Can Christians Have Christmas Trees?

Introduction

A number of well-meaning Christians feel that Jeremiah 10 proves that the Christmas tree is a pagan custom and is forbidden by God. Therefore, they argue, all those who decorate a Christmas tree in their home are sinning in God’s sight. This is quite a serious charge. Let us briefly examine Jeremiah 10 and the argument based upon it to see if there is any merit to this argument.

I. The Context of the Verse

The verses that the concerned readers repeatedly cite are 10:2-4: “Do not learn the way of the nations or be terrified by signs in the heavens, although the nations are terrified by them, for the customs of the peoples are worthless. Someone cuts down a tree from the forest; it is worked by the hands of a craftsman with a chisel. He decorates it with silver and gold. It is fastened with hammer and nails, so it won’t totter.” “Aha!” these readers say. “Jeremiah is talking about the Christmas tree!” However, closer examination reveals that he certainly is not!

First, there is the immediate context of this passage. The very next verse, 10:5 goes on to say, “Like scarecrows in a cucumber patch, their idols cannot speak. They must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them for they can do no harm—and they cannot do any good.” This passage and the passages that follow make it crystal clear that the “decorated tree” that Jeremiah was talking about in 10:3-4, was a tree that was cut down and made into an idol, a very common custom in the ancient world. Verses 10:8-10 also confirms this, where the wooden idols are contrasted with the Lord, who is the true and living God. Keil and Delitsch, the well-respected Old Testament commentary, confirms this interpretation that the trees in question were idols that were then worshiped.¹

II. The Context of History

Second, when we search the rest of the Old Covenant, we find many other examples of trees being planted, cut down, or carved into idols. One of the most common examples of a

tree idol was the Asherah, mentioned often in the Old Testament. Asherah was a pagan
goddess that was worshiped throughout the Mediterranean world.

Asherah, the Canaanite goddess, according to Ugaritic tradition, was the wife of El. In the
Ugaritic literature she is called “Lady of the Sea”, a title that may signify “she who treads on
the sea.” Apart from her name, she has other connections with the sea. Her servant is called
“fisherman of Lady Asherah of the Sea.” A drinking cup from Ras-Shama (the modern Arabic
name of the site of the ancient city of Ugarit) seems to portray her underwater.

We read of her as “an abominable image” in 2 Chronicles 15:16, and in 2 Kings 21:7 of “a
graven image” of Asherah. Asherah was the pagan goddess of fertility. Some say she was
Baal’s mother. Others say she was his consort. In any case, the people that worshiped the
pagan god Baal also worshiped Asherah.

The term Asherah pole defines something similar to a Native American totem pole. In
other words, it was a log or tree trunk that was carved with the image of Asherah. Often, this
was very crude and many time the tree limbs were utilized to form arms and legs with the
trunk given a general body shaped.

This form of idol worship caused the people of Israel many problems win their relationship
with God as recorded in First and Second Kings. There, we see the unrighteous kings setting
up Asherah poles and altars and the righteous kings tearing down the altar and using the
Asherah pole as firewood to totally desecrate the place.

In the earliest period of the Semitic occupation of Canaan, the goddess Asherah shared
with Baal the chief worship of the immigrants, and Asherah was particularly worshiped as the
goddess of fertility. Her place was later usurped by Astarte. In this early aniconic age, the
wooden post, or pole, was her symbol, just as the stone pillar was of Baal. Bearing her name,
it passed by gradual stages into the complete anthropomorphic image of the deity as in
Samaria and Jerusalem.

III.  The Context of Scripture

Asherahs or Asherah poles are found beside “sacred trees” in Jeremiah 17:2. The
graven image of Asherah set up by Manasseh in the Temple, when destroyed by Josiah, is
simply termed the Asherah. Like the idols described by the prophet of the Exile, it evidently
consisted of a core of wood overlaid with precious metal, since it could be at once burned
and “stamped to powder,” and was periodically decorated with woven hangings by the
women votaries of Asherah. Therefore, there is good warrant for seeing the Asherah which
Ahab set up in the temple of Baal at Samaria as something of greater consequence than a
mere post or pole. It must have been a celebrated image of the goddess.

In the remaining passages of the OT, the Asherah is the name of a prominent object
associated with the altar in the worship of the Canaanite high places. It was made of wood
and could be planted in the ground, plucked or cut down, and burned with fire.

---

2 c. BC. 2500-2000
3 Judges 3:7; 6:25
4 Also see 1 kings 14:23; 2 Kings 17:10
5 2 Kings 21:7
6 2 Kings 23:6
7 Isaiah 41:7; 44:12
8 2 Chr. 15:16
9 2 Kings 23:7
10 cf. 1 Kings 16:33; 2 Kings 10:26
11 Judges 6:26
12 Deuteronomy 16:21
13 Micah 5:14; Exodus 34:13
14 Deuteronomy 12:3
Accordingly, the Asherah was a wooden post or pole having symbolical significance in the Canaanite cults.

There are many warnings in the Old Testament about the Asherah tree. For example, in Exodus we read,

- **Exodus 34:12-14 HCSB** Be careful not to make a treaty with the inhabitants of the land that you are going to enter; otherwise, they will become a snare among you. 13 Instead, you must tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, and chop down their Asherah poles. 14 You are to never bow down to another god because the LORD, being jealous by nature, is a jealous God.

From a more thorough study, we learn that the Asherah idol was sometimes planted\(^{15}\), sometimes erected at high places\(^{16}\), with altars and incense stands next to them where they would be worshiped.\(^{17}\) The Asherah, along with other man-made idols, were often decorated with various cloth hangings\(^{18}\), as well as gold and silver.

Isaiah 44:14-19 gives a detailed picture of how a tree was cut down and fashioned into an idol – and the absurdity of it all.

- **Isaiah 44:14-19 HCSB** He cuts down cedars for his use, or he takes a cypress or an oak. He lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a laurel, and the rain makes it grow. (15) It serves as fuel for man. He takes some of it and warms himself; also he kindles a fire and bakes bread; he even makes it into a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and bows down to it. (16) He burns half of it in a fire, and he roasts meat on that half. He eats the roast and is satisfied. He warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm, I see the blaze." (17) He makes a god or his idol with the rest of it. He bows down to it and worships; He prays to it, "Save me, for you are my god." (18) Such people do not comprehend and cannot understand, for He has shut their eyes so they cannot see, and their minds so they cannot understand. (19) No one reflects, no one has the perception or insight to say, "I burned half of it in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and ate. I will make something detestable with the rest of it, and I will bow down to a block of wood."

**Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is abundantly clear that the "decorated tree" to which Jeremiah 10 refers is an idol, very likely the Asherah. Therefore, it is very superficial Bible interpretation and pure silliness to understand this passage as directly referring to the use of a fir tree for Christmas! If, and I repeat, if those who set up a Christmas tree fall down and worship it as a god or goddess, complete with altars and incense stands, then Jeremiah 10 applies here. Also, if someone loves their Christmas tree more than God, then such a thing might also be considered spiritual idolatry.

However, apart from these exceptions, I think it is abundantly clear that Christians who erect Christmas trees are NOT worshiping them as gods or goddesses, nor do they love them more than their Savior Jesus Christ. They are simply using the Christmas tree as a fun custom, one that can remind them of Jesus who is the Branch of David\(^{19}\), the root of Jesse.\(^{20}\)

---

\(^{15}\) Deuteronomy 16:21; Micah 5:14  
\(^{16}\) 1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 17:10  
\(^{17}\) In Judges 6:25, Gideon is commanded by God to “Tear down your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.” See also Isaiah 17:8; Jeremiah 17:2  
\(^{18}\) 2 Kings 23:7  
\(^{19}\) Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15  
\(^{20}\) Isaiah 11:1
It can also be a reminder of the tree that led Adam and Eve to sin, but more importantly, the tree on which Christ Jesus died to make atonement for the sins of the whole world.\textsuperscript{21}

Our family does not observe Christmas, because we believe that the Messiah was born on Sukkot, and because we would rather observe Hanukkah, as the Messiah did, than a pagan custom. However, we do not believe that other disciples who observe Christmas and have Christmas trees are sinning.

Christians should know that they can use a Christmas tree with a good conscience (1 Corinthians 10:29). It is unfortunate and wrong when well-meaning Christians call something sin that is not sin, and enslave the consciences of their fellow believers with imaginary sin! Shame on such Christians! Those who continue to believe that the Christmas tree is pagan and sinful, even after having their conscience correctly informed (Titus 1:15), should not use them. For it is not right to sin against conscience (Romans 14:23). This is regrettable, however, since there is absolutely nothing wrong with using a Christmas tree.

\textsuperscript{21} Acts 5:30; Gal. 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24