

WISDOM  
NATIVE TO  
ISRAEL



By B. Dale Ellenburg

ESUS WAS A MASTER storyteller primarily because He was a master illustrator. His ability to reach out to nature for parallels to spiritual truths was unsurpassed. Not surprisingly, He often used references to trees to point toward spiritual realities. Nowhere is this more evident than His use of trees and their fruit to describe peoples' spiritual conditions (Matt. 7:16-20).

The land of Israel was extensively forested during biblical times. The Bible contains hundreds of references to trees and types of wood.<sup>1</sup> Botanically, we can characterize trees of the Bible into three groups: nut and fruit trees, trees of the forest, and wilderness or desert trees.

### Nut and Fruit Trees

**Almond**—Nut and fruit trees included the almond, a member of the peach family that blooms usually in February. The Hebrew name for the almond translates into English as “wake” or “watch.” Interestingly, the Lord used a play on words when He showed Jeremiah an almond branch as a sign that He was “watching” or about to act (Jer. 1:11-12). Part of the lampstand for the wilderness tabernacle was to be shaped like almond blossoms (Ex. 25:31-36). Aaron’s rod miraculously sprouted almonds as a sign of his God-given authority (Num. 17:1-10).

**Fig**—Both the Old and New Testaments refer often to the fig tree. Jesus spoke of the fig tree on several



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occasions (Matt. 7:16; Luke 21:29-31). Its fruit served as a staple in the Mediterranean diet since earliest times. It reaches an average height of 10-20 feet. It actually produces two crops per year, one in June and the other in August.

**Sycamore**—Growing up to 45 feet tall, the sycamore (a type of fig) tree preferred the regions of Canaan with a warmer climate. This large, hardy tree has low-growing branches that enable easy climbing, like Zacchaeus did at Jericho (Luke 19:4).

**Olive**—The olive tree was an important source of food and oil. The olive is a slow-growing evergreen that can reach a height of 40 feet. Flowering and fruit begin when the tree is 5-6 years old; mature fruit is ready for harvest when the tree is 10-15 years old. Production of olives can continue for hundreds of years. An olive tree produces clusters of small, white flowers in May with the fruit appearing after the flowers fall off. Workers harvest green olives in September and October and the more desirable black olive in December. Fine olive oil was used in the lamp inside the tabernacle (Ex. 27:20).

**Date Palm**—The date palm could sometimes reach 100 feet. Each tree produces a great quantity of fruit,

which grows in large clusters. Dates served as a staple of ancient Near Eastern diets. People wove the tree’s fibrous leaves into mats. Date palms favored hot areas—such as around the Dead Sea. Jericho was known as the City of Palms (Judg. 1:16). During their wilderness journey the Israelites camped near the Elim springs, where 70 palm trees were growing (Ex. 15:27). This tree served as a frequent symbol for Israel (Isa. 9:14; Joel 1:12).

**Pomegranate**—One of the seven foods the Old Testament uses to describe the abundance of the promised land (Deut. 8:8), pomegranates grow on small trees; the red fruit is about the size of an orange. The pomegranate symbolizes beauty in the Bible, as in Song of Solomon 4:3; 6:7. Its blossoming in the spring also typified the awakening of love in the Song (6:11; 7:12). Further, pomegranates were part of the decoration on the high priest’s robe and on the pillars in the temple (Ex. 39:26; 1 Kings 7:18).

### Trees of the Forest

**Cedar**—This large and fragrant evergreen grows mostly in the mountainous regions. The celebrated cedars of Lebanon fall into this category. They grow over 100 feet tall and can live for 1,000-2,000 years. Solomon

**Left: View from atop the ruins at Jericho, facing the Jordan River Valley. Even today, the landscape has an abundance of palm trees.**

**Above: From the palace of Sargon II, who ruled Assyria about 722-705 B.C.; this relief shows boats transporting cedar logs that had been cut in Lebanon.**

contracted with Tyre's King Hiram to supply cedar to build the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 5:2-6; 2 Chron. 2). Prophets spoke of the cedar's height and strength to refer to the durability of nations (Amos 2:9; Ezek. 31:1-18). The psalmist compared the righteous to the cedars of Lebanon (Ps. 92:12).

**Oak**—This strong, magnificent tree usually grew alone on high ground, sometimes reaching 75 feet in height and having

a crown circumference of 60 feet. Its wood was excellent for ships and buildings (Ezek. 27:6). Ancient peoples used oaks to mark graves and other important landmarks (Gen. 35:8; 1 Sam. 10:3). For some, the oak symbolized strength and long life (Amos 2:9). The prophets condemned the idolatry and false worship that took place under large trees, such as the oak (Ezek. 6:13; Hos. 4:13). God

appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:1).

**Plane**—(or *Chestnut* in the KJV) These mainly ornamental trees grew along streambeds. Jacob used branches of the chestnut in his curious manner of breeding his flocks (Gen. 30:37).

**Poplar**—Along with the plane, Jacob peeled a branch of the poplar, a tall fast-growing tree that favors moist areas along riverbeds. Poplars



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reach a height of 100 feet; their straight trunks are excellent for tools or roof beams. Job said the poplar trees by the stream were large enough to conceal the behemoth (Job 40:15-22, NIV). A related species, the *Euphrates Poplar*, grows along the Jordan and, as the name implies, the Euphrates. When the Euphrates Poplar is young, its leaves resemble those of the willow. This may be the type tree on which the children of Israel hung their harps during the exile (Ps. 137:2).<sup>2</sup>

*Willow*—These trees grow profusely beside fresh-water streams. The Hebrews may have used willow branches in constructing the booths described in Nehemiah 8:15.

*Algum*—This rare wood (possibly also the “almug” tree, see 1 Kings 10:11-12) was prevalent in Lebanon. Builders used it in the construction of Solomon’s temple (2 Chron. 2:8). It was also used for making musical instruments.

*Terebinth*—Of the several species of terebinth trees in Israel, one is large and long-lived like the oak. The prophets rebuked the people for idolatrous sacrifices under the terebinth trees (Hos. 4:13). Jacob buried Laban’s household idols under this tree (Gen. 35:4, ESV).

### Wilderness or Desert Trees

*Acacia*—The Bible contains numerous references to the acacia (or shittah) trees, which grew in the wilderness or desert. The ark of the covenant was made of acacia (Ex. 25:10). It is a hardwood tree; its beautiful grain darkens with age. In Bible times people used it for fuel, construction, and shade. Its resilience and resistance to insects made it an excellent choice for building. Some types of acacia are shrub-like; others have a central trunk and can reach heights up to 50 feet.

**Right: This sycamore tree in Jericho stands over 60 feet tall. Determining the age of the tree is impossible, though, as this type of sycamore does not produce annual growth rings.**

**Page 76, from left to right, top to bottom: Figs growing at Tekoa. Amos, who was from Tekoa, said to Amaziah, “I was not a prophet or the son of a prophet; rather, I was a herdsman, and I took care of sycamore figs” (Amos 7:14, HCSB).**

**Pomegranates growing among the ruins near the ancient City of David in Jerusalem.**

**Olives in a grove outside of Tekoa.**

**Almonds growing in a grove at the foot of the Arbel Cliff, west of the Sea of Galilee.**

*Tamarisk*—These were small shrub-like desert trees. As many as 12 species grow today in the holy land. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba (Gen. 21:33) to identify the place where he called on the name of the Lord. It was significant enough as a place marker that the men of Jabesh-gilead buried the bones of Saul and his sons under a tamarisk tree (1 Sam. 31:11-13). Some believe the manna the Israelites ate in the wilderness may have actually been tamarisk resin.<sup>3</sup>

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, affirmed that Jesus was “a teacher” from God (John 3:2). One practice that made Him an effective teacher

was His ability to illustrate heavenly truths with earthly objects. Jesus said that a tree reveals its true nature by the fruit that it bears. What an effective, concise way of reminding us that the same goes for our spiritual condition. **B**

1. For additional information about trees and plants in the Bible, see F. Nigel Hepper, “Plants” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [HIBD], gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1303-1308.

2. See “Euphrates Poplar” in Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), 130.

3. See “Tamarisk” in HIBD, 1556.

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