

Trees in the Koran and the Bible

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Mention of trees in the holy books of Judaism, Christianity and Islam reflect the place of trees in the daily life and imagination of cultures of millennia ago.

Trees are prominent in both the Bible and the Koran. Arboreal references in these holy books reflect the place of trees in cultures of millennia ago: their uses, the local species of importance, and moreover their inspirational and symbolic significance, based on the perception of the tree as symbol of the life given by the Creator.

With the continuous influence of these books over thousands of years, particular species (e.g. the cedar of Lebanon) and certain forests and groves have acquired great – even sacred – importance, which still holds today and may contribute to their protection and conservation.

REFERENCE TO TREES IN THE HOLY BOOKS

The Bible contains more references to trees and wood (over 525) than to any other type of living organism except humans. These references are found from the first book of the Bible, which contains a reference to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9) to the last book of the New Testament, which refers to the tree of life as a major feature in Paradise (Revelation 22: 2, 14). The distinction between a tree with a large single trunk and a shrub with several stems is not always clear and some, like olive and pomegranate, could be either.

Twenty-two trees are recognized in the Bible:

- acacia (*Acacia* spp.);
- almond (*Amygdalus communis*, sometimes known as *Prunus dulcis*);
- apple (*Malus domestica*; there are many synonyms for the cultivated apple);
- carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*);
- cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*);
- date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*);
- ebony (*Diospyros ebenum*);
- fig (*Ficus carica*);

- frankincense (*Boswellia* spp.);
- lign aloe (*Aquilaria* sp.);
- oak (*Quercus* sp.);
- pine (*Pinus halepensis* and *P. pinea*);
- pistachio (*Pistacia vera*);
- plane (*Platanus orientalis*);
- pomegranate (*Punica granatum*);
- poplar (*Populus euphratica* and *P. alba*);
- sycamore fig (*Ficus sycomorus*);
- tamarisk (*Tamarix* spp.);
- terebinth (*Pistacia atlantica*, *P. terebinthus* and possibly *P. lentiscus*);
- thyme (an obscure wood, mentioned only in Revelation 18:12, which may be *Tetraclinis articulata* but whose botanical identity remains unknown);
- walnut (*Juglans regia*);
- willow (*Salix* spp.).

Except for the mysterious thyme, the only tree unique to the New Testament is carob. In Luke 15:16, carob fruits (“husks”) are fed to swine.

Of the 22 trees of the Bible, the date palm, fig, olive, pomegranate and tamarisk are also included in the Koran. Unique to the Koran are the *talh* (scholars are undecided as to whether this is the banana plant, which is not a tree, or a species of the widespread genus *Acacia*), the *sidr* (a thorn bush, probably *Zizyphus spina-christi*) and the mysterious and foul “tree of Hell”, or *zaqqm* (As-Saffat 37:65, Ad-Dukhn 44: 49, Al-Waqi’ a 56:51):

Is this not a better welcome than the zaqqm tree? We have made this tree a scourge for the unjust. It grows in the nethermost part of Hell, bearing fruit like devils’ heads: on it they shall feed, and with it they shall cram their bellies, together with draughts of scalding water. Then to Hell shall they return.

Sura 37:62-68

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Whence the apple tree?
European tradition portrays Eve tempting Adam with an apple (as in this painting by Hugo van der Goes, c. 1467), but in the Old Testament the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not identified as such

Religious texts such as the Islamic Hadiths, the Judaic Mishnah and the writings of the early Christian church fathers also contain much information on plant lore and legend. Indeed, some references to plants in early Christian writings have become so familiar that they are now inferred to originate in the sacred texts. For example, Judaeo-Christian tradition generally holds that in the Garden of Eden, Eve enticed Adam with an apple from the forbidden tree. However, in the Old Testament book of Genesis, the tree that is linked to the disobedience of Adam and Eve is not identified as an apple.

WHY ARE TREES VENERATED?

People have always worshipped trees. Early tree worship by pre-monotheistic religions is recorded in numerous Greek and Sumerian classics. The ancient Greeks regarded trees as the first temples of the gods and sacred groves as their first places of worship, where the powerful forces of nature inspired human image making (Baumann, 1993). Groves of trees, often dark and mysteri-

ous, were thought of as haunts of spirits. The pagan use of trees and groves for worship is mentioned in the Bible:

... places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations ... worship their gods.

Deuteronomy 12:2
[King Ahaz] ... offered sacrifices and burned incense ... under every spreading tree.

II Chronicles 28:2
Size, age, beauty and utility are features of trees that elicit admiration from humans. Many trees are impressive in size, among the largest living things. They are probably especially imposing in the Near East, where the distribution of trees is frequently limited. Towering over a person, extending from the ground and reaching into the sky, trees have been revered as a link between heaven and earth.

Trees are also the oldest organisms that most people ever see. Village trees in public places, for example near wells, transcend generations and are often protected. Frequently gnarled with age, such ancient trees nevertheless appear to be "reborn" with each new growing season. With a long life span relative to that of a person, they may be perceived as eternal.

Trees provide shade, food and fibre and have many other uses. Both the Koran and the Bible abound in references to

trees as a gift from the deity. Like the features of size, longevity and beauty, the utility of trees adds to the perception that they have divine attributes.

ANCIENT USES OF TREES

Both the Bible and the Koran refer to the utility of trees for food, animal feed, oil, woodfuel (including charcoal) and construction.

Trees are mentioned as a source of food in the earliest chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1:29). Because of the importance of trees for food, cutting fruit-trees during the siege of an enemy town was prohibited (Deuteronomy 20:19-20). The Koran refers to the use of olives for food, while the Bible refers to their use only for oil.

In the Koran, at least two verses (Sura 36:80 and 56:72) record fuelwood as a divine provision.

One of the specialized uses of trees in the Bible was for tensile material, as noted in several chapters of Exodus. The boards and poles as well as the furniture for the tabernacle, including the Ark of the Covenant, were all made from acacia. Historically, the cedar of Lebanon was one of the most important building materials in the Near East (Bikai, 1991). The first construction use of cedar mentioned in the Bible was for royal palaces. The most famous cedar building, though not the largest, was the temple built by Solomon. In addition, Solomon built a magnificent home for himself entirely out of cedar (I Kings 7); it took 13 years to complete, six more years than for the temple. Earlier, Solomon's father had built a house out of cedar (II Samuel 7:2). A lesser-known use of cedar was in oblations for purification, for example, in ritual cleansing for leprosy (Leviticus 14; Numbers 19:6). Details are not given, but it seems likely that small pieces of cedar were used for their fragrance.

Early in the Bible, trees are mentioned

Tree formations around places of worship in the Near East

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Trees planted or preserved around monasteries, shrines, cemeteries and mosques came to be viewed as part of the sanctity of these places and are protected to the present day.

The Near East is the cradle of ancient civilizations such as the Babylonian, Assyrian, Phoenician, Sumerian, Pharaonic, Aramaic and Arabian. Many religions appeared with the development of ancient civilizations in the region. The presence of these civilizations brought about reciprocal effects between humans and nature – including forests and trees.

Out of forests and trees ancient peoples built their boats, temples and palaces. For example, in ancient Egypt, temples, the houses of the gods, were built using the same elements as normal houses. Their columns were originally made of papyrus, reeds and palms; only later was stone used to imitate the natural materials.

Forests in the Near East retreated under the impact of civilization and numerous invasions. They have further retreated in contemporary times in the face of agricultural and residential expansion until they are now confined to remote mountainous areas. Yet in many locations, old individual trees or tree formations are observed in gardens and around monasteries, monks' cells, holy shrines, cemeteries and sometimes mosques.

How have monasteries, shrines and mosques secured protection for these trees for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years?

Heavenly revelations have on the whole called for the cherishing of trees and forbidden inflicting harm on them. Monks, priests and mystics planted trees in the gardens of their premises and protected relic tree stands around them. With respect for these holy people and religious values, people continued to protect and care for these trees, which became almost sacred. Trees came to be viewed as part of the sanctity of these places, besides being environmentally, culturally and spiritually connected to the saints that the sites commemorated. In the coastal mountains of the Syrian Arab Republic, for instance, forests have retreated from the mountains or become degraded through years of grazing and cutting. However, these mountains still have old, small forest patches, surrounded by bare or agricultural lands, which usually mark a saint's burial ground. The trees have remained despite the people's need for wood for heating, building or other uses. Even the dead

trees or parts of them are barely touched, as if the souls of the saints have formed a spiritual fence around them.

The evergreen oak *Quercus callebrinos* is the most common tree around Islamic mausoleums in the eastern Mediterranean. It gradually starts to merge with deciduous oaks such as *Q. infectoria* and *Q. cerris*. Brutia pine (*Pinus brutia*) is encountered as individual trees or stands around monasteries in Greece, the islands of the Aegean Sea, Cyprus, Turkey, the Syrian Arab Republic and northern Iraq. A number of other old trees of the Mediterranean basin such as *Pinus pinea*, *Cupressus sempervirens*, *Juniperus drupacea* and *Juniperus oxycedrus* also form part of the tree mosaic around places of worship and mausoleums.

The ages of trees around places of religious interest is largely indexed to the ages of these places. It would be interesting to investigate the exact ages of these native or planted trees.

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as a source not only of food, but of beauty (Genesis 2:8). The beauty of trees is also a theme in the Song of Solomon. In Deuteronomy 8:8, olive, fig and pomegranate are especially singled out as a blessing from God. Likewise, the Koran describes fruit-trees as a gift of God.

SYMBOLIC IMAGERY

Beyond mention of their utility, trees are important in both of these holy books as symbol and metaphor.

In the two books, the good tree is equated with a good person and the bad tree with a bad person. For example, from the Koran:

Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its root is firm and its branches are in the sky; it yields its fruit in every season by God's leave. God speaks in parables to mankind so that they may take heed. But an evil word is like an evil tree torn out of the earth and shorn of all its roots.

Sura 14:24-25

And from the Bible:

He is like a tree planted by a stream of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Psalms 1:3

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree; they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.

Psalms 92:12

The Bible explicitly likens great men to trees. For example, Daniel, interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar's dream about a tree, says, "... You, O King, are that tree!" (Daniel 4:22). In Ezekiel 31:3, the King of Assyria is called a cedar of Lebanon: "Consider Assyria, once a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest; it towered on high, its top above the thick foliage."

In both the Bible and the Koran, trees

symbolize eternity and are associated with the heavenly state. An example is the tree of life in the Bible, which is mentioned in the Garden of Eden as well as in the eternal afterlife. And from the Koran:

Those on the right hand – happy shall be those on the right hand! They shall recline on couches raised on high in the shade of thornless sidrs and clusters of talh; amidst gushing waters and abundant fruits, unforbidden, never ending.

Sura 56:27-33

In a sense, the message of the Bible can be summed up by the symbolism of four trees. The first was the tree of life in the paradise of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22-24). This became the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the second tree) of which Adam and Eve ate the fruit, causing the fall (Genesis 3:4-6, 17-18). Third, Jesus's cross is referred to as a "tree" and is linked to Deuteronomy 21:22-23: "If a man guilty of a capital offence is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse". In the Christian doctrine of salvation, Jesus taking the curse removes the curse of the tree of good and evil and leads to the last tree: the tree of life in the paradise of God with "... leaves of the tree ... for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse" (Revelation 22:1-3).

CULTURAL REFLECTIONS

Both the Koran and the Bible were culturally relevant to their original readers. The plants familiar to the cultures that gave rise to these books influenced their tree imagery. Over the centuries, these texts have influenced the people who have adopted them as sacred.

A good example of cultural influence is the inclusion of Greek plant lore in the New Testament, which was heavily influenced by Greek culture and written in Greek; some of these plants were not common in the lands of the Old Testament. For instance, in I Peter 5:4, a winner of a sports event is crowned with leaves of the shrub *Laurus nobilis*, "... the crown of glory that will never fade away". *Laurus nobilis* is one of the few examples of a plant mentioned in the New Testament but not in the Old Testament.

Biblical or Koranic names are frequently used outside the Near East for indigenous plants that never grew in the lands where these two books originated. The flora of eastern North America, for example, has many "cedars", which are not related to the cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) of the Bible. Perhaps because the cedar of Lebanon was such a well-recognized symbol from the Bible, the early Christian settlers in North America gave this name to many different trees (and even to many herbaceous plants), whether or not they were true cedars or even members of the same botanical family. For example, the widespread red cedar of eastern North America (*Juniperus virginiana*), like *Cedrus libani*, is an evergreen and has a pleasant, enduring fragrance, but its cone is fleshy and berry-like, unlike the large spindle-shaped cone of the cedar of Lebanon.

Similarly, in eastern Sudan, the Beja people call the large, arborescent cactus *Euphorbia abyssinica* "zaqqm" after the tree of Hell mentioned in the Koran. It is unlikely that the conception of the *zaqqm* in the Koran was based on this succulent, since the *zaqqm* fruit was described as resembling a devil's head, for instance. It is perhaps owing to its very bitter sap that *Euphorbia abyssinica* has been likened to the *zaqqm*.

REFERENCES TO LOCAL TREES: TAMARISK AND POMEGRANATE

Understanding the flora of the regions where the sacred text originated helps to understand the text itself. Both the Koran and the Bible draw upon local trees.

Tamarisks, for instance, a species of the genus *Tamarix*, are very common trees and shrubs in parts of the Near East and have now become serious weeds in other parts of the world. They often grow in some of the most difficult environments for plants. For example, they tolerate soils with high salt concentration and are therefore the only trees found on the shores of the Dead Sea.

In the Koran, tamarisks are used to describe the notion of a degraded environment: "So We let loose upon them the waters of the dam and replaced their

gardens by two others bearing bitter fruit, tamarisks, and a few nettles [sometimes translated as stunted lote trees]" (Sura 34:16). In the Bible, the prophet Abraham planted a tamarisk tree to honour God (Genesis 20:33).

The pomegranate is widely used in the Near East. In the Koran, pomegranates, *Punica granatum*, are mentioned as one of the gifts of Allah:

"It is He who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth the buds of every plant. From these We bring forth green foliage and close-growing grain, palm-trees laden with clusters of dates, vineyards and olive groves, and pomegranates alike and different. Behold their fruits when they ripen. Surely in these there are signs for true believers."

Al-An'am 6:99

Similarly, in the Bible pomegranates come from God (Deuteronomy 8:8). They are also referred to as objects of beauty. Pomegranates figure prominently in three places in the Scriptures: on

the garment of the high priest (Exodus 28:33), as a garland on the pillars in the temple, and in the Song of Solomon. Solomon's temple had two hundred pomegranates engraved on the capitals of the two pillars that were at the front of the temple (I Kings 7:42; II Chronicles 4:13). In the Song of Solomon 4:3 and 6:7, the red interior of the fruit is likened to the temples of the Beloved.

PRESENT-DAY VENERATION OF TREES AND GROVES – A CATALYST FOR CONSERVATION?

Trees are still venerated today in many countries, including Iraq, Israel, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. Among Druze and Muslim Arabs, certain individual trees are considered holy. These trees are often near the tombs of holy men or women where visitors come to make requests. They pledge to do good if the requests are fulfilled, and tie cloth, cloth strips, or rags on to the trees as a solemn indication of their promise to implement these vows (Dafni, 2003).

A *Pistacia atlantica* tree near the village of Kufr Yusef in Galilee, Israel honours a local girl who is considered a kind of saint by Muslims



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An olive tree in the Syrian Arab Republic associated with the tomb of a saint, adorned with strips of cloth



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Saving the cedar of Lebanon, *Cedrus libani* – a cultural emblem

The cultural significance that Cedrus libani has held since ancient times helps to explain why the Lebanese Government has made it a priority in recent years to defend the health of the cedar forests.

References to the cedars of Lebanon go as far back as the beginning of written script (Meiggs, 1982). The epic of Gilgamesh, which refers to a visit of Gilgamesh and Enkidu to the Lebanon Mountain to cut the trees, can be traced back to the third millennium BC:

*They beheld the cedar mountain, abode of the god,
Throne-seat of Irnini.
From the face of the mountain
The cedars raise aloft their luxuriance.
Good is their shade, full of delight.*

Epic of Gilgamesh

Fragments of this epic text have been recovered in Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, Hurrian and other languages – indicating that these cedars caught the imagination of people more than 500 km distant.

The same feeling for the magnificence of the cedars permeates the Old Testament:

*Look at Assyria: it was a cedar in Lebanon,
whose fair branches overshadowed the forest,
towering high with its crown finding a way through the foliage.
Springs nourished it, underground waters gave it height,
Their streams washed the soil all around it
And sent forth their rills to every tree in the country.
So it grew taller than every other tree.
Its boughs were many, its branches spread far;
for water was abundant in the channels.
In its boughs all the birds of the air had their nests,
under its branches all wild creatures bore their young,
and in its shadow all great nations made their home.
A splendid great tree it was, with its long spreading boughs,
for its roots were beside abundant waters.*

Ezekiel

But the writers of the Old Testament knew that the cedar forest was not merely admired for its beauty; it provided the most sought-after wood in the Near East. The kings of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece, until the region was ruled by Rome, proudly reported providing cedar timber for building temples and palaces, obtained either through commercial transactions or through military expeditions. In the tenth century BC, the Phoenicians built Solomon a great palace from cedar wood. Cedar wood was also used in building Aeolon Temple in Greece. The ancient Egyptians not only used cedar wood extensively, but also used a preservative from cedar resin, called “life of the dead”, in their embalming process. Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross allegedly from

cedar wood. In 118 AD the Roman Emperor Hadrian established rules to protect the cedars of Lebanon to prevent deforestation.

Through this long history, a strong cultural link evolved between this tree and the people living in and nearby the cedar forests. Because of its majesty and long life span, the cedar became a symbol of eternity. Tales and legends referring to the cedar are numerous in Lebanon and constitute one of the cultural links shared by the many ethnic, linguistic and religious groups living there. When the country obtained independence, it adopted the cedar as its national emblem and put this emblem on its flag.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the resource was depleted and much concern was expressed about the loss of this important species. Since then, many attempts have been made by successive governments, local communities and the international community to protect and restore the cedar forests of Lebanon.

The cultural significance of *Cedrus libani* helps to explain why the Lebanese Government, in recent years, made it a priority to defend the trees from a serious, previously unrecorded pest, *Cephalcia tannourinensis*. This wood wasp threatened to wipe out most of Lebanon's cedar forests and spread to neighbouring countries. The situation was particularly critical in Tannourine-Hadath El-Jebbeh Forest in northern Lebanon, one of the largest remnants of cedar forest in the country, with 50 000 trees spread over 600 ha. As much as 80 percent of the forest's cedars were infested. The insect had also spread to the "Forest of the Cedars of the Gods" in Bcharreh, which is on the World Heritage List of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Forests in the neighbouring Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey were also threatened.

To combat the threat, Lebanon brought together a team comprising scientists from the American University of Beirut, the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture and French experts. FAO provided funds and expertise through its Technical Cooperation Programme. After efforts lasting nearly five years, the pest is now reduced to an economic level, but continual monitoring of the situation is still necessary.

Immediate control methods involved the aerial application of biological (non-chemical) pesticides – insect growth regulators – coupled with studies of the pest's life cycle to determine the correct treatment window. As a portion of the life cycle is subterranean, spraying is more effective in the first and last phases of the cycle, when the insect lives above ground.

Work is continuing to identify the best tools to prevent new outbreaks and control future infestations should they occur. Medium- and long-term control strategies include trapping, studies on the potential of pheromones for population monitoring and biological control measures as part of an ongoing pest management strategy.

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The Tannourine Forest, Lebanon, where as much as 80 percent of the cedars were infested by a new insect pest



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A sculpture by the artist Rudy Rahme depicting a crucified Christ, located in the grove of cedars above the Maronite Christian town of Bsherri on Mount Lebanon in Lebanon

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Less than 3 percent remains of the original cedar of Lebanon forest which once covered much of the western slope of Mount Lebanon. Almost all of this is protected. One of the reserves, called "The Cedars of the Lord" (*Arz el-Rab*), a remnant of a few hundred hectares on Mount Lebanon, has been considered sacred by the Maronite Christians who have lived in the region for a millennium.

CONCLUSION

Trees have a high frequency in the Bible and are so prominent that the main biblical messages can be summed up by four trees. In the Koran, trees are most frequently cited as gifts of a beneficent Creator, with the notable exception of the tree of Hell, *zaqqm*. In both scriptures, fruits from trees are highly valued.

The study of trees of the holy scriptures of Islam and Judaism and Christianity, and the observation that trees are presented as a resource from God, leads to the question of how those who revere the holy scriptures are handling

trees. Sayeed Hossein Nasr (1996), in a profound volume on the relationship between religion and the ecological crisis, argues that what is needed in a modern world where humans are increasingly alienated from nature is the recovery of the truth to which the important enduring religions all attest, namely, that nature is sacred.



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