

**Naked Bible Podcast Transcript**  
**Episode 222**  
**Trees and Kings with Rusty Osborne**  
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**Episode Summary**

How ancient Israelites thought about the institution of kingship is deeply rooted in the ancient Near Eastern ideology of kingship. Kings were viewed as extensions of the rule of deities, the providers of life and welfare and order. Kings ensured that life for the people under his (and the deity's) rule went along as it was intended. Trees were emblematic of these ideas, as they spoke of the fertility of the land, the presence of life in an otherwise arid, hostile environment, and a metaphorical connection between heaven and earth. In this episode of the podcast we interview Dr. William ("Rusty") Osborne, an expert in this kingship metaphor, to help us navigate these concepts.

**Transcript**

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, episode 222, "Trees and Kings" with Rusty Osborne. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how're you doing this week?

**MH:** Pretty good. Busy as usual, but it's been productive.

**TS:** Yeah, absolutely. And every week that goes by, we inch closer the Naked Bible Conference. I'm excited that this episode's going to give you a taste of what to expect at that conference.

**MH:** Yeah, it'll be good prep for people, and we still have some tickets left, so again, we're hoping that the interview today will not only prep people who are already coming, but get some other people interested. The tickets are disappearing, so now's the time.

**TS:** Absolutely. I think we have about 50 left, so please go to [NakedBibleConference.com](http://NakedBibleConference.com) and get your tickets. I'm excited to talk to Rusty!

**MH:** Yeah, I am, too! I think our listeners are going to be really interested in what he has to say today.

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Well, we're here with Rusty Osborne. That's not his real first name, but that's how I know him—William "Rusty" Osborne. And I've had a number of talks over the years at the academic conferences with Rusty about his work, which we're going to talk about in broad strokes today. He is one of our speakers at the upcoming Naked Bible Conference, where he will drill down on some specifics—specific passages—related to what we will talk about today. I've kind of followed his work. His book that was just published is entitled *Trees and Kings: A Comparative Analysis of Tree Imagery in Israel's Prophetic Tradition and the Ancient Near East*. I've mentioned it several times, Rusty, as we went through Ezekiel. Of course you get to some of that material and all the weird tree images (your "the trees in the Garden of God" and all that kind of stuff)... So there's Divine Council stuff in there. Rusty is very familiar with the kind of content that I traffic in, that we mention on the podcast, that we write about. And so once I found out what he was working on, I was really interested. Because honestly, there's not a whole lot done in this that's not in what we academics would call the "Fugitive Literature"—the Scandinavian Press, or something like that [laughs].

**RO:** Yeah.

**MH:** There's not a whole lot, so it was exciting that you were working on this, and it's great that you can be here to introduce the audience to your work and sort of prep them for what we'll do at the conference. Whatever we can do to help people contextualize scripture, that's what we're about. So, Rusty, I'd like you to introduce yourself to the audience to begin with, and then we'll start talking about your work.

**RO:** Yeah, thanks, Mike. It's great to be with you and to talk about this. I know we've chatted a few times at conferences over the years, and it's nice to have the volume finished and be able to talk about it. Like you said, my name is William Russell Osborne, so my parents named me, but I go by Rusty. I studied at Southern Seminary, did a Ph.D. at Midwestern Seminary in Kansas City, and really the tree work came as part of my Ph.D. research. I currently teach as an Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at College of the Ozarks in southwestern Missouri, and I've served as a pastor of Christ Covenant Church there in Branson for the past year. So that's a little bit about me. I teach Hebrew Old Testament, also do some Greek and am teaching some biblical exegesis courses. I actually just finished a class this past semester on Ezekiel, so we got to spend a good bit of time looking at some tree imagery in Ezekiel. [MH laughs] I think my students may have got a little bit more than they bargained for on tree imagery in Ezekiel, but they didn't complain too much.

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**MH:** That's good. Yeah, well, they're captives, so... [laughs]

**RO:** That's right. [laughs] At least I didn't make it a textbook. I was kind.

**MH:** Well, it's good to disabuse them of the thought that they already know all this stuff.

**RO:** That's right.

5:00

**MH:** The more of that we can do, the better. Well, let's jump in at this place. Let's just start with ancient Near Eastern kingship, because that's obviously, I think... "Of Kings and Trees," kingship and tree stuff. Kingship is probably more familiar to the audience. They're used to thinking about kings because you run into those in the Bible and they do stuff, but that all has a context. Kingship doesn't just come out of nowhere, and the Israelites didn't just invent it. So tell us a little bit about the trappings of ancient Near Eastern kingship. If you study kingship, what kinds of things do you need to be thinking about? What kinds of things come up in the discussion.

**RO:** That's great. Before I start, one of the reasons that I titled the book *Trees and Kings* was because there's a lot of tree imagery in the Bible. But really, in this volume, I wanted to focus on the intersection between tree imagery and royal ideology, or that is, how did people think about kings? How did they think about the leaders and their various cultural scenarios—in cultural context? So that's really what I'm honing in on, and obviously, as you just said, kingship. How we think about kings in the ancient world is intrinsically tied to that.

I think perhaps there's nothing more foreign to modern Americans than notions of ancient kingship. This is a huge idea, but this divide is a massive worldview chasm that we must get over if we're going to understand many texts in the Old Testament. Because there was no compartmentalization in the ancient world when it came to politics, religion, and agriculture, interestingly enough. All of these concepts were intertwined with great complexity. So unlike our modern notions of "politician is radically separate from religious leader is radically separate from farmer," in the ancient world, there was just far more complexity and interconnection in these spheres of life that brought these figurative portrayals of kingship, and fertility of the land, and political power and opulence, and all of this is rolled up together. I think Dan Block and Chris Wright just give such a good visual summary of kingship in the ancient world when they draw this triangle: the deity is at the top, people are at one lower corner, and land at the other corner, and the king stands in the middle of all three of these realities. The king was the greatest religious figure, spanning the gap between heaven and earth. The king was the greatest of his subjects, representing the people, and the king's reign was also connected to the fertility of the land. So when we think about kingship, we have to recognize that we are looking at the human being par excellence, in whatever cultural context we're encountering—whether it's Egypt,

Mesopotamia, Ugarit... that we're looking at this human (sometimes divinely human) figure that encapsulates what it means to be the best of us, and he serves a unique role in representing that people to the god or the gods, depending on that context. So I think all of those aspects are incredibly important in thinking just about kingship in the ancient world as we start looking at how people in this ancient worldview came to portray kingship visually and literarily.

10:00

**MH:** Let's pull out a few of those ideas. You mentioned fertility—the fertility of the land. How do we look at the king? Is he essentially a divine being—spawned by the deity—or is he made of some quality that's superior to the rest of us? Those are related, but different concepts. Let's just call it parentage or lineage. You've got fertility... We don't need to go further than that because you can drift off into military stuff, but let's just focus on those two things. How would an ancient person think about either of those, or both of those, both in a way that would be quite different from the way we look at things, and even different from each other. Give us the lay of the land there, and where the Israelites drop in or pop up from.

**RO:** I think a really good place to hone in on in getting a great picture of all of these ideas coming together is really in ancient Egypt around the time of the New Kingdom. We see this ceremony with what's called the Ished Tree. If you're familiar with kingship in ancient Egypt and the life cycle of how they lived in Egypt on the Nile, there was an annual flood that would come. Osiris was the god that was associated with the fertility of the land, and he had this reincarnated visage on earth that was Pharaoh. And so Pharaoh was very, very intrinsically tied to the Egyptian pantheon. As Pharaoh did his job maintaining Ma'at in the world (that is, cosmic order), when all was well the Nile would flood, the land would become fertile, the people would farm it, there would be good crops. That was the rhythm of life.

**MH:** Life was the way it was supposed to be.

**RO:** That's exactly right. And the king stood in the middle of that. So when life was good, he was great; when life was bad, he was the problem—or he needed to identify something else as the problem, [laughter] as so often happens. But at that point, the king comes to this position of centerpiece between the land (the fertility of the land), the gods, and the people. And around the New Kingdom, we have these wonderful iconographic scenes of the Pharaoh being superimposed over a tree, which is the Ished tree. We don't know exactly what type of tree it is. Some have speculated maybe it's a Persia tree or something like that. But the king is superimposed over this image of the tree with the gods (specifically Thoth), inscribing the name of the king on the leaves of the tree. And this is kind of symbolizing—iconographically, visually—how the king's reign is to be as long and productive and fruitful as this tree. And so these images of fertility and stability and long reign and connectedness to the deities is all visually wrapped up in that one wonderful image that becomes quite common, even down through

Rameses II, Rameses IV. There are several iterations of that scene, especially like at the Temple at Karnak and other places.

**MH:** Now, as an Egyptian, you're buying into this because of what? What have you been taught about the gods and kings? Why is this meaningful?

**RO:** Yeah, you've been taught that the king is the descendant of the gods, and that he is one of them, and that he spans this gap between heaven and earth and is the presence of the deity on earth that maintains world order and keeps all things established. And as long as everyone is contributing and doing their part, then the world continues to function. So I think it's very much tied up in an enormous worldview, that it shapes and answers many questions and explains the reality that the ancients were experiencing day in and day out.

**MH:** I think maybe the closest analogy (if you have a better one, chime in here), but I think for the average Christian Bible-reader—Bible student—the closest analogy may be the returned Messiah with the New Earth. There's something about that event and that person that returns things to the way they are supposed to be. But for an ancient person like an Egyptian, that was an annual re-up—you'd hit the reset button every year to both maintain and restore and continue those kinds of conditions through different rituals and whatnot. So is that a reasonable analogy—Messianic thinking?

15:00

**RO:** Yeah, absolutely; I think so. I think that we see... I don't want to drift too far down the path of Jungian archetypes, or anything like this, but I wrote an article one time on ancient kings and Dr. Who. I think there is something intrinsic in humanity that recognizes that we need someone who is enough *like* us to represent us and be interested in us, but we need someone outside of ourselves that is able to do what we sense that we cannot do. So from the past to the future, we're looking for someone that represents us, but is not like us exactly, because we recognize our own deficiencies. We need someone *other* than us, but similar, and I think that you see that idea regurgitate over and over and over and over again in the ancient world—looking for someone to be the best of us, to go before us with the deity and intercede for us.

**MH:** It's interesting... In a godless culture, let's just say—an atheistic culture that wants to meet the same needs—the human psychology doesn't change. They're still looking for those things, but instead of a person who is most like us to be some sort of divine representation, now we have the State—the collective. The collective is better. "All of us" is better than one of us. You can see how the State just slides in there, and if we just surrender power to the collective, life is just going to be so wonderful. They take the same needs—they're trying to answer the same issues—but removing anything that smacks of an otherworldly presence, displacing it with the State. You can see how that would work.

**RO:** Yeah, and what's fascinating is that one is just as far-fetched to believe as the other. We stand as modern human beings shaking our head, going "Tsk, tsk; how could they believe in a divine human?" While at the same time, we just attribute the exact same characteristics to a utopian state that just doesn't even exist. It's just a psychological creation in our minds, but we say, "Oh, no, this is what intelligent people believe in." I think it *is* fascinating how we are still looking for those similar qualities as human beings in a fallen world.

**MH:** Yeah, it really is. What about Mesopotamia? Because obviously, you're going to have prophets (especially the biblical prophets, Major and Minor) that are going to touch in some way... Depending on their own historical circumstances... They're going to be involved in some way with Egyptian motifs, depending what the historical circumstances are. But you also get a lot that interact with Assyrian (later Babylonian and Persian) motifs just because of the historical circumstance. So how are the Mesopotamian views of kingship similar or different than what you just talked about with the Egyptians.

**RO:** Yeah, that's great. I like to think about this in a bit of a chronological stream. If you look at the earliest culture of Mesopotamia—look at the Sumerian culture—there's a very *strong* connection between trees and kings. There's some explicit figurations with Shulgi, and "the king is a tree planted by a ditch"—just very explicit metaphorical language. We have a lot of seals from that time—cylinder seals—that portray the king replacing the tree. And so there's a very strong tradition in Sumerian culture of associating the king with a tree. And as that culture goes through various transformations through the Assyrians and the Babylonian hegemony in Mesopotamia, you do see some various changes. But by the time of the Neo-Assyrian period, the idea of the sacred tree or some type of stylized tree becomes incredibly important politically, so much so that Assurnasirpal's throne room in the northwest palace at Nimrud that was lined with these stylized trees... Many scholars have said that became almost emblematic of his reign and kingship. So that kingship itself became very visually associated with a sacred tree or some type of stylized tree. Now what's the significance of that tree? Therein lies a lot of good, scholarly debate. But you certainly see a strong flow of ideas through Mesopotamia that are picked up in iconography later in the Neo-Assyrian period, but then you also have some literary examples... There's much to be said about the Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the most popular works in the ancient Near East for centuries. Just based on what we know about the copying and use of Gilgamesh, it was a literary work that just had enormous influence over the way that ancients thought in Mesopotamia. And we have these wonderful stories about Gilgamesh ascending to the cedar forest and doing battle with Humbaba, the god of the cedar forest, and conquering the cedar forests, and chopping down the cedars, and shipping them back to build palaces and temples, and those types of things. So very strong tree imagery throughout Mesopotamia.

20:00

**MH:** Even that—even the act of cutting them down and shipping them to build palaces and temples... I'm guessing you've read it. It's not like you memorized it (I don't know what space this occupies in your head), but Lapinski has this really fascinating article on Mount Hermon and its relationship to the Mesopotamian Garden of the Gods—the cosmic mountain—and tracing the roots all the way back to Sumer. This was the place where the Divine Council was, and tree imagery is a big part of that. Gilgamesh was a big part of that. It's really fascinating. But if you're believing that, if you're believing that this place or maybe some part of Biblos, or the Anti-Lebanon, or up there where Hermon is... When you take trees from that place and you bring them to wherever you're at and you build temples and palaces with it, that creates an association.

**RO:** Absolutely.

**MH:** It's like divine building material. So there's cosmic geography involved in that, but it even transcends the cosmic geography. Now you're taking elements out of a place that has a certain number of associations—certain kinds of associations—and you're recreating (even the whole idea of re-creation) with this kind of material. If this is your worldview, you can't help but understand or see what the connections are. You're doing this intentionally, to create the linkage.

**RO:** Yeah. And one thing that's really fascinating that I discovered in researching this book was the political significance of gardens created by Mesopotamian kings, so that the garden... Based on scriptural evidence that we have, we know that these kings would actually dig up trees from the foreign lands that they conquered and bring them back and plant them in their garden so that their palace garden—their temple garden—actually became kind of like this miniature of their empire, including all of the vegetation, all of the trees. So you could walk through the garden and the greater the variations of trees and the greater the variation of plants and flora and fauna indicated the vastness of the empire. It was this symbol of “this is what we rule.”

**MH:** Mm-hmm. Do you think that that can be sort of like cosmic geography in reverse, where, because it's a tree being moved from one place to the other, and the trees are going to be associated with deity, that now, “This conquered region's deities are now submissive to (or they've joined the club over here with) our pantheon?” Was there any of that going on?

25:00

**RO:** You know, I think so. I think certainly Gilgamesh lends us in that direction. It seems like by the time of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian period these trees seem to have more significance as a sign of opulence and wealth and prestige, and perhaps not so much of a theological “I've conquered the tree god” type of idea. But certainly that points us back to this continual mythopoeic use of the Garden of Yahweh—the Garden of gods—the location of the Divine Council. There certainly does seem to be something significant. Why else would Solomon spend so much time and energy building his palace and the temple out of the

cedars of Lebanon? These were the most sought-after trees in all of the ancient Near East, and Solomon (like every other king before him and after him) wanted his palace to be the palace of cedars, as we're told in I Kings. So I do think there is a lot of political significance in building with these materials. They were seen as fine, they were seen as precious, they would inspire awe in people who would come to see them. But I do think there is something to say... This is sacred ground. This is where you go to interact with the precious things of this world. And there is probably some theological overtone that's carried over, but it's hard to say by the time you get down into the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian how much of that residual Mesopotamian mythology is still driving that political agenda.

**MH:** You've got Psalm 48, with the *tzaphon* language attributed to Zion... If Solomon had a good theological propagandist, you could make a lot out of where the trees come from, because now this is a sign act that the temple of Yahweh is the seat of the gods—he's the Most High, and all that kind of stuff. These things you're doing overtly for essentially public consumption and maybe priestly consumption and maybe you're the king and you believe it too—that whole sort of thing. But these can be conceived of as sign acts. And in Solomon's case, you could actually turn that into a theological polemic that sounded really good on the supremacy of Yahweh, when we all know that Solomon's just going to go off in crazy places with his intermarriage and political alliances. But if you had a good theological propagandist, you could make that case.

**RO:** Well, you know what's interesting is there are texts—I want to say Hittite texts—that talk about the king requiring permission from the gods to chop down the trees. The king had to receive this divine ability to harvest the trees—to do that. It's kind of interesting because we're told in scripture that David was specifically forbidden to build the temple and Solomon is commissioned to do it. You still have that same idea of, like God is saying, "Yes, you're the one who's going to build me a temple," and it's the cedars of Lebanon that are going to provide the backbone of that temple, and we can turn to other places in scripture, especially Ezekiel 31, like I'll be talking about this in the conference, where we see direct reference to the cedars that are in the garden of Yahweh. So it is the very trees that Ezekiel 31 talks about that are making up the habitation of Yahweh in I Kings.

**MH:** So let's talk about trees. What was it about a tree that made it an appealing metaphor or an appropriate metaphor (I don't know if these are the right terms? Because I tend to try to look at things simplistically. If I'm in an arid culture and I see a good-looking, healthy tree, I'm thinking, "There's got to be water around here somewhere. This might be a good place to camp out for a while.")

**RO:** Yeah.

30:00

**MH:** And the stronger it is, I'm going to be propelled by that thought: this area sustains that tree somehow, so there's going to be other living things here. This is going to be good for me. I'll be able to survive here. And then you have the whole tall tree connecting heaven and earth kind of stuff. So build on those thoughts a little bit, and then whatever direction you want to take it. What was the big deal with the tree? Why was that appropriate?

**RO:** Yeah, that's a great question. And I think it's actually a really important question for those of us living in North America, because our geographical/topographical realities in North America can oftentimes run opposite to what you see in Israel and in the ancient Near East.

**MH:** We have an interstate highway system and trucks. [laughter]

**RO:** Well, yeah, but I mean, in the sense of where I live... Well right now, I'm in North Carolina, and the higher up you go in the Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina, the more sparse it becomes. When you go down, it becomes more lush and green. But in Israel, it's not really the case because a lot of times the lower you are in elevation, the more desertification has happened (the drier, more arid it is) and the higher you go, the greener it becomes because the temperatures are cooler—they're more temperate. And you get these beautiful forests and creeks and streams. So it's kind of strange for us sometimes to think that going up is actually encountering the forest, while going down could possibly drive you into the Arabian desert or somewhere that's incredibly hot and dry with little source of life. And so for the ancient Israelites specifically, to go up to Jerusalem was to walk up into the central highlands of the Levant. It's forested; it's very green. And so there was very much this idea in the ancient world that where there were trees, there was life. There was shade, there was water.

**MH:** It wasn't hostile.

**RO:** Yeah, I think that was very much at the heart of this idea. Not to try to explain away all of the inspired nature of the biblical text, but I do think there was something that really resonated with the ancient mind. I remember the first time when I was in Israel and I went to En Gedi, which is next to the Dead Sea... You talk about a stark contrast! The Dead Sea is just as barren as you can imagine, and then you walk into En Gedi, and it's this natural spring and it looks like you've been transported immediately to a tropical jungle. There's just green everywhere, and all because there's water that sustains it. There's trees that are growing up. There's life in the middle of the desert. I think it's that stark contrast that really just fueled this type of tree imagery and provided much of the poetic grist for the biblical prophets and the poets of the Old Testament. It really is a picture of death to life when you walk from sand and dirt as far as the eye can see to a spring that's exploding with different shades of green and flowers and water. And many of the tree images that we encounter in the Bible are connected to the source of water. We're told several times where either personification or...

Think about the classic example in Psalm 1: a tree planted by streams of water. In the ancient world, they didn't think that trees just sprung up out of nowhere. They oftentimes associated that tree with its water source. And that water source becomes quite theological in and of itself, being a metaphorical portrayal of Yahweh and his blessing—of those ways that Yahweh would sustain that individual.

35:00 **MH:** Yeah, these isolated little places are glimpses of where the gods are. And the gods (or in the case of biblical thinking, the God of Israel)... You mentioned that this is life and death, this counter-position... They are the source of life. If you don't believe that, go visit! What better place could there possibly be? So that becomes this reinforcing metaphor (pun intended here), to implant the idea that the divine presence is where life is. It's not barren; it's not death. So if you want to live, this is where you want to be. You want to be in the presence of and in sync with this deity—either the God of the Bible or the gods of somebody else, because they have power of life and death. And the environment itself is proof of that to the ancient mind.

**RO:** Yeah, you're exactly right. These are not separated realities in many ways, so where you see life in its fullness, that would be...

**MH:** Why wouldn't you want that?

**RO:** Yeah, that's the domain of the deity, and I think you certainly see that with many of the traditions that emerge in the Old Testament that point Yahweh's residence back to the lofty mountains of Lebanon and these beautiful mountains full of these trees that were awe-inspiring—that were refreshing, that just looked like vibrance and life. Yes, that is what we think of. That is Yahweh.

**MH:** Yeah, and to take it back to kingship, the guy sitting on the throne with all the women in his harem (all these pejorative stereotypes)... The guy sitting on the throne there is... You've been taught that he's an extension of that. So if you want life to be all it could be—if you want in an way to get along in life, and have something that, to you at least, would feel like a good life—you're going to obey. You going to align yourself with him—align your will with him—because he is the one that holds all these things in place. To displace him—to make trouble for him—is not only going to be a personal threat, but it's going to be a threat to your own family, to your own extended family, to your town, to your city. There's this ripple effect, because everything is viewed as connected to this guy who is connected to the real source of life—God or the gods.

**RO:** Absolutely. And in a way, that is almost a bit unnerving.

**MH:** Yeah, it is kind of creepy.

**RO:** One of the realities that you're smacked in the face with when you read through the biblical literature from the divided monarchy—from the time of the prophets—is you just really don't learn a lot about the life of the average Israelite or Judean during the time of the prophets. There's a few times where you have the prophets, like Amos, giving speeches at a temple (where obviously there were some bystanders) and some other phenomena. But most of the time the prophets are dealing with two types of people: prophets and kings, and the nation really is not addressed that much. You might have some direct address to the people, but we don't really know what's going on on the ground during this time. I think it highlights the significance of the reality that the Bible states, and that is, "So goes the king, so goes the nation." When the king responds in faithfulness to Yahweh, then the nation is blessed. When the king rebels against Yahweh and creates foreign alliances with Egypt or Assyria or whoever it is, the nation as a whole is punished. And with all of the ethical intricacies that emerge from that, it shows us how important the role of king is to the future stability and vitality of the nation. And so just as these wicked kings... The Deuteronomist and I and II Kings really want us to realize us that it's the wicked kings that prompted the destruction and exile of Israel. In the same way, Yahweh is going to have a new king. And that new king is going to establish his world order, and on his holy mountain. And frequently, that new king is also portrayed with a young sapling or a small, insignificant-looking shoot, something that's not very inspiring—not very powerful-looking. But that this young, new growth of Yahweh's planting is going to be *his* king that will establish *his* world order on *his* holy mountain—something that these other kings have failed to do.

40:00

**MH:** Yeah, all that stuff: the stump, the branch—it's connected back to the tree imagery. What I'm hoping listeners will get out of this is, this is intentional. The stuff that happens in the Hebrew Bible (and of course in regards to other things, just in the Bible generally), they're not trying to fill space. "I need to vary my vocabulary here so I don't get a B on this paper." It's not random; it's not peripheral. They're doing these things intentionally to conjure certain thoughts in the mind of the reader—a reader that is actually connected to this world and they're going to be able to process things like "stump, branch, sapling." They're going to know how to orient that in the bigger picture. And we just miss that thing. But on this podcast, we are constantly harping on the intentionality of the biblical writers—that God prepared the biblical writers in the way that he did and he picks them out of the culture that he did. God knows what he's getting when he picks these people and he has providentially prepared them, and they are equipped to communicate something very intentional—very specific—to their audience. And we're disconnected from that, but it's our job to try to get back into that world so that we can process scripture better. And this is a very simple example. We're all familiar with this branch language with Messiah, and the line of David. But there you go. It's part of the matrix of ideas associated with tree imagery, which is associated with kingship.

**RO:** Yeah, in fact, I would go so far as to say that when the prophets of Israel are grasping for their preferred stock metaphor or stock image of talking about royal figures (both contemporary and future and messianic) they reach for this working metaphor of the tree as a king. This relationship between talking about kingship as a tree that has branches that shadow the land and provide shade as a dynasty that has roots that reach down, as a tree that is nourished by the divine springs of Yahweh... All of these ideas are wrapped up in this working cultural idea. And for us, it's really important, as you were saying, to tease that out, because the significance of figurative language is that it's bringing together two worlds that don't normally exist. And the only way that that figuration or that metaphor or simile makes sense to us is when there's shared knowledge. And I sometimes use the example of... The son of one of my colleagues had a favorite saying for a while. He would say that he was "fast as a lemon." [laughter] And I would always say, "He must know something about lemons that I don't." [laughter] So metaphors...

**MH:** There's some other layer to that... [laughter]

**RO:** Yeah, they break down when there's not a shared understanding. So this study of imagery and metaphor in the Hebrew Bible is, I think, one of the places where our knowledge of ancient culture can really just become so profitable in helping us establish those connections of shared understanding, to where when we read that, "Yes, Yahweh's going to take this young shoot and it's going to grow up," and we can go, "Okay, that's not just a random image. That has an enormous—a huge—cultural currency." The reader would be going, "Oh, this is Yahweh's new dynasty. This is Yahweh's new king."

**MH:** Yeah, they're picking up what he's laying down. It just goes right over our heads. Yeah, that's really important. You actually gave a little bit of an infomercial there for John Hilber's session at the Naked Bible Conference. [laughs]

**RO:** Oh, okay. Sorry.

45:00

**MH:** No, that's great, because his talk is about why a "literal hermeneutic" should not be our default. And it's this kind of thing. This disconnection with metaphor really harms our ability to understand scripture. It's really important. What do you think about... Something else you just said—the tree language here... Nobody in the Israelite world is going to read that and be confused by it. They're not going to think, "That's kind of odd. Why would you pick that?" They're just going to know what to do with it. What do you think about... This is a broader perspective that you get in other cultures, and you get a little bit of it in the ancient Near East, and of course there are places in the Hebrew Bible where you run into it—but the whole "world tree" idea? The tree is a good metaphor because it reaches to the heavens and it's connected to the earth. So you have this heaven and earth intersection, and you can even press it to the idea that a tree is actually penetrating the earth, too, so it even connects to Sheol. You have all this kind of

stuff going on. In the course of your book, how much of that specific idea factors into kingship?

**RO:** Yeah, that's a great question. I certainly think that when you look at the various cultures across especially the ancient Near East, you do see some similar themes emerging as this large tree stretching from heaven to earth. And in fact, I think that there is (especially in the Hebrew Bible) another metaphor that's working alongside this tree metaphor. That is, "height is arrogance," or "height is extending to the heavens." The heavens is the place where God dwells and reigns, and so in Isaiah chapter 2 it says, "Every high thing is going to be brought down." It's like, really? Just everything that's high? A ship mast is going to be judged because... Yes, and I think the idea there is that you have this metaphor of "height equals arrogance and hubris." It's as though anything that's tall—that's extending into the heavens—is seeking to occupy the place or the space of God. And that gets tied up very closely with the tree imagery and kingship, so that any king that is going to be a great tree... Or in Ezekiel, you don't even have to be a tree. Ezekiel kind of takes up Isaiah's vine imagery and talks about a vine that does what trees do. The vine grows to the heavens and extends its branches out, providing shade and protection, and these types of things. But once your top is in the heavens, there's a lot of potential for trouble, especially in the Hebrew Bible. Oftentimes, that's the precursor of arrogance, of "look what I've done—look what I've become," at which point Yahweh steps in and says, "No, this is my domain. You will be judged for your arrogance and your hubris." So at one level, you really can't avoid the reality of this world tree idea, that there is this tree that stands as this figure, planted by Yahweh to extend and to establish his world order. But oftentimes, that idea kind of gets turned on its head (or quite literally, chopped down) by the prophets—because of the pride and hubris of the nations.

**MH:** Mm-hmm. We don't want to go too far into that, because of the Daniel 4...And I know that's conference turf. [laughs]

**RO:** Yeah, sorry.

**MH:** But there... You really get it there, too.

**RO:** Yeah, absolutely.

**MH:** What do you make of Asherah? You have tree symbology there. Is there some sort of rivalry going on there? Did you get into that at all, like why would that be her symbol? Why did the Israelites seemingly adopt it so easily, and even in some cases, transfer it to Yahweh in some conceptual way? Is the reason that that could and did happen... Is the link there the tree, or is that just too close of an association? What do you think about that?

50:00

**RO:** Yeah, when you start looking at the use of Asherah and Asherim in the Old Testament, I do think that a lot of those references in our Hebrew Bibles are specifically speaking about a stylized tree. When I say stylized, I'm talking about a tree that has been pruned to a unique shape, like a sacred type of tree (that is either alive or possibly even dead) that's put in a sacred location, like on top of a mountain. We've got our references in Jeremiah. The people were worshiping wood and stone. I think that what you have there is the people of Israel just embracing the cultural symbols of Canaanite worship (which were, of course, Baal and Asherah) and conflating those with Yahweh. We see theological conflation happen with the people coming out of Egypt making the golden calf: "Here are your gods, O Israel." [Exodus 32:4] It happens again with Jeroboam the First. We know that it's not farfetched for the people of Israel to have this theological conflation of, "We have Yahweh, but we're going to represent him the way that the cultures around us do. We want to see Yahweh. We want something physical and tangible that we can bow down and worship." And just as the tree was a significant sacred object in Egyptian worship and Mesopotamian context, I think it was also a significant object in Canaanite worship before Israel even got into the land of Canaan.

**MH:** One of the things that would pop into a listener's head would be, "Well, shouldn't they have known better?" Because you're not supposed to make a graven image of anything in the earth or under the earth, because Yahweh is so unlike anything else in creation. So shouldn't they have known, "Hey, we shouldn't be making tree objects here." So how would you address that?

**RO:** Yeah, well, in one sense, I don't know how much Israel was associating Yahweh with the Asherah pole or the tree. There are a few inscriptions that I deal with in the book from Kuntillet Ajrud and other places, where you have references to Yahweh and his Asherah, which could be talking about Yahweh and his consort or something along those other lines. But as far as the text goes, I don't know. There's really only one place in the Hebrew Bible, and that's in Hosea 14, where Yahweh himself is actually directly associated with a tree. In all other places, the reference is to Asherah, or Baal and his Asherah. So the question, "Didn't Israel know that this was wrong?" One of the ways that I talk about idolatry, especially during Israel's occupation in the land of Canaan, is it's so easy for us standing on this side of history to look back and just go, "Gosh, what is wrong with them?"

**MH:** When everybody has a Bible, just like the ancient Israelites. [laughs]

**RO:** Yeah! "Golly, couldn't they figure it out?" But the difficult things about idols, both then and now, is they're deeply culturally embedded. And they're not easy to see when you're in that culture. And when Israel went into the land of Canaan, I don't believe that the main threat the Canaanites were posing was, "Do away with Yahweh," because more than likely, the Canaanites were polytheistic or certainly henotheistic. It was not, "Your God's not real." It was, "If you want to

experience life and thrive in the land of Canaan, you better pay homage to the gods of Canaan. If you want to worship Yahweh on your own... You've got your Sunday morning Yahweh service, that's fine. But if you want to *live* in this land, you'd better pay homage to Baal and his Asherah." And we can come up with all kinds of contemporary narratives that say, "Yeah, you want to worship your God on Sunday, that's fine, but if you want to experience life in its fullness in the land of America, you too better worship X. You, too, better worship this." And so I think that we can fall prey to those same henotheistic tendencies that Israel did. The monotheism of the Bible doesn't say that God is the greatest of all of these other gods—they exist, and you need to pay homage to them at times. It is that Yahweh is Lord alone.

**MH:** Yeah, the cultural embedding is an important thing, because let's be realistic here: not everybody has access to scripture. Even beyond that, we don't even know necessarily what existed when in certain circumstances. So does the material exist? If it exists, how is it being disseminated, if at all? In the divided monarchy, if you get a situation where you get a king in there and he's putting up the Asherah pole or some other object and says, "This is how we worship Yahweh here," in 20 years, in 30 years, in 40 years, you have a generational slippage.

**RO:** Absolutely.

**MH:** The old generation's going to die out that remembered, "We shouldn't be doing this." And the new generation grew up with it. So how are they supposed to know what to do or not to do? And the biblical answer is: God raises up a prophet. This guy runs around and starts yelling at people about the covenant. But if you just grew up with the trappings of this and then you go out and you listen to this guy, it's like, "Why should I listen to the wild man?" It's a real question in your mind. In the biblical context (and biblical material is selective), there are going to be occasions where the wild man turns out to do a miracle or the wild man challenges this deity or the king or whatever, and there's some act of power that draws your attention to, "Well, maybe we ought to listen to the wild man because look at that!" You have these points of interference where God will intervene to keep a remnant alive—that whole point of biblical thinking. But it isn't hard to imagine when people don't have the access to truth (and isn't that a trajectory we could pursue—even in the age of information, so much of the information we have access to is just nonsense and garbage)... But when people are cut off from that or they can't filter it—they can't filter out the noise—then when you expose a generation to that and you go 10, 15, 20, 25 years down the road, now what are you going to do? It just changes the picture completely. So I try not to be too hardnosed about what people are doing. Not to call evil good and all that, but you can understand that it's not really a question of intelligence.

**RO:** Absolutely.

55:00

**MH:** It's not that they're stupid, and we're so smart. It's that they really don't have access to what they should be thinking, or the alternative. It's really an access question; it's not an intelligence question.

**RO:** Well, that's one of the reasons, Mike, that I really appreciate your vision with the podcasts, and just the many areas and ways in which you're trying to help people grow in their understanding. As a college professor, I see year after year after year... What I can anticipate students coming into a basic Bible class understanding is just getting smaller and smaller and smaller. And you're right, it's not a matter of intelligence; it's a matter of exposure, and it's a matter of exposure to *good* information. And the reality is that many people have noted the rise of biblical illiteracy in the American Church, and the inability to interact with the information of the Old Testament and the New Testament. So, yeah, I think you're exactly right: it's not a matter of whether people are intelligent or not. It's what do they have access to as far as information goes? And how do we (in this information age where you can get tons of information) help people begin to decipher what's true, good, and beautiful, in a world that they are bombarded by lots of noise?

**MH:** Yeah, chances are they would think better thoughts if we gave them better things to think about.

**RO:** Yes.

**MH:** That doesn't seem to be rocket science to me. [laughter] But it's a real problem. I have one more question before we wrap up. This is something I've been a bit frustrated on. I've not really found anything... I just haven't found much information at all. Commentators just don't seem to really drill down on this, to my satisfaction. I'm not asking for a dissertation. I'm just asking for a really good article, but I haven't been able to find it. And that is the 70 trees... the place, Elim... You have this oasis, you have the trees... It just seems that there's something going on here. You've got the number 70, and even the word play with '*elim*' being a plural of "gods." I know you have a homograph issue—or do you? But you can see water, gardens, the trees, the number 70... It just seems like this is Divine Council stuff, but I have not found anybody that has really drilled down on that. So I'm wondering: in your research about trees, did you ever come across anything useful about the oasis there at Elim and the 70 trees?

**RO:** You know, I think I look at it briefly in the book. One of the things that you do notice in the Bible is that, especially early on in the patriarchal narratives, there seems to be this overlap of sacred sites. Especially Shechem—Shechem has a pretty significant role to play, and it seems as though there's kind of a sacred grove at Shechem. And so I am okay with the people of Israel theologically usurping these perceived sacred locations as they come to understand them through their Yahwistic perspective. They encounter this site where there seems to be something significantly spiritual about this grove at Shechem. "This seems

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like a place that we, too, should worship—that we should worship Yahweh here.” And so when we get to this moment here at Elim with the 12 springs and the 70 palm trees...

**MH:** There’s just so much packed into this. [laughs]

**RO:** Yeah. There’s a lot, numerically and symbolism there, but it’s hard to say beyond that what’s happening.

**MH:** Yeah, I know, I just haven’t found anything on the history of the place. And I realize, who knows if they can identify it? And you run into all sorts of problems there, but it seems pretty clearly to be a place associated with either divine encounter or the abode of the gods, because you’ve got these Divine Council trappings there. And the 12 is really significant there because of the number of the tribes. There’s got to be something going on there, but I just haven’t found anything that really...“Wow, somebody actually did the work here.”

**RO:** Yeah, I think as biblical scholars we’re all kind of scared to take that step! [laughter] “There’s something there, and I’m going to leave it for the next guy to figure out.” [laughs]

**MH:** It just seems that it’s pregnant with these motifs. I don’t know that you can get a good article out of it, because there just doesn’t seem to be a lot of supporting material to it. But who knows?

**RO:** I think you certainly can build on the idea of the theological significance of water and trees. And then when you look at the significance of water and trees together with the numerical numbers of 12—the tribes of Israel—and the 70 palm trees, it does seem to be a very significant theological respite that the people are experiencing before they are sent out into the wilderness of Sin. It’s a picture that (if we want to make that association between those springs and Israel) God is providing blessing for his people, and the trees are a perfect shelter for them—70 of them. I would tend to read those numbers...

**MH:** Maybe we’ll resort to gematria at one place... [laughs]

**RO:** I don’t know. And that’s where I guess I pull up on the reins. [MH laughs] I don’t want to go down the path of gematria and start doing some Midrash here on Exodus 15:27, but there’s certainly something there.

**MH:** Well, thanks for being with us. Anything else you want to mention? Your book, of course, is for sale. This is the kind of thing that... Okay, maybe you didn’t go to seminary, maybe you didn’t go to grad school, but there’s going to be plenty in this book that you *can* digest that will put lots of seed thoughts (there’s another pun) in your head, so that you can be thinking better about kingship and why the Bible does all this tree imagery stuff, even with the Messiah. You get

these metaphors and extensions of metaphors, and they're actually intentional and they mean something. So this is the kind of book that you're going to benefit from a lot. You may not pick up everything in it, but who cares? It's going to be one of the best things out there for this: *Of Trees and Kings: Comparative Analysis of Tree Imagery in Israel's Prophetic Tradition of the Ancient Near East*. That's Eisenbrauns; it is available on Amazon. If you go up the site, you'll notice that the publisher hasn't put a cover picture there. Don't worry, it *is* for sale. I have proof of that: I have one sitting on my desk. [laughs] It's real. It's a good resource to recommend. Are there any online resources that you have found that might be useful for metaphor and iconography and stuff like this?

1:05:00 **RO:** As far as online resources... oh, goodness, that is tough. This might sound really bad, but I would almost kind of encourage people to stay away from online Tree of Life resources. [laughter]

**MH:** Right. [laughs]

**RO:** I mean, honestly, it is kind of a hot topic with people that like to grab things and run. I would encourage people if you can get your hands on it, there's a great book by William Brown called *Seeing the Psalms* in which he kind of walks through metaphor and various metaphors that are picked up in the Psalms. And one of those... He's got a fabulous chapter on tree metaphors in the Psalms that is going in similar ways... But just a really good...

**MH:** Yeah, that's a really good recommendation.

**RO:** It's very readable: *Seeing the Psalms* by William Brown. For the more technically inclined, Brent Strawn, Izaac De Hulster, and others have put together a fabulous book called *Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible: An Introduction to Its Methods and Practice*, which is a really good volume in exploring how we associate ancient iconographic images with our understanding of the biblical text. I would actually encourage listeners to push into that, because I find that there's a lot of room for error when people start saying, "See, look at this image from the ancient world. See this biblical text. Voila." There's not always a clear-cut connection. There's not always an organic connection. So we need to be careful about how we are using images in the ancient world to help us better understand the cognitive worldview of the ancients.

**MH:** Those are good. Those are good recommendations. They're things people can get. Some of this stuff isn't exorbitantly expensive. It's not like a dime paperback (if those even exist anymore), but catching the drift. If you want good resources they are available, and a lot of them are reasonable. And those are two of them that would qualify for that statement. Yeah, they're good. Well, thanks again for being with us, and we look forward to your session at the conference. You mentioned Ezekiel 31 and Daniel 4. Hey, folks, read those chapters, and you're going to see why Rusty's going to focus on those at the

Naked Bible Conference. It's going to be good stuff, and honestly, I feel quite confident that you're not going to hear it really anywhere else. You don't need to go to grad school. We have people like Rusty to take us into (I want to make another pun here): to lead us into the forest. [laughter] It just getting bad, we should cut this out.

**RO:** Hopefully we don't lose the forest for the trees, right? [laughter]

**MH:** Yeah, there's that one—lose the forest for the trees, and all that. But we appreciate your work. You're trying to teach it not only in your classes, but just participating in the conference to make it accessible.

**RO:** Absolutely. It's been great. Thanks, Mike. I appreciate being with you and being a part of the conference, and I look forward to it.

**MH:** Yep. Thank you.

**TS:** Alright, Mike, well, I'm really looking forward to Rusty diving deeper into it at the conference, and again, go to [NakedBibleConference.com](http://NakedBibleConference.com) to get your tickets. I think we have about 50 tickets left, so don't wait. Please go get Rusty's book, *Trees and Kings*. It's on Amazon, and you'll be ready for the conference come August 18<sup>th</sup>.

**MH:** Yeah, absolutely. And we're serious, don't wait, because they are disappearing. The tickets are disappearing.

**TS:** Absolutely. We're expecting a full house, and we're super-excited about that. And we want to thank Rusty for coming on, and want to thank everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.