

# Arboreal wisdom for a deeper, greener faith

**Molly Grace McKnight** considers what trees can teach us

In a century marked by ecological crisis, climate anxiety and the relentless clearing of forests, the Bible offers an invitation that is both urgent and profound: to read Scripture through the eyes of Creation. Trees, in particular, hold a central place in the biblical imagination, not as background scenery, but as living witnesses to wisdom, justice and renewal. Yet modern readings often overlook this imagery or detach it from ecological reality, missing its profound relevance for today.

From the tree of life in Eden to the tree whose leaves are “for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2), the biblical world is richly infused with ecological awareness. Trees are interwoven throughout, embodying and revealing the sacred, and reminding us that caring for Creation is not an optional concern but a central, living truth.

Consider King Solomon, whose wisdom “extended from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the walls” (1 Kings 4:33). This image is more than a catalogue of knowledge; it reflects understanding grounded in attentiveness to Creation’s diversity. The towering cedar speaks of strength, endurance and flourishing, while the delicate hyssop embodies humility and cleansing. Together, they suggest that true wisdom is not dominion over nature, but a listening, reciprocal engagement with it.

Trees also shape Israel’s moral and spiritual imagination. Deborah held court beneath the palm tree (Judges 4:5), her leadership inseparable from its shade, shelter and openness. Prophets likewise compare the faithful to a tree “planted by the water” (Jeremiah 17:8), whose leaves remain green even in drought, while the unfaithful are “like a shrub in the desert.” The flourishing or withering of trees mirrors human ethics and faithfulness to God; the well-being of Creation and the soul are intimately connected. In this way, biblical trees are more than symbols; they are living teachers, embodying endurance, patience and relationality.

Christian theology continues this tree-centred vision, transforming trees into powerful symbols of redemption and sacramental presence. Perhaps the most striking example is the paradox of the tree of the Cross: Jesus is crucified “on

a tree” (Acts 5:30), deliberately recalling the cursed tree of Deuteronomy 21:23: “for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse”. Here, the instrument of death becomes a site of new creation, participating in salvation. In the Cross, God’s solidarity extends not only to humanity but to the entire living world.

This tree-centred vision also shapes Christian art and architecture. The soaring columns, branching arches, and vaulted ceilings of medieval cathedrals evoke a forest-like space, where stone mimics the patterns of branches and canopies, reflecting the order and beauty of Creation itself. Even in these human-made spaces, Creation participates in worship, pointing to a God whose grace is inseparable from the living world. Palms waved on Palm Sunday, and the green of liturgical seasons further reinforce this sense of a sacramental ecology, where the natural world itself joins in the praise of the Creator.

The final vision of Revelation returns to the tree. The river of life nourishes a tree “whose leaves are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2), connecting eschatology, the end of all things, with ecological restoration and reconciliation. Salvation, in this view, is not escape from Creation, but its healing. To stand beneath this tree is to be reminded that human flourishing depends on the flourishing of the Earth, and that divine wisdom is rooted in life, growth and interconnectedness. Reading trees ecologically also opens the door to understanding the feminine dimension of the divine. In their rootedness, fecundity and sheltering canopies, trees embody qualities traditionally associated with the feminine: nurturing, protective and generative. Biblical imagery often intertwines the arboreal with the maternal: Deborah’s palm tree, the Tree of Life and the ruach (the Spirit of God), feminine in Hebrew, moving across the waters in Genesis 1. These images testify to a God who is immanent, life-bearing and relational.

Eco-feminist theologians like Sallie McFague and Rosemary Radford Ruether highlight the connection between patriarchal domination and ecological destruction. Ruether identifies a “logic of dualism” that separates male from female, spirit from matter, culture from nature, legitimising exploitation in both social and environmental spheres. The felling of forests, then,

is not only ecological devastation but a symbolic silencing of the maternal voice of Creation. McFague's metaphorical theology deepens this insight: if the world itself is God's body, then to harm trees is to wound the divine. Protecting forests becomes an act of spiritual restoration, reclaiming God's nurturing presence in the world.

In practical terms, biblical trees model virtues countercultural to extraction and domination. They teach patience, resilience, humility and generosity. Isaiah proclaims that *"the earth is defiled by its people"* (Isaiah 24:5), framing ecological harm as a spiritual failure, a refusal to honour the sacredness of the more-than-human world. Responding to this call, reforestation, conserving and restoring ecosystems are acts of theological as well as ecological repentance. Liturgy, too, can awaken ecological awareness: blessing trees, celebrating Eucharist outdoors, and planting forests in honour of Creation's renewal are not sentimental gestures but faithful participation in God's ongoing creative work. To plant a tree is to enter into the work of divine restoration; to protect forests is to honour the image of God present in all living things.

Ultimately, the trees of scripture invite us to reimagine human life within Creation, not above it. They challenge anthropocentric worldviews and remind us that salvation is not disembodied transcendence, but the flourishing of the whole created order. In a world stripped bare by exploitation and ecological neglect, these ancient teachers offer wisdom for living with care, generosity and rootedness. They invite us to begin the work of ecological conversion, to live as part of a sacred forest where every branch, leaf and life matters. ■



Molly Grace McKnight is a Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics student at the University of Leeds with a passion for green theology, ecofeminism, and environmental hermeneutics. She is fascinated by how spirituality and philosophy intertwine to inspire more compassionate and sustainable ways of living.

1. Ruether, R. R. (1992), *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, Harper San Francisco
2. McFague, S. (1993), *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press

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