

Q. Does Jeremiah 10 describe the decorating of a Christmas tree?

A. Jeremiah 10 has often been cited as describing the decorating of a tree in a fashion similar to the decorating of Christmas trees today. Jeremiah 10:3-5 says, "For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good."

Taken out of context, this passage can certainly sound like the cutting and decorating of a pre-Christian "Christmas tree." But a closer examination reveals that this is talking about the crafting of an idol. The wood for the idol is taken from a tree cut out of the forest. The word "workman" is translated from a Hebrew word that means a "fabricator," a skilled craftsman. This is not just someone cutting down a tree. It is a craftsman fashioning the wood from the tree into something. "They deck it with silver and with gold" refers to putting silver and gold plating on it, not merely to adding tinsel. Verse 9 speaks of the silver and gold plates and even mentions the blue and purple clothing put on the idol: "Silver spread into plates is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz, the work of the workman, and of the hands of the founder: blue and purple is their clothing: they are all the work of cunning ["skillful"] men." So, you see, this is not a Christmas tree but a skillfully fashioned idol in the shape of a human or animal. It is true that decorating trees is a practice that predates Christianity. But it is not described in the Old Testament.

Further reading: "Do you think Bible-believing Christians should keep Christmas?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/christmasqa.htm>.

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