illustrations, metaphors and phrases. Especially worth noting is his use of Isaiah 60:21: "Your people shall all be righteous . . . the shoot of my planting", and the contrast brought up by Ezekiel between the "trees by the waters" and the "trees of Eden" (Ezek. 31:14).

If we may date the Book of Enoch prior to the Thanksgiving Scroll, its author might have been influenced by chapter 24 of *Enoch*, picturing the tree of fragrance, the tree of life, which stands out from all others, planted on the summit of the high mountain, the throne and sanctuary of God.

He might have drawn his picture on the basis of traditions that dealt with branches and shoots originating from the stem of the holy tree, such as: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Is. 11:2), or the phrase *netzirei Yisrael*, which we may translate "the branches of Israel" (Is. 49:6), referring to the Tribes of Jacob. (In the R. S. V. translation: "the preserved of Israel", as they use the alternate reading *netzurei Yisrael*). We even venture to admit a connection with traditions about "the rod of God" in the hand of Moses, which according to legend belonged to Adam and came from the trees in the Garden of Eden. We may presume that the phrase "trees of life" in apocryphal and apocalyptic literature may be derived from the ideas and style of the Thanksgiving Scroll.

We have a good example in the parable of the Psalms of Solomon 17:3-4: "The righteous of the Lord are the trees of life. Their planting is rooted for ever". Likewise in the Revelation of John 22:2 we read: "And he showed me a fresh water stream . . . and on its banks on both sides trees of life . . . bearing fruit". Translators and exegetes were undecided whether the singular or plural form is indicated in this verse: the constant use of the plural "trees of life" in our Scroll lends support to the plural reading as translated by Lohmeyer¹.

In the Midrash, "The Book of Noah", there is also mention of "the trees of life"².

¹ "Am Strom hier und dort Bäume des Lebens". E. Lohmeyer, *Offenbarungen des Johannes*, 1927.

² See: Beth-Midrash III pp. 165 ff., A. Yellinck, Leipzig, 1855. Markus, who drew attention to this midrash, rightly remarked that this phrase bears distinct marks of Essene, namely apocalyptic, origin. Indeed we find in it expressions similar to those in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

World Trees and the Cosmic Tree

The author of the Thanksgivings shifts easily from the term “trees of life” (plural) to the description of one immense Tree similar to the Cosmic Tree (*Weltenbaum*), stating: “And its stem will draw on fresh waters, and (those waters) will be the fountain of the world. And under its branches will graze all the beasts of the forest” (1QH VIII, 7-8). The description of the cosmic tree is found also in 1QH VI, as the author passes easily from the plural to the singular form. “And it will throw its shade over the entire (world). And its (branches) will rise to the skies, and its roots to the lowest depths, all the rivers of Eden shall water its sprawling offshoots”.

The tradition of the one immense cosmic tree “standing on earth ... and its height reaching the sky” (Daniel 4:7-8) was so deeply rooted that the author of the Scroll easily switched from the plural to the singular. In general the legend about one great world-tree was widely known in the ancient world. While there was some doubt as to the “tree of life”, we are on firm ground when dealing with the cosmic-tree idea among the ancients. A clear and elaborate description of the great cosmic tree is to be found in a sacred text, the *Era*³ epos, describing the sacred tree, “God’s Flesh”, whose roots reach the floor of the ocean (a depth of 100 double hours) and its top rises to the skies.

In the *midrashim* similar gigantic measurements are listed for the tree of life – the walking distance of 500 years⁴.

The Waters irrigating the Garden

The author of the Thanksgivings musters a long list of descriptive terms that detail the character and quality of the fountains irrigating the garden: sacred waters, fresh waters, a secret fountain, the fountain of light. His own superiority over his adversaries he illustrates by likening them to “waters of darkness”, “waters of falsehood” (Damascus Document A, 14-15). In 1QH VI, 17-18, the distinction is drawn between blessed waters and waters of abomination which correspond to the streams of the wicked (1QH III). It seems that our author is also familiar with legends about waters at war, which formed the source from which the Zohar drew its descriptions.⁵ The poet, using the biblical expression *mayim chayyim* (living waters), i. e.

³ P. F. Gössman, *Der Era Epos*, 1955 I, pp. 149-157. For material on cosmic trees, see M. Witzel, *An. OR.* (1938) 81 ff.

⁴ Rabbi Meier said: The circumference of the tree of life is 700 years walking distance, and its stem is in the direction of the moon ... and all the waters from the time of Creation flow from under it. (Midrash Hagadol for Genesis 2:9).

⁵ Margalis Edition of Zohar for *Genesis* p. 34. “The hidden meaning of the verse Gen. 1:6, ‘Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters and let it separate’, hints at the primeval strife that evoked anger and violence and division, that brought Gehinnom = Hell”.

flowing spring water in contrast to stagnant water, considers the waters of his garden sacred waters.

The author of the Thanksgiving Scroll might have obtained the idea of sacred water from the water libation ceremony in the Temple. And it is safe to say that there were in his mind some of the legends preserved in several *midrashim* about sacred waters flowing from under the roots of the tree of life. Though the ideas of our author were modelled after the others who preceded him, he was, as far as I can discern, the first to introduce it in Jewish apocalyptic writings under the name *mei qodesh* (sacred water).

We may presume that this idea of holy water influenced later apocalyptic writings, especially of the Christians. The Syrian version of *Baruch* describes the war between the sacred spring and its vine and the cedar tree in the garden of the wicked. I believe that Syrian *Baruch* borrowed the idea from the Thanksgivings (1QH VIII).

The Keeper of the Garden

Another point we shall examine is the task which the author of the Scroll took upon himself to care for the garden and provide the fresh waters.

“Through me you opened their source and all their tributaries, and I may direct their course on the right path, and the planting of the trees to face the sun, to give their branches glorious splendour. As I lift my hand to till its stream-valleys they (the trees) will take root even in flint-rock, that the stem may not perish on earth, and in the hot season retain its moisture. But when I take my hand away, it will wither as the desert shrub” (1QH VIII, 21 - 24).

We have here, as Bardtke⁶ noticed, a gardener’s description of irrigating the trees in the hot season. Perhaps the author of the Scroll describes here the cultivation of the irrigated lands at Jericho and Ein Gedi, which require a constant supply of water from the wells.

The Septuagint version of Isaiah 60:21 translates the phrase *netzer matta’ay* as “the keeper of my planting”, instead of *netzer matta’ay* of the Masoretic text, which means “the shoot of my planting”.⁷

The motive of the keeper and guardian of the garden, who as Widengren rightly pointed out is identified with the king, was widely known in Mesopotamia.⁸

The leader of the sect (at the Dead Sea) had ample ground to consider himself, in line with the tradition of the ancients, as the devoted

⁶ H. Bardtke, *Die Handschriften Funde am Toten Meer*, 1952, 193ff.

⁷ I. F. M. Brailey, *Biblica*, 1960, pp. 275 - 286.

⁸ G. Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion*, p. 42.

keeper of the garden, who sustains the life of the trees in the garden (his fellow-sectarians).

The keeper of the garden directs the water source in accordance with the planting of the trees *'al mishqelet ha-shemesh*. Licht and other scholars have correctly explained it as meaning "facing the sun", i. e. turned eastward. The author follows the passage about the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8): "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east".

The idea of *mishqelet ha-shemesh* may have its parallels in outside sources. In Mesopotamia we find mention of Shamash, the sun god, strolling in the sacred garden. In Pyramidal texts we read of the dead meeting on their way one or several sacred trees facing the sun; others tell of the sun rising from the east between two sycamores.⁹

In conclusion, we can say that the basis for the parable of trees is present in legends and images circulating in the ancient East, and also recorded in the Bible: stories about the Garden of God, a cosmic tree of astronomical proportions within the garden, with sacred water flowing from the roots of that tree; sacred waters warring against the impure waters; and finally the keeper of the garden, who is supposed to be king and ruler.

We see where our author had ample material ready at hand; still, he added much of his own to express in artistic style, in vibrant poetic language, the feeling of the sectarians, whose leader he appears to have been.

Tracing the identity of the "I" referred to in the Parable

If we accept the theory of Sukenik, developed immediately after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, identifying the author of the Thanksgivings with the Teacher of Righteousness, and if we assign the role of the gardener to the Teacher of Righteousness, we have a perfect match for the parable. The parable of the garden fits the personality of the Teacher of Righteousness especially well. Many scholars, foremost among them Dupont-Sommer, endorse this theory, as they point to the shoot (plant), the secret fountain of the garden, etc., all of which fit the image of the "Teacher". Another group of scholars question the oneness of the composition; they doubt if it is the work of one person and composed all at the same time. They believe that the parable refers to a group.¹⁰

At this point we reach the most difficult problem in the study of the Scrolls. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, anonymity is still the rule, while in

⁹ See relevant Egyptian material about sacred trees: H. Bonnet, in *Real-lexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte*, Art. *Baumkult*. Of special interest are the trees which the sun god meets on his path from the east that are mentioned in Pyramidal texts.

¹⁰ I. Maier, *Texte von Toten Meer*, 1960 II, pp. 61-62, 89-91, 96-100. G. R. Driver noted that the Thanksgiving Scroll has fewer references to historic events than the others. See his *The Judean Scrolls*, 1965, p. 126.

early rabbinic literature we find almost always the names of the authors. We must regretfully admit that we have been able to identify distinctly neither the authors nor the historical persons hinted at in the Scrolls. We are as much in the dark today as at the time the first scrolls became known.

I shall limit my investigation now to one aspect of the general problem. We must ask the question: have we the means to determine the implication of the author's "I" in the parable of the garden, and in particular the keeper of the garden? Does the word "I" stand for an individual, or a collective – as if to say: I and all the others like myself?

Bardtke¹¹ is inclined to believe that one person was the author of the scroll, but that the "I" he uses becomes the representation of the entire congregation. Maier¹² thinks that the "I" has a collective meaning right from the beginning, like the "I" used in Psalms. All the descriptions in the Thanksgivings of a biographical nature are mere expressions detailing the group's theology. Holm-Nielsen¹³ finds a distinct parallel between the "I" of the Psalms in all its variations and the "I" of the Thanksgivings and the Manual of Discipline.

Accordingly he concludes that "I" stands for both the whole congregation and each member of it. He goes on to say that we get the impression that the "I" in the garden parable is of special significance to the congregation. Yet even here all members are included, and at most "I" is the expression of the one responsible for the leadership of the group. He describes it as "authoritative I".

This conception appears to me a mechanical switch of the "I" used in Psalms into the Scrolls; whereas the idea of "I" of the Psalms is only a minor component of the Scroll.¹⁴ Unquestionably the "I" as used in Psalms contributed specific content and language forms (idioms) to the Thanksgiving Scroll. Still there are distinct differences between the two styles. In Psalms we find numerous mentions of "we", while in this Scroll the plural appears only five times.¹⁵ The individual "I" in the Psalms stands for the humble, the poor, as contrasted with the "I" of the Thanksgiving – energetic, aggressive, reaching for the skies, claiming to have attained the revelation of God.

The "I" in biblical literature

It is my opinion that the "I" of the Thanksgiving carries the characteristics of this word as used in Job 29:4. Perhaps there is even a similarity

¹¹ H. Bardtke, *Dach "Ich" des Meisters in den Hodajot von Qumran*, *Wiss. Zeitschr. d. K. Marx- Univ. Leipzig* 6, 1956/7 Ges. u. sprachwiss. Reihe Heft 1. 93-104.

¹² J. Maier, op. cit. See especially p. 62.

¹³ *"Ich" in den Hodajot und die Qumran Gemeinde*, by S. Holm-Nielsen (Qumran Probleme ed. H. Bardtke, 1963, pp. 217-229).

¹⁴ J. J. Stamm, *Das Ich der Psalmen*, *Theolog. Zeitschr.* 1955, p. 50ff.

¹⁵ Bardtke goes so far as to state that the scarce use of the plural in the Thanksgiving leads us to conclude that the use of "I" (the singular) was deliberate and by no means an oversight.

to its use in Ecclesiastes; the "I" in the Wisdom literature has some biographical elements in it.

Not only that; even in the Thanksgivings one can detect the "I" in a suffering mood, as he regrets and confesses; in contrast to the aggressiveness characterised by the keeper of the garden.

I am inclined to believe that the Thanksgivings – especially where the "I" is the one who causes everything – are the first record written by the founder of the sect. This founder of the sect, regardless of whether he was later known as "Teacher of Righteousness" or not, expresses in this text his personal feelings, his devotion to the "garden" which he "planted".

A final decision on the theory that the parable of the keeper of the garden contains individual biographical data still depends on the clarification of the meaning of "I" and its evolution over the centuries in ancient texts. It appears to me that we should at least reject the extreme view which claims collective interpretation for the term "I" in Psalms and the Scroll of Thanksgivings. Rather we may assume that "I" basically expressed the individual feeling, and in time, due to a series of influences, was eventually also used in a collective sense.

Outside material

In addition to relevant criteria we ought to consider outside comparative material such as prayers, hymns, inscriptions on monuments and tombs, where the names listed are known to us. Stamm¹⁶ made some use of Babylonian material. I would suggest the type of literature named in Egypt "Ideal Biography". In such "biography" all the good qualities of the ruler are recorded in the form "I did" – help the weak, administer justice, practise righteousness – this ideal life being a model for future generations to emulate. Such descriptions, which had some basis in fact at the close of the ancient kingdom, were first recorded during the fourth dynasty and became the accepted pattern over the fifth and sixth dynasties, and were being copied in the archaic style in "ideal biographies" of the 22nd-23rd dynasties. For one thing, this pattern was limited to the rulers and governors only.

In the light of this latter parallel it may be a reasonable guess that the sect leader created the image of the keeper of the garden in order to present his personal biography as a model of righteousness to be imitated by his followers. His motifs resemble those which describe the Mesopotamian gardens that deal with the king-ruler only.

Conclusion

The keeper of the garden in the Thanksgiving Scroll may represent the outstanding personality of the sect. The description could just as well fit the founder and first leader of the sect, and those who succeeded him.

¹⁶ J. J. Stamm, *op. cit.*

In the final analysis it appears that we have not succeeded in advancing beyond the ideas of "the authoritative I" of Holm-Nielsen: the "pedagogic I"; the "Ich des Meisters" of Bradtke. For myself I am convinced that we are dealing here with a relatively new sect, and that there must have been a founder, whose eminent qualities were familiar to the authors of the Thanksgiving Scroll, the Habakkuk Commentary and the Manuals.

I venture to say that as long as no other proof to the contrary is presented, we may assume that the "keeper of the garden" expresses the personal feelings of the founder of the sect (the "Ur-Ich" in the words of Bradtke).

I further suggest that the term "I" in Psalms, the Thanksgiving Scroll, and even in the poetry of Zoroaster, calls for further additional research.

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