

Cat.7 # 6 A nation as a tree.

By Pieter Bos

In the Bible Israel is presented as a fig tree, Assyria and Egypt as “trees in the Garden of Eden”. What could that mean for our day?

In my book, “The Nations Called”, I develop the thesis that a nation is a living entity, even a corporate person created in the image of God, that God wants to covenant to. This article develops a related intriguing feature: a nation as a tree, also a living entity and supposed to live long, maybe even as long as a nation.

(I use the term “nation” as generic for tribe, people and state.)

In the Bible, Nations are consistently likened to trees

Jotham, the son of Gideon tells a parable about nations as trees (Judges 9).

Isaiah describes the fall of Babel as the fall of a tree:

‘Even the pine trees and the cedars of Lebanon exult over you and say, “Now that you have been laid low, no woodsman comes to cut us down.” ... How you have fallen from heaven, ...you who once laid down the nations!’ (Isaiah 14:8, 12)

The same prophet testifies to the almighty God as sowing and planting kingdoms and making them wither again (Isaiah 40:23,24).

Ezekiel is told to set forth an allegory (17:2) on the international political dynamics of his time in terms of the rise and fall of trees. In the end God declares, referring to the final glorious role of Israel:

“I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar... On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it... All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall” (Ezekiel 17:22-24)

Amos compares the Canaanite peoples to cedars and oaks (Amos 2:9).

Hezekiah states that Assyria “has laid waste peoples... cut down its tallest cedars, the choicest of its pines” (Isaiah 37:18,24)

Zechariah depicts the enemies of Israel as cedars and oaks and stately trees (Zach 10:11-11:1-2).

The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of kings of the time, dreams that he is a huge tree (Daniel 4)

Jesus as risen Lord is depicted as “Root of David” and “Root and Offspring of David” (Revelation 5:5; 22:16).

In other words: the nation as tree seems to be a consistent imagery. And our exploration is not yet half way.

Israel is likened to trees

Israel is likened to a stump of a tree:

“As the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land”. (Isaiah 6:13);

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from the roots a Branch will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1).

The same prophet calls Israel a “fruitful vineyard” (Isaiah 27:2-6).

A psalmist depicts Israel as a “vine out of Egypt”, “this vine, the root your right hand has planted” (Psalm 80:9,14,15)

... to an olive tree

“The Lord called you a thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form” (Jeremiah 11:16).

Believers from the nations are “grafted in”, as branches from one olive tree into another: “If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot were grafted in... After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree...” (Rom 11:17,24)

The modern state of Israel uses the olive tree as her symbol.

...and especially to a fig tree

‘I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig-tree’ (Hosea 9:10).

Jesus picks up the same imagery. Three times he chooses the fig tree to teach a serious lesson:

Lesson 1 concerns a situation turned into a warning. Jesus sees a fig tree and, though out of season, he demands fruit. As he does not find fruit, he condemns the fig tree (Mat 21:19-21, also Marc 11:13-21). In other words: he assigns personal responsibility to the (nation-as-a-)fig tree.

Lesson 2 is a parable, while talking about Galileans and the city of Siloam: “A man had a fig tree... and he went to look for fruit on it, but he did not find any.” He then has the choice to cut it down or to “dig around and fertilize it” one more year. This is quite a serious warning for a nation through the fig tree image (Luke 13:6-9).

Lesson 3 is most significant. Jesus is teaching his disciples concerning the “end of the age” and mentions that “all the nations... will see the Son of Man coming... Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender you know that the summer is near” (Mat 24:30,32; Marc 13:28). In the context of the future of nations, Jesus uses the fig tree image to point out that the nation of Israel will play a key role in the “end of the age”.

The purpose of the tree image has to do with the purpose of the nations

Trees can grow very old, and so can nations:

“As the day of a tree, so will be the day of my people” (Isaiah 65:22).

My suggestion is that the tree image for a nation, as in the above three lessons by Jesus, has to do with the history and the responsibility of nations in view of the thrust of all history! The nations-as-a-tree image connects nations, as living entities, with their “roots” in their history and with the future they are “planted for”! The Lord seems to say: the nation is not just the sum total of her inhabitants, without an own dynamic. On the contrary: nations are living entities, created for a reason, living for a goal to be reached, for a fruit to be born!

Out of heaven ↓ ↓ ↓ comes God’s protection and guidance
and (from lower) come Satan’s deceptions

they influence:

branchesas...the..... future
that can lead to a turn of events

some nations have experienced something of this , e.g. UK, Netherlands, Mexico, Thailand...
Basque nation, Kurdistan, First Nations....

There are.....roots > history, “roots”

like cultural exploits, corporate sin

↑ ↑ ↑ “water”: there is :God’s plan and nourishment

But also: corporate self-image, deceptions, curses,

This understanding sheds light on an important feature in our time. Western nations almost fall apart through extreme individualism and self -fabricated groupings and networks, with little appreciation for nationhood. But for nations that are suppressed, discriminated, “uprooted”, it seems all they have is their nationhood, with the painful past and the uncertain future, and nationalism around the corner, even wars and rumours of war (Mat 24:7).

That is the very point where Jesus picks up the imagery of nation-as-tree. In his well-known address on the end of the age He does not only say: “Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree...” (mentioned above, Matthew 24:32). In a parallel narrative he says: ‘Look at the fig-tree and all the trees... When you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:29,31). This refers to Israel, and all nations: “Look at the fig-tree and all the trees, look to Israel and all the nations, and to their international political exchanges; then you can perceive what is to be expected; the kingdom of God is about to be revealed, as a political reality!”

This imagery of a “nation as tree” is consistent. It makes “nation” a pre-Fall concept. God saw Assyria as a tree in the garden of Eden, long before the nation existed. “Trees in the Garden of Eden” seems an indication of a “representative presence” of nations before their actual presence in their inhabitants, their governments and their cultural exploits.

The corporate self -image, international deceptions and divine and satanic curses may cripple a nation as poison stunts a tree.

The concept of a nation as a tree might explain why, throughout the Bible and in (modern) secular sources, trees are often related to the spiritual realm. The idolatry under “every spreading tree” as warned against repeatedly (a.o. Deuteronomy 12:2), the Germanic maypoles, the Christmas tree and the African tribal holy trees are obvious examples.

King of kings Nebuchadnezzar, before dreaming that he was a tree, had another dream which included the detail "a rock was cut off, but not with human hands" (Daniel 2:34). This indicated the smashing of human kingdoms by the kingdom of God, or rather: the smashing of human one-world governments by the divine one-world government. To his disciples Jesus is more specific at this point: "Look at the fig tree and the other trees, at Israel and the other nations; when you see Israel blossoming, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Then Israel will be a tree with 'all the great nations living in her shade' (as Egypt aspired to be, Ezek. 31:6). This will signify that a family of nations, the Commonwealth of Israel, is near".

"As the day of a tree, so will be the day of my people" (Isaiah 65:22).

A nation as a tree? Some trees (sequoia, olive) are reported to have reached ages as old as 1000 years. So far, no ruling dynasty ever reached that age. Israel will.

And all nations will serve one another, as a family or Commonwealth of Nations, as a healthy eco-system of nations, and bear fruit, for a thousand years.