The Felled tree – metaphor and theology

The Dream of the Tree (Dan 4) in light of the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy (Isa 10:33-11:9)

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# Abstract

This paper deals with the connection between the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah (10:33-11:9) and Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the tree in Daniel (3:31-4:34). Several scholars briefly noted this connection but did not analyze its meaning and purpose. This paper demonstrates how the perspective presented in Dan 4 serves as an “inner-biblical interpretation” for the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah, shedding light on theological perceptions as reflected in Isa 10:33-11:9 and Dan 4. Analyzing the metaphor of the felled tree in both sources, I point out three stages of the metaphor’s development and the theological messages that the various authors express through the use of this metaphor.

# Introduction: The king-tree metaphor

Trees are metaphorically used to represent the king in both the Bible and in other ancient Near Eastern texts.[[1]](#footnote-1) Sometimes the tree and the king are linked in a parable.[[2]](#footnote-2) The tall tree, often symbolizing the king’s hubris (Ezek 31:1-14; Isa 2:12-17), is later felled or burned as retribution, portending the king’s upcoming fate (Isa 10:16-19; Isa 9:13-20). Occasionally, the king-tree metaphor focuses on the tree’s renewed growth (Job 14:7-9; Isa 6:11-13; Isa 27:2-6).

In this paper, I focus on metaphors of the latter type, those 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 specifically employed for transmitting theological messages.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I examine the two metaphors that describe the tree’s renewed growth following its destruction and show how the dream of the tree in Daniel (3:31-4:34) serves as an inner-biblical interpretation for the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah (10:33-11:9). The connections between the book of Isaiah and the book of Daniel, both its first, narrative part (1-6)[[4]](#footnote-4) and its second, apocalyptic part (7-12)[[5]](#footnote-5) have been addressed at length.[[6]](#footnote-6) Various scholars have also noted the connection between Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the tree and the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah but 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, as well as the theological messages that the authors propound through its use.

I begin my discussion with the dream of the tree 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 from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah: the image of the roots shackled in iron 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 address the fact that the sprouting roots of the tree in Isaiah, the “shoot from the stump of Jesse,” symbolize the rejuvenation of Judah while the same image in Daniel symbolized the restoration of Nebuchadnezzar. I discuss this surprising and its explanation, as well as its theological implications.

# The dream of the tree (Dan 4) and the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy

The dream of the tree, as it appears in Dan 3:31-4:34, is Nebuchadnezzar’s second 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 that it will be destroyed. The evil tidings are accompanied by a small consolation: The tree will not be completely destroyed; rather, its roots will remain underground, enabling future growth.

Like Nebuchadnezzar’s previous dream, the dream of the statue (Dan 2), the dream of the tree 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), with the rock that smashed the statue becoming a mountain that filled the earth, and the tree roots symbolizing the 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 dream of the tree 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 periods of time, during which time his heart will transform from human to animal. The tree’s roots symbolize Nebuchadnezzar’s return to the throne once he has acknowledged God’s supremacy.

The third part of the dream describes the rejuvenated roots: “בְּרַם עִקַּר שָׁרְשׁוֹהִי בְּאַרְעָא שְׁבֻקוּ” וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ “But leave its root in the ground, and in fetters of iron and bronze” (Dan 4:12). The words “וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ” are difficult, as this clause lacks a verb, making it unclear whether they are to be linked to “in the tender grass of the field” that follows them, or not. In any case, there are 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 from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah, as I will now demonstrate.

## וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ : Do the iron and bronze fetters relate to Nebuchadnezzar or the tree?

The words "וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ" can be understood as relating to the tree in the dream or to that which the tree symbolizes (meaning Nebuchadnezzar, who turns into an animal). The preceding phrase, “but leave its stump and roots in the ground,” clearly relates to the tree, while the words that follow refer to Nebuchadnezzar, who will be drenched by the dew, eat the grasses of the earth, and whose heart will transform from human to animal for the duration of seven eras.

Rashi understands these words as relating to Nebuchadnezzar. He likens the shackling of Nebuchadnezzar with iron and bronze chains to the harnessing of a horse: not only will Nebuchadnezzar be drenched by the dew and eat grasses like an animal, he will also be chained to the tree, as one chains an animal. Saadia Gaon also takes this approach,[[9]](#footnote-9) as do Charles,[[10]](#footnote-10) Hartman,[[11]](#footnote-11) Henze,[[12]](#footnote-12) and Collins.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The claim that the iron and bronze chains bind Nebuchadnezzar, and not the tree, is bolstered by a verse in Chronicles that describes shackling in bronze chains: “Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he became king… *Nebuchadnezzar* king of Babylon attacked him *and bound him with bronze shackles* to take him to Babylon” (2Chr 36:5-6). Both verses mention both shackling in bronze chains and Nebuchadnezzar; however, in Chronicles Nebuchadnezzar is the one who does the shackling, and in Dan 4 it is he who is shackled. The connection between these verses exhibits a kind of *quid pro quo*: As punishment for shackling Joakim, the king of Judah, in bronze chains, and exiling him to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar himself was shackled in bronze chains and exiled from human society.

Other scholars have proposed that the chains bound the remnant of the tree instead.[[14]](#footnote-14) Possible support for this claim can be found in findings from the ancient Near East which feature trees encircled by iron rings: Archeologists have found remnants of trees with bronze rings at the entrance to the Temple of Shamash in Mesopotamia (from the time of Sargon II, 721-705 BC);[[15]](#footnote-15) and cylinder seals and slabs from the palace of Ashurbanipal II (885-856 BC) in Nimrod feature heavy bands of metal around the trunks of trees.[[16]](#footnote-16) In addition, Nebuchadnezzar II’s throne room in Babylon had a picture of palm trees whose trunks are encircled by four yellow and green rings.[[17]](#footnote-17) Although the rings encircle the tree trunks, not the roots, in all these findings, they nevertheless depict a similar image and strengthen the claim that this phrase refers to the tree. [[18]](#footnote-18) If so, it is possible that the author of Dan 4 drew his motif of shackling the roots of a tree from Isaiah’s prophecy: “He will cut down [נִקַּף] the thickets of the forest with iron, And Lebanon will fall by the Mighty One” (Isa 10:34). The verb נק"פ in this verse means “to chop down” (the tree); however, as Michael Segal has correctly pointed out, this may be an example of an incorrect inner-biblical interpretation;[[19]](#footnote-19) the author of Dan 4 understood the verb נק"פ in the sense of “encircling,” and this verse in Isaiah inspired the idea of encircling the tree trunk with iron bands after it was felled.

# Use of the tree metaphor to cope with a theological quandary

In addition to shackling tree roots in iron chains, the image of the roots’ renewed growth appears in Daniel as well. This image expresses hope, as in Job 14 (vv. 7-9): "At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail." (Job 14: 7-9) In both Isaiah and Daniel, the authors use the roots metaphor to present a theological framework for understanding the rise of the empires. Isaiah sees the great expansion and strength of the Assyrian empire in the last third of the eighth century BC, and the author of Dan 4 experiences the rise of the Hellenistic empire in the third century BC. The enormous power of the emperor may have been viewed as a threat to divine sovereignty, and therefore required a theological explanation.

Isaiah uses the tree metaphor to present a revolutionary theology, found throughout Isa 10 (vv. 5-6; 15; 16-19; 33-34). The prophecy opens with the words: “Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me…” (10:5-6). It is God who sends Assyria against his people, describing Assyria as a rod, a club, and further on as an ax. Assyrian propaganda inscriptions include the motif of felling trees, and several Assyrian rulers boast of cutting down forests during their conquests.[[20]](#footnote-20) The prophet uses the same motif of cutting down trees, adapting it to his own purposes through “rhetorical reversal.”[[21]](#footnote-21) While the Assyrians proudly describe themselves as those who fell trees, Isaiah mocks their hubris: “Does the ax raise itself above the person who swings it, or the saw boast against the one who uses it”? (v. 15) and asserts that it is God who chops down the trees. Assyria is but a tool in God’s hand. According to this metaphor, the felled tree symbolizes Judah.

## כבוד יערו וכרמלו vv. 16-19

Later in the prophecy, one can see the metaphor developing. If Assyria exhibits hubris, ignoring its true place and stature, it will be punished. Instead of the ax which fells the tree, Assyria is the tall trees themselves, “the splendor of his forests and fertile fields” (v. 18), which will be destroyed by ax or fire. In vv. 16-19 the prophet describes the fire consuming the forest, consuming their thorns and briers in a single day. These verses open with the word “therefore” (לכן), connecting to Assyria’s hubris as described above.[[22]](#footnote-22) While the prophecy opens with God sending (שלח)Assyria against his people, now God sends (משלח)wasting sickness against them. Only a remnant will survive the flames, trees so few that even a child could count them.

The context implies that the tall trees mentioned in vv. 16-19 refer to Assyria. However, if we isolate these verses from their context, one can understand these verses in other ways. Various scholars have noted that vv. 16-23 form a secondary unit that was added to ch. 10 at a later stage,[[23]](#footnote-23) where its first section, vv. 16-19, comprises an earlier prophecy that originally described the misfortunes of Judah and not of their Assyrian enemies. This idea was first proposed by Koppe in 1780,[[24]](#footnote-24) based on comparing this passage to other prophecies in Isaiah like that in 9:13-18[[25]](#footnote-25) or that in 17:4-6 that relates to the fate of Judah.[[26]](#footnote-26)

When incorporated into ch. 10, vv. 16-19 relate to Assyria, not Judah. I believe that the shifting of the object of the prophecy stems from theological considerations. Verse 16 describes God causing his fatted ones to become emaciated, which leaves his fertile land seeming as though consumed by fire.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, this image changes in v. 17. God no longer sends the fire; rather, God Himself is described as a consuming fire, a burning and destructive flame: וְהָיָה אוֹר־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֵשׁ וּקְדוֹשׁוֹ לְלֶהָבָה וּבָעֲרָה וְאָכְלָה שִׁיתוֹ וּשְׁמִירוֹ בְּיוֹם אֶחָד, “So the Light of Israel will be for a fire, And his Holy One for a flame; It will burn and devour His thorns and his briers in one day.” The expression אור ישראל*,* the “Light of Israel,” is singular and enigmatic, appearing only here. This led some scholars to suggest textual emendations such as אביר ישראל or צור ישראל.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, the analogy to the word “וקדושו” (his “holy one”), a term that hints at the familiar appellation קדוש ישראל, the “holy of Israel,” led most exegetes and scholars to understand it as referring to God.[[29]](#footnote-29) This is a play on the words אוֹר and אוּר, “light” and “fire”: Instead of being a shining light that benefits Israel, God turns himself into a burning fire that consumes them.[[30]](#footnote-30)This description of God as a burning fire raises a theological difficulty, as it presents a problematic aspect of God’s divinity, that of one who harms and consumes, perhaps even uncontrollably. Similar imagery appears elsewhere in the Bible, and in other prophecies in Isaiah, [[31]](#footnote-31) but this prophecy is particularly disturbing as God is not only depicted as a consuming fire, but that fire is directed at His people. This difficulty motivated the redactor to incorporate this prophecy (vv. 16-19) into ch. 10, thus changing its object. Instead of describing God as burning and consuming His people, it now describes how He consumes their enemies.

## “He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax” – vv. 33-34

We can identify a similar phenomenon in verses 10:33-34. Here, too, the identity of the tall trees is ambiguous.[[32]](#footnote-32) Who are these mighty trees that whose branches God will cut off במערצה, in a frightful manner[[33]](#footnote-33) – Assyria, or Judah?

This question touches upon the issue of the unit’s borders. Some scholars view these verses as belonging to the previous unit and defined this unit as 10:5-34.[[34]](#footnote-34) According to this demarcation, the prophecy speaks of Assyria. Their hand is already reaching from Nob toward the Temple Mount, though at the last moment, the Lord of Hosts will cut down the lofty ones and halt the Assyrian attack. In contradistinction, other scholars believe that these verses belong to the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy, and defined this unit as 10:33-11:9. According to them, the words “Therefore the Lord, the Lord of Hosts” form the beginning of a new prophecy, like the opening of the prophecy in 3:1.[[35]](#footnote-35) According to this demarcation, these verses seem to portend the downfall of Judah. The description of the calamity is followed by consolation: the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” will arise out of the felled tree and will flourish once more.

As in vv. 16-19, various scholars have claimed that vv. 33-34 originally referred to Judah; their current placement results in an ambiguity that allows the reader to understand them as referring to either Assyria or Judah.[[36]](#footnote-36)

## The tree metaphor: three stages of development

The felled tree metaphor goes through a very interesting development process.

At first, this metaphor is used to describe the disaster that will befall Judah. Isaiah employs this metaphor to describe the great calamity, alongside the notion of the remnant, which is a cornerstone of his doctrine. Destruction will come but will not be complete; a few trees will remain, few enough for a child to count. The felled tree is Judah, God is the one who brings on the destruction (9:12), the One who fells the tree, while Assyria is described as the ax.

The second stage features the development of this metaphor: Assyria changes its role. Instead of an ax, it becomes a tall proud tree that is cut down or burned. Verses 16-19, as well as vv. 33-34, which originally described the burning or destruction of Judah, are integrated into ch. 10 and receive new meaning as referring to Assyria. However, in this stage, the roots of the tree still describe the future growth of Judah.

In my opinion, the third stage appears in Dan 4. This stage incorporates an additional novelty: Not only does the tall tree symbolize the foreign king, but its roots do as well. The author of Dan 4 seems to be familiar with the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in its current place, and he interprets it while deliberately shifting the meaning of the metaphor: The tree roots no longer symbolize the redemption of Judah, but rather the redemption of Nebuchadnezzar. This change makes us wonder: Why describe the hope for Nebuchadnezzar’s rehabilitation? Is this dream supposed to serve as a sort of consolation prophecy for Nebuchadnezzar? To answer these questions, we must first attend to the historical figure that hides behind the character of Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4.

# The roots of the tree describe Nebuchadnezzar (Nabonidus?)

Various scholars throughout the twentieth century identified the historical figure of “Nebuchadnezzar” as it appears in Dan 4 with king Nabonidus. They base this claim on Mesopotamian texts, arguing that the story was first told about Nabonidus and only later became adapted and shifted to Nebuchadnezzar.[[37]](#footnote-37) This claim is based on several reasons. First, Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus, and not of Nebuchadnezzar (as described in Dan 5:11). Second, the historical sources show that Nabonidus was absent from Babylon for a period of ten years, which he spent in the Arabian desert, in the city of Tayma. This description dovetails with Nebuchadnezzar’s banishment from human company, for seven eras. In addition, Nabonidus was said to be different from the other Babylonian kings, being very interested in revelations and dreams. The descriptions of Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams in chs. 2, 4, and 5 would therefore fit him.[[38]](#footnote-38) In 1956, Milik published fragments of the “Prayer of Nabonidus” found in Qumran, which further supports the identification of Nebuchadnezzar with this king.[[39]](#footnote-39) These fragments, written in Aramaic, record the prayer of king Nabonidus who was inflicted with leprosy and banished to Tayma for a period of seven years. The king testifies that for seven years he prayed to gods of gold and silver, believing them to be true deities; however, he was finally healed after praying to *El ‘Elyon* with the help of a Jew from among the exiles. Most scholars believe that the text of the “Prayer of Nabonidus” reflects an earlier stage of Dan 4, which was also originally written about Nabonidus.[[40]](#footnote-40) This prayer may help explain why the author chose to use the tree roots to symbolize Nebuchadnezzar: the story has a historical basis that describes Nabonidus’ reinstatement following a lengthy period of exile or banishment.

## Why was the figure of Nabonidus changed to that of Nebuchadnezzar?

I will now address the question of why the author (or redactor) of Dan 4 chose to replace the figure of Nabonidus with that of Nebuchadnezzar.

This may be based on a theological consideration. As Newsom correctly pointed out, having the great destroyer of the Temple eventually recognize the power and sovereignty of Israel’s God may help heal a deep cultural wound.[[41]](#footnote-41) Fewell similarly notes that the mention of Nebuchadnezzar would significantly affect the audience – the reader who is familiar with his historical figure as the destroyer of the Temple cannot but wonder at the words of praise this human, though practically omnipotent, king, utters.[[42]](#footnote-42)

This is perhaps the reason the story is presented as a missive that Nebuchadnezzar distributes to all the nations of his kingdom, describing his experiences in the first person, a style common in the ancient Near East. Kings used this medium to glorify their deeds, as found on many inscriptions within kings’ tombs[[43]](#footnote-43) but it is rarely found in the Bible.[[44]](#footnote-44) The author of Dan 4 chose this style to heighten the effect of Nebuchadnezzar’s words, granting them greater weight.

Nebuchadnezzar’s central role in Daniel 4 is also evident from the conclusion of the story. Four out of the six stories in Daniel conclude with the king glorifying God but Nebuchadnezzar’s praise in Dan 4 is exceptional. The other stories have the foreign king praising God in relation to Daniel or his comrades: In Dan 2 Nebuchadnezzar praises God after witnessing Daniel’s ability to uncover the mystery and interpret his dream (2:47); in Dan 3 Nebuchadnezzar praises God for having sent an angel to rescue His servants who believe in Him (3:28), and in Dan 6 Darius puts out a missive in which he glorifies and praises Daniel’s God for saving Daniel from the lion’s den (6:27-28). In contrast, in Dan 4, Nebuchadnezzar’s praise mentions neither Daniel nor his friends. Instead, he praises God’s ability to humiliate the haughty: “And those *who walk* in pride he is able to humble” (4:34). Use of the verb “to walk” מַהְלְכִין alludes to Nebuchadnezzar, who was earlier described as “walking” (מְהַלֵּךְ) on the roof of his royal palace (4:27).

## From enemy to beloved: consequences of the transformation of Nebuchadnezzar’s character

Changing the identity of the king in Dan 4 to Nebuchadnezzar may have been for theological reasons but this change has consequences. Nebuchadnezzar suddenly switches from his role as Israel’s bitterest enemy to a positive character, a type of “repentant.” In Jeremiah 27, According to the MT, Jeremiah calls Nebuchadnezzar “my servant”: “Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him” (Jer 27:6).[[45]](#footnote-45) Just as Assyria is likened to a rod and a staff, serving as God’s messenger, so Nebuchadnezzar is called His servant. God gave him all his lands, as well as the beasts of the field. Dan 4 takes this a step further: While Jer 27 describes Nebuchadnezzar as one who receives the beasts of the field from God, in Dan 4 it is Nebuchadnezzar who turns into such a beast. Furthermore, while Jer 27 describes Nebuchadnezzar as God’s servant in the sense of His messenger, or one who is subordinate to God, in Dan 4 he is described as repentant, as one who serves God.

Nebuchadnezzar glorifying God causes his character in Dan 4 to completely deviate from his familiar image as the Temple’s destroyer. Readers experience dissonance when confronting these two characters. Various translators and exegetes could not handle this dissonance and so attempted to harmonize the two completely different characters. this is already evident, in the OG version. As in other chapters in Daniel, here, too, we find differences between the MT and the OG.[[46]](#footnote-46) According to OG, Nebuchadnezzar’s sin led to his banishment from human company, including the changing of his heart from human to that of an animal., Nebuchadnezzar’s sin was not a general one of hubris, (like in the MT), but the more specific one of destroying God’s Temple. Some scholars view this verse (22) as secondary to the MT, believing it to be an early interpretation that sought to resolve the readers’ dissonance by connecting these two different images of Nebuchadnezzar.

A midrash that appears in the Talmud (BT *Shevuot* 35b), cited by Rashi, continues this exegetical trend. As part of positively presenting the character of Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar are shown to have a close relationship. When Daniel hears Nebuchadnezzar’s dream he is astonished and frightened, so much so that in an odd instance of role reversal it is Nebuchadnezzar who tries to calm Daniel. “Then Daniel, known as Belteshazzar, said: ‘My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!’” (v. 16). Daniel addresses Nebuchadnezzar as “My lord,” and wishes that his dream and its interpretation would come true for his enemies.

The Rabbis of the Midrash, as cited by Rashi, cannot accept Daniel wishing such as thing for Nebuchadnezzar’s enemies, given that those enemies are Israel. They therefore reverse this verse and explain that the vocative “My lord” was directed not at Nebuchadnezzar, but at God: “Our Sages said that ‘if only the dream applied to your enemies’ addresses God. He raised his eyes to heaven and said ‘if only the dream applied to Your enemies,’ and if you say that he addressed Nebuchadnezzar, how can that be possible, as Israel were Nebuchadnezzar’s enemies and how could Daniel curse them” (Rashi on Dan 4:16, and also see BT *Shevuot* 35b). This exegetical trend also appears later in the chapter. Daniel’s advice to Nebuchadnezzar in v. 24 also expresses Daniel’s loyalty to his king. Daniel wishes his king to avoid the upcoming calamity, or at least have his punishment deferred, and so advises him to give charity to the poor: “Therefore, O king, may my counsel please you, to atone for your sin by almsgiving and for your iniquity by mercy to the poor/ Perhaps your leisure will be prolonged” (4:24).[[47]](#footnote-47)

Rashi assumes that Daniel could not possibly have given this advice to Nebuchadnezzar out of a sincere desire to help him. Rather, he claims this is an attempt to benefit the exiled Judeans: “Why did Daniel give Nebuchadnezzar good advice? He saw the poor downtrodden Israelite exiles begging [for food] and advised him [Nebuchadnezzar] to free them. He said, ‘These poor people whom you exiled are hungry; feed them.’ And so he [Nebuchadnezzar] did: he opened his food stores and supported them for 12 months” (Rashi on 4:24). With his interpretation of this verse, Rashi again connects between the two – very different – images of Nebuchadnezzar.

# Conclusion

This paper presented an example of inner-biblical interpretation. The author of Dan 4 interprets the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah, alluding to two similar images: the image of encircling the tree’s roots with iron fetters (which, as we saw, is based on an erroneous intra-biblical interpretation), and the image of the roots which grow anew after the tree is felled, symbolizing the hope for renewed growth. Both the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah and the narrative in Dan 4 employ the metaphor of the felled tree to propose a theological framework for addressing the expanding empires of their day.

Tracing this metaphor allowed us to identify its three stages of development. In the first, Assyria is likened to an ax that God wields, while the felled tree symbolizes Judah. Isaiah uses this to express a double message: first, that Assyria is but a tool in God’s hands, and second, to communicate a message of hope that the upcoming destruction will not be total, but a remnant will be spared. In the second stage, the role of Assyria changes: instead of an ax the Assyrians are portrayed as tall trees. Since the Assyrians are haughty and do not recognize their role as God’s messengers, they will be cut down. This stage is reflected in vv. 16-19 and 33-34, following their insertion into the prophecy in ch. 10. The incorporation of these prophecies in their current place gave them new meaning, and they can now be understood as referring to the Assyrians. The result of incorporating these verses into the prophecy and shifting their meaning created a “middle stage” that lent the metaphor a compound meaning: while the tall trees symbolize Assyria, the roots symbolize the future renewal of the shoot from the stump of Jesse (11:1).

The third, and final, stage of the metaphor is in Dan 4. Here both the tree and its roots symbolize Nebuchadnezzar. On the level of the symbol, it makes sense for the tree and its roots to symbolize the same entity. However, on the level of the meaning of the symbol, this representation is revolutionary. For the author of Dan 4, the rising empire is not merely an ax that does not know its role but goes a step further and turns the great threat, the man who destroyed God’s Temple, into one who glorifies God. Therefore, Nabonidus is replaced with Nebuchadnezzar. This is also why this story is related in the form of a missive that Nebuchadnezzar distributes throughout his kingdom, relating his experiences in the first person.

It seems that Dan 4 strives to describe God’s greatness from Nebuchadnezzar’s viewpoint, in the context of what he experiences himself. Switching the felled tree metaphor and the symbolic meaning of its renewed roots from a description of the restoration of the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” to a description of the restoration of Nebuchadnezzar and his reinstatement was intended to serve this purpose.

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1. See Osborne, who discusses the ‘tree-king’ metaphor in the Bible and in the ancient Near East. Osborne, 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, in wake of the rise of the Assyrian empire. This empire posed a formidable threat to Judah’s existence. Will Judah survive? And what can she do to ensure her future? Isaiah’s response to these questions was vague, however, he used the tree metaphor to contend with the following paradox: on the one hand, God intends to judge the people (and punish them); on the other hand, 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 Nielsen, 1989, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 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, 2015, pp.107-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fishbane, 1985, pp. 482-499; Blenkinsopp, 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 Antiochus IV in his time. See: Teeter, 2012, pp.169-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Lester’s comprehensive study: Lester, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Segal, 2016, pp. 112-114; Y. Zakovitz, 2010, p. 68 n. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For detailed descriptions of this and other proposed divisions see Golan, 2017, pp. 130-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Saadia b. Yosef, 1981, pp. 79-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Charles, 1929, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hartman and DiLella, 1978, p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Henze, 1999, pp. 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Collins, 1993, pp. 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Zakovitch, 2005, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Collins, 1993, p. 226; Henze, 1999, pp. 88-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Henze, 1999, p. 79; Collins, 1993, p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Segal, 2016, p.111. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Henze and Segal posit that these differences preclude any conclusions regarding our case. Segal, 2016, p. 108; Henze, 1999, pp. 86-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Segal, 2016, p. 114; Zakovitch claims that the author of Dan 4 understood the verb נק"פ in the sense ofקשר (‘tying,’) as in Isa 3:24: ‘Instead of a sash, a rope’. נִקְפָּה is a rope used for tying. Zakovitch 2010, p. 68 n. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Aster, 2017, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Chan, 2009, pp. 718-719; 728-729. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The word ‘therefore’ appears in the MT and creates a link of causation: Assyria took pride in their actions, and therefore receive their punishment. As opposed to this, the OG includes the words ‘καὶ οὐχ οὕτως, ἀλλὰ,’ which can be rendered ‘not so,’ as conjunctions that express a connection of contrast. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The section remains coherent even without these verses; v. 24 seems to directly follow v. 15. See: Wildberger, 1991, pp. 429-431; Williamson, 2018, pp. 537-542. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Wildberger*,* 1991, p. 429; Roberts, 2015, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Chapter 9 contains prophecies of reproach directed at Ephraim. Both prophecies mention burning, the forest, and the fire. Both have fire as the subject of the verb אכ"ל where the object ‘consumed’ is the briars and thorns. In ch. 9 the order is ‘briers and thorns,’ as this word-pair usually appears in Isaiah (see, for example, 5:6; 7:23; 7:34; 7:25; 27:4) while in ch. 10 the order is reversed: ‘it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers’ (v. 17). The reversed order may show that chapter 10 is quoting the previous chapter, forming a chiasm by reversing the order of the familiar expression. Horovitz, 1972, pp. 248-255. In addition, both prophecies use the metaphor of burning thistles to express swift destruction – ‘in a single day’ (9:13; 10:17), a fire which spreads widely, ‘both head and tail, both palm branch and reed’ (v. 13), and ‘both soul and flesh’ (10:18). The prophecy in ch. 9 is explicitly aimed at Israel: ‘The Lord will cut off from Israel’ and scholars have concluded from that fact that the adjacent prophecy in ch. 10 was also originally aimed at Israel or Judah and not at Assyria. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a detailed comparison, see Nielsen,1989, pp. 194-197. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Wildberger, 1991, p. 430. The word משמנו can be understood in more than one way. The emaciation metaphor may lend it the sense of a corpulent individual, implying health (for example, Jud 3:17), whose body heat rises as if on fire. The conflagration metaphor משמנו can refer to the fertile land, and רָזוֹן may describe a waning of the fertile areas. compare ‘ומה הארץ השמנה היא אם רזה’, ‘How is the land? Is it fertile or poor,’ (Num 13:20). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For a discussion of the various emendations see Wildberger, 1991, p. 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Most exegetes understood this expression as referring to God. Rashi is an exception and explains thatאור ישראל is a sobriquet for the Torah. He argues that the word קדושו indeed refers to God but also offers an additional option, wherein it refers to the righteous of each generation. Among modern commentators, Tur Sinai’s opinion is exceptional. He who believes that אור ישראל, even when paired with וקדושו, cannot refer to the God of Israel but rather to one of the nation’s false deities… ‘The expression, according to 8:12, indicates that which the nation consecrates to a foreign deity, and not to the God of Israel. According to this, the word ‘אור’ here indicates an accursed thing [from the root אר"ר, curse] and not to something truly holy.’ Tur-Sinai, 1967, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Roberts, 2015, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. A similar description of God using the metaphor of fire appears in a prophecy in Isa 30:27-33, ‘הִנֵּה שֵׁם ה' בָּא מִמֶּרְחָק בֹּעֵר אַפּוֹ וְכֹבֶד מַשָּׂאָה שְׂפָתָיו מָלְאוּ זַעַם וּלְשׁוֹנוֹ כְּאֵשׁ אֹכָלֶת’, ‘See, the Name of the Lord comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire’ (v. 27), however in this case the fire is turned against Assyria: ‘כִּי־מִקּוֹל ה' יֵחַת אַשּׁוּר בַּשֵּׁבֶט יַכֶּה’, ‘The voice of the Lord will shatter Assyria; with His rod He will strike them down’ (v. 33). On this issue see Knohl, 2007, pp. 73-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. On ambiguity in Isaiah’s prophecies, see Sommer, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. According to the OG (μετὰ ἰσχύος) and 1QIsaa the word ‘במערצה’ should be read as an adverb, meaning ‘frightfully.’ Duhm proposed emending the word to במעצד (meaning iron), reading this word as a noun. See Duhm, 1922, p.----. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See, for example, Blenkinsopp, 2000, p. 21; Roberts, 2015, p. 175; Wildberger, 1991, pp. 456-458. For a survey of the scholars who demarcate the prophecy in this manner see Williamson, 2018, p. 629 n. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Williamson, 2018, pp. 629, 638. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Williamson, 2018. p. 637. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Newsom and Breed, 2014, pp. 128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Collins, 1993, p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Milik, 1956, pp. 407-415; Freedman, 1957, pp. 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Haag, 1983, pp. 62-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Newsom, 2013, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Fewell, 1988, pp. 133-134. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Polak, 1994, pp. 321-324. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The ‘hero narrator’ is found in a few places in the Bible, such as Neh 1:1-7:5, 12:27-43, 13:4-31; Ez 7:28-8:36, 9:1-15. This category can also include the maiden’s dream in Song 5:2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See also Jer 25:9, 43:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The OG exhibits a far greater connection to Ezek 31. It also does not include the motif of competition between Daniel and the other wise men over the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream.. On this see N. Golan, 2017, pp. 123-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Collins, 1993, p. 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)