Irish Biblical Apocrypha

Selected Texts in Translation

EDITED BY

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17. THE MYSTICAL TREE

Learned tradition tells of a wonderful tree, with its upper part above the firmament, its lower part in the earth, and every melody in its midst. Another of its marvellous features was that it grew downward from above, while every other tree grows upward. It grew downward from a single root, with innumerable roots coming from it below. There were nine branches, every branch more beautiful than that above. There were pure white birds on the forks of the branches, listening to their many melodies throughout the ages.

The tree is Jesus Christ, the acme of all God's creatures, above them by reason of his divinity, who came forth on earth, assuming humanity from the Virgin Mary. All the melody in the tree's midst represents the perfection of every bliss in the mystic depths of the divinity. It grew from above, that is, from the Heavenly Father. Its single root from above is the one Godhead of the divinity. The many roots below are the twelve apostles, the disciples, and the saints. The nine branches are the nine heavenly orders, with each order more noble than that before it. The white birds among the branches are the shining souls of the just among the heavenly orders.

Those of us who dwell together here implore the mercy of God that we may dwell among the branches of that tree, that is, among the heavenly orders.
17. THE MYSTICAL TREE

McNamara no. 64;

The theme of the cosmic tree is found in the Bible, in Ezekiel 31:3-9 and Daniel 4:7ff. As W. Eichrodt notes in his comment on Ezek 31 (Ezekiel. A Commentary, London, 1970, 425): "It is perfectly clear that the magnificent tree, described in vv. 3-9, is not just an ordinary tree of unusually large dimensions, but is identical with the great world-tree, known not only to Mesopotamian religion as the Kishkanu tree in Eridu, and to Teutonic religion as the world ash-tree in the Edda, but also to the Vedas and the Upanishads in India, and playing an important part even in China and in the religion of the Arctic tribes" (with reference to M. Eliade, Die Religionen und das Heilige, 1954, chap. VIII, pp. 299ff.). Illustrative texts from the Upanishads on the cosmic tree are given by M. Eliade in Patterns in Comparative Religion (Cleveland and New York, Meridian Books, 1963), 273f. The idea is defined fairly formally in the Upanishads: the Universe is an inverted tree, burying its roots in the sky and spreading its branches over the whole earth. Eliade devotes a special section to this particular theme: "The Inverted Tree" (pp. 274-276). A Sabean tradition has it that Plato declared man to be a plant turned upside down, with roots stretching to heaven and branches to the earth. The same tradition is found in Hebrew esoteric teaching (the Zohar): "Now the Tree of Life extends from above downwards, and it is the Sun which illuminates all". It occurs in Dante (Paradiso xviii, 28ff.): "the tree whose life is from its top". It is found, too, in Federico Frezzi, a Florentine poet much influenced by Dante: "the most beautiful plant of Paradise ... whose roots are above, in heaven, whose branches grow towards earth".

The "legend" of which the Irish text speaks is presumably some Latin work in the tradition of the cosmic and inverted tree which writers such as Mircea Eliade have examined.