**The Felled Tree – Metaphor and Theology**

**The Dream of the Tree (Dan 4) in light of the Shoot of Jesse Prophecy (Isa 10:33-11:9)**

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**Abstract**:

This paper deals with the connection between the Shoot of Jesse prophecy (Isa 10:33-11:9) and Tree dream (Dan 3:31-4:34). Several scholars briefly noted this connection but have not analyzed its meaning or purpose. This paper seeks to demonstrate the way in which the perspective presented in Dan 4 serves as an “inner-biblical interpretation” for the Shoot prophecy in Isaiah, shedding light on the theological perception reflected in both Isa 10:33-11:9 and Dan 4. Based on the metaphor of the felled tree in these two sources, I point to three stages of the metaphor’s development and to the theological messages that the various authors express through this metaphor.

**Introduction: The King-Tree Metaphor**

Various sources in the Bible, as well as from the ancient Near East, employ a tree metaphor to describe the king.[[1]](#footnote-1) Occasionally the tree and the king are linked in a parable.[[2]](#footnote-2) The tall tree often symbolizes the king’s hubris (Ezek 31:1-14); Isa 2:12-17); and as retribution for this hubris, the tree is felled or burned, portending the king’s upcoming doom (Isa 10:16-19; Isa 9:13-20). Oftentimes the parable focuses on the tree’s renewed growth, instead (Job 14:7-9; Isa 6:11-13; Isa 27:2-6).

In this paper, I focus on metaphors belonging to the latter type, which describe the tree’s renewed growth following its destruction. These metaphors abound in the prophecies of Isaiah son of Amotz, and, as Nielson has correctly pointed out, they are particularly useful for transmitting theological messages.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I examine the two metaphors that describe the renewed growth after its destruction and show how the Tree dream (in Dan 3:31-4:34) serves as an “inner-biblical interpretation” for the Shoot dream in Isaiah (10:33-11:9). Several scholars have discussed the connections between the book of Isaiah and the book of Daniel,[[4]](#footnote-4) with regard to both the first, narrative part of Daniel (1-6)[[5]](#footnote-5) and the second, apocalyptic part (7-12).[[6]](#footnote-6) Various scholars also noted the connection between Nebuchadnezzar’s Tree dream and the Shoot prophecy in Isaiah, however, they did not discuss its theological significance.[[7]](#footnote-7) I examine the metaphor of the felled tree in these two sources and describe three stages of the metaphor’s development, and the theological messages which the authors transmit through this metaphor.

I start by discussing the Tree dream in Daniel, focusing especially on the third part of the dream (4:12-14). I present various commentaries on these verses and point to two images that create a connection between this dream and the Shoot prophecy in Isaiah: the shackled roots and the image of the roots’ regeneration.

In the second section of the paper, I focus on the theological meaning of the Tree metaphor and present its three stages of development – two occurring within Isaiah and the third in the book of Daniel.

In the third and final section of this paper, I discuss the metaphor shift within the Tree dream: Why do the roots of the tree describe Nebuchadnezzar? And what are the theological implications of this shift?

1. **The Tree Dream (Dan 4) and the Shoot Prophecy**

The story of the Tree dream, as it appears in Dan 3:31-4:34, describes Nebuchadnezzar’s second dream. In this dream, he sees a tree that is visible to the ends of the earth, whose branches reach the sky. Birds perch in the tree, animals take shelter in its shade, and its fruit nourishes all living things. Then an angel descends from heaven and proclaims its destruction. However, the evil tidings are accompanied by a small consolation: The tree will not be completely destroyed; its roots will remain underground, enabling future growth.

Similar to Nebuchadnezzar’s previous dream, the dream of the statue (Dan 2), I believe that the Tree dream can also be divided into three sections:[[8]](#footnote-8) The first part of both dreams describe an enormous object – a tree or a statue (2:31-33; 9:7-9), the second part describes the felling of the tree or the smashing of the statue (2:34-35a; 4:10-11), and the third part describes its restoration (2:35b; 4:12-14). The boulder that smashed the statue becomes a world-encompassing mountain, and the tree roots symbolize hope for rehabilitation. Daniel interprets the two dreams for Nebuchadnezzar. The statue in the first dream symbolizes the four empires that will rise and fall one after the other, as opposed to the restoration of divine rule, which is likened to the mountain. By contrast, the Tree dream is concerned exclusively with Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. The tree’s demise portends Nebuchadnezzar’s expulsion from human society to that of the animals, for seven eras, during which time his heart will transform from human to animal. The tree’s roots symbolize Nebuchadnezzar’s reinstitution as king after he praises God and acknowledges His supremacy.

The third part of the dream describes the rejuvenated roots: "בְּרַם עִקַּר שָׁרְשׁוֹהִי בְּאַרְעָא שְׁבֻקוּ וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ" (‘Nevertheless, leave the stump and roots in the earth, [and a binding of] iron and bronze in the tender grass of the field,’ Dan 4:12). The words "וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ" are difficult, as this sentence lacks a verb, making it unclear whether they are to be attached to ‘in the tender grass of the field’ that follows them, or not. In any case, there are clearly two images here: The roots that remain in the earth after the felling of the tree and the binding of iron and bronze. These two images form an inner-biblical explanation for the Shoot prophecy in Isaiah, as I will now demonstrate.

"**וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ": Does the iron and bronze bonding refer to Nebuchadnezzar or to the tree?**

The words "וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ" can be understood as part of the allegory (meaning, the tree) or as referring to that which it symbolizes (meaning Nebuchadnezzar, who turns into an animal). The words that precede them refer to the allegory (the roots of the tree), while the words that follow refer to Nebuchadnezzar, who will be drenched by the dew, will eat the grasses of the earth, and whose heart will transform from human to animal for the duration of seven eras.

1. See Osborne, who discusses the ‘tree-king’ metaphor in the Bible and in the ancient Near East. W.R. Osborne, *Trees and Kings – A Comparative Analysis of Tree Imagery in Israel’s Prophetic Tradition and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, in the parable of Jotham (Jud 9:6-21). We also find this in the parable of the eagle and the vine (Ezek 17:1-10), the parable of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7), and the parable of the king of Babylon (Isa 14:3-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isaiah uses these metaphors to provide his audience with a new understanding of their political situation, following the rise of the Assyrian empire, and he seeks to influence their thought. The Assyrian empire poses a formidable threat to Judaea’s existence. Will Judaea survive? And what can she do to ensure her future? Isaiah’s response to these questions was vague. However, using the tree metaphor, Isaiah could contend with the following paradox: on the one hand, God intends to judge the people (and punish them), but on the other, He also intends to redeem them. The imagery illustrates this: The tree must be felled and destroyed, but afterward it will enjoy renewed growth. See K. Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree – The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (JSOT 65; Sheffield, England: 1989), p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Lester’s comprehensive study: G.B. Lester, *Daniel Evokes Isaiah – Allusive Characterization of Foreign Rule in the Hebrew-Aramaic Book of Daniel* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 606; London: Bloomsbury, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The fourth chapter of Lester’s book is devoted to the connections between Isaiah and the first part of Daniel: He mentions the similarities between Dan 2 and Isa 41, 45; Dan 3 and Isa 43; Dan 1 and Isa 49. See Lester, *Daniel*, pp. 107-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), pp. 482-499; J. Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 14-23. Teeter finds inner-biblical interpretations of several of Isaiah's prophecies, such as 8, 10, 14, and 29, in the Dan 11 vision. He shows how Daniel uses the description of the Assyrian king to re-characterize of Antiochus IV in his time. See: A. Teeter, “Isaiah and the King of As/Syria in Daniel’s Final Vision: On the Rhetoric of Inner-Scriptural Allusion and the Hermeneutics of ‘Mantological Exegesis,’” in: E. Mason, S. Thomas, et al. (eds.), *A Teacher for All Generations*: Leiden 2012, pp. 169-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. M. Segal, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions: Textual, Contextual and Intertextual Approaches to the Book of Daniel*) Berlin-Boston: 2016), pp. 112-114; Y. Zakovitz, “‘Etz ha-Daat Hu ‘Etz ha-Hayyim?” in: R. Elior (ed.), *Gan ‘Eden mi-Kedem – Masorot Gan ‘Eden be-Yisrael u-va-‘Amim* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2010), pp. 63-70 (p. 68 ftnt. 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For detailed descriptions of this and other proposed divisions see N. Golan, *Sippurei Daniel – Nituah Sifruti shel Daniel 1-6* (Hebrew), PhD Diss. (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2017), pp. 130-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)