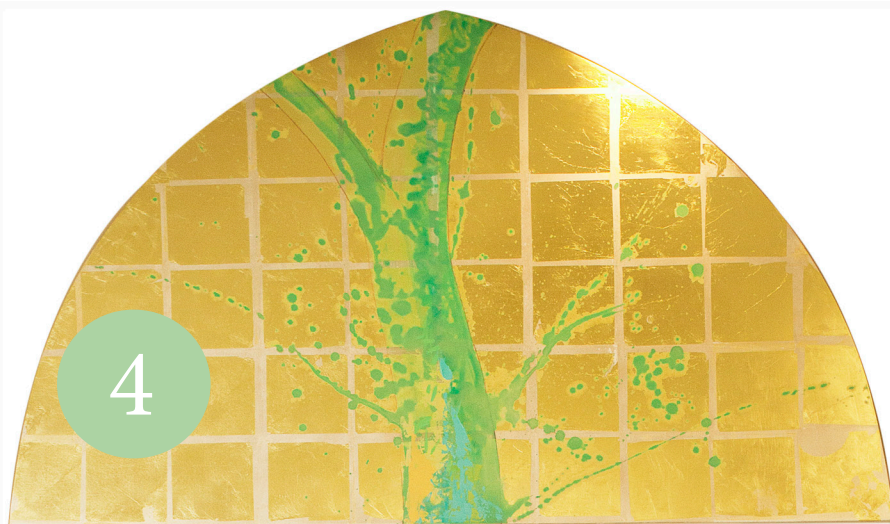


Riven Tree

art by Bruce Herman



Riven Tree ©Bruce Herman, 2016
triptych in oil and alkyd resin on wood with 23kt gold, Platinum, and silver leaf

Comissioned for Duke Divinity School, Duke University
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In many cultural traditions the Tree is a central symbol, understood as life itself, sustenance of all living things. In Hebrew scripture (Genesis 2:7) the human race was created from the dust of the ground, endowed with the the breath of life, and freely given sustenance from the fruit of every tree in the Garden, except one. “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (Genesis 2: 16, 17).

Mistrusting the Creator, our forebears stole that forbidden fruit and fell from divine grace, becoming mortal, thence gaining their sustenance from toil and beset by painful childbirth—estranged from our Creator and from the garden world we had been given. Thereafter denied access to the Tree of Life, we were protected from becoming eternally separated from God and sent out to cultivate the ground from which we were taken.

In the Christian scriptures the Tree of the Cross redeems us from our mortal fate. Despite the ancient Hebrew saying, “Accursed is anyone who hangs upon a tree” the Cross became the source of our redemption, freeing us from the entanglement of sin and death and opening once again access to the Tree of Life and restored fellowship with our Creator.

Symbol Key

1. *Roots of the Tree* (before Time)—Paradise Lost—mortality brought about by mistrust, arrogance, and disobedience—the serpent’s temptation; human craft and architecture driven by ambition and greed.
First Element: Earth
2. *The Tree in Time*—intimations of the Cross—the tree through history, source of sustenance yet troubled by suffering and labor.
Second Element: Water
3. *The Tree of the Cross*—God’s intervention in human history— we are “redeemed from fire by fire” (*cf.* “Little Gidding” from *Four Quartets* by T. S. Eliot)—referencing the Burning Bush which is never consumed. Third Element: Fire
4. *The Tree in Paradise Regained*— “a shoot will spring from the stump of Jesse” (Isaiah 11:1)—the fulfillment of Time/Time redeemed, with gold as the symbol of the new heavens and new earth.
Fourth Element: Air
5. *Jesus Christ, Tree of Life*—vertical shaft of gold descending/ascending, knitting together once more heaven and earth, God and humankind. The mysterious Fifth Element: “Ether” the *quintessence*, in which all the Elements are held together.