

Sacred Trees in Israelite Religion

The narratives about the patriarchs of Israel (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) provide insights into the faith of God's people before the establishment of the priesthood, tabernacle, and Law. Trees play a particularly interesting role in this faith. Sites marked by trees often became associated with appearances of Yahweh that involved divine revelation.

For example, in [Gen 12:6–7](#), the oak at Shechem commemorated Yahweh's appearance to Abram with the promises of the covenant. Later, in [Gen 35:4](#), it marked the place where Jacob buried his family's idols to fulfill a vow to Yahweh.

Due to these events, the oak at Shechem became a sacred site; it was considered a place of divine residence and encounter many years after the patriarchs. In [Josh 24:25–27](#), Joshua erected a stone at the oak of Shechem containing a portion of the Word of God. The site was chosen for its significance as a holy place (*miqdash*, "sanctuary") for the God of Israel.

In [Judg 9:5–6](#), Gideon's son, Abimelech, was declared king "by the oak of the pillar at Shechem." The "pillar" at the town of Shechem also appears later in the same chapter. There, the tree is associated with divine revelation ([Judg 9:34–37](#)).

[Judges 4:4–5](#) contains a similar association of a tree with divine revelation. There, the prophetess Deborah customarily sat under "the palm tree of Deborah" to fulfill her ministry. In [2 Sam 5:24–25](#), God tells David to listen for the sound of marching in the tops of balsam trees as a sign to attack the Philistines. This guidance was supernatural.

Later in Israel's history, the land was apparently dotted with trees (or pillars, to mimic a tree) to mark the location of false gods and their place of worship. These "high places" and their pillars (*matstsevoth*) were ubiquitous. Pagan tree symbols were particularly associated with the goddess Asherah ([1 Kgs 14:23](#); [2 Kgs 17:10](#); [Jer 17:2](#); compare [Deut 16:21](#)).

This unfortunate evolution profaned a sacred symbol of Israel and Yahweh's presence with the nation. God angrily spews judgment of such places in [Ezekiel 6:13](#) (compare [Jer 3:6](#)).

MICHAEL S. HEISER