

The Hebrew Corner

The time of the year is spring, and with all the trees blooming and putting on leaves, what better time than to focus on references to trees in the Tanach. Before starting on this topic, it would be good to point out where the name Tanach, which is the Hebrew scripture from which the Old Testament is translated, comes from. Tanach is a Hebrew acronym consisting of three letters, ת נ כ, which from right-to-left are tav (ת), nun (נ), and kaph (כ). These are the first letters of the three divisions of scripture, the Torah (תורה, toh-RAH), or in English, the law, the Nevi'im (נביאים, nev-ee-EEM), or the prophets, and the Ketuvim (כתובים, keh-too-VEEM), or the writings. The Tanach contains all of the text that is translated into the Old Testament, but with different order of books, and some books combined together as one.

In the Tanach, references to trees are numerous. The Hebrew word for tree is ayts (עץ, AYTS, *pronounce like waits*). Many types of trees are referred to in the Tanach. Examples are the fig tree, in Hebrew, ayts t'ayna (עץ תאנה, AYTS tuh-ay-NAH), the palm tree, in Hebrew, tamar (תמר, tah-MAHR), and the olive tree, in Hebrew, zayit (זית, ZAY-yit).

There is a common reference, repeated many times in the Tanach, to a variety of tree known as the cedar of Lebanon. Some passages refer to the trees as used in materials for building, but often the reference to this tree is symbolic of the

arrogant pride and lofty status of people. Cedars of Lebanon in Hebrew is arzay l'vanon (ארזי לבנון, ahr-ZAY luh-vah-NOHN). There are prophetic passages that prophesy the humbling or destruction of these stately cedars, for example, in Isaiah 2:12,13:

“For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low: And upon all the cedars of Lebanon, and upon all the oaks of Bashan,”.

There is a prophetic passage given in the book of Judges (Chapter 9) that symbolically pictures several variety of trees in a parable. The story centers around the time after the passing of the judge Gideon (גדעון, gihd-OHN, feller of trees), and the struggle for his successor in Shechem of the land of Israel. Gideon had numerous wives and sons, including one son born of his concubine, named Abimelech (אבימלך, ah-bee-MEH-lehch, my father is king). Abimelech planned and carried out a scheme in which he first went to his mother's relatives to gain support for him to be the ruler. He was given some monetary support from them, then hired some shady characters to help him kill all the sons of Gideon. However, Gideon's youngest son Jotham (יותם, yoh-THAHM, Yah is perfect) escaped, went to the top of Mount Gerizim, and proclaimed the following parable in Judges 9:8-15:

“The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them: and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us. But the

olive tree said unto them, should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.”

Jotham in this passage clearly is alluding to the fact that no good man of Israel was willing to stand up and rule the people, as represented by the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine, all symbolic of Israel. Instead, the leaders, who at first he simply refers to as the trees, have chosen a ruthless man, Abimelech, as represented by the bramble, who desecrates the legacy of Gideon. He then prophecies the fate of these leaders, who he then reveals as cedars of Lebanon, associating them with prideful arrogance. They are to be destroyed by the bramble, Abimelech. This prophecy comes to pass with the leaders, the men of Shechem, being killed in a tower by Abimelech, then Abimelech himself being brought to destruction by a woman casting a millstone upon Abimelech’s head, breaking his skull.

As previously discussed the Hebrew word for tree is ayts, however, ayts is also used to refer to objects made of wood. This is important, because the cross that Jesus, our Yeshua was crucified on was made of wood. The following reference comes from Deuteronomy 21:22,23:

“And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.”

The Hebrew word translated in as “tree” in this passage is ayts. A valid alternative translation would be “structure made of wood.” So an alternate rendering of the phrase “... hang him on a tree” could be “... hang him on a wooden structure.” This makes the connection with the following passage in Galatians 3:13 of the New Testament:

“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written; Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.”

The Greek word translated as tree in this passage, xulon, is also used to refer to objects made of wood. When Yeshua was hung on a wooden structure (the cross), he was receiving the curse of God described in Deuteronomy 21:22,23 in place of all of us, making himself a sacrifice for our own sins. The gift that

he gave to us on that day still is blessing people around the world on this very day. Praise God for his gift of Jesus, our Yeshua, our salvation!

May you all find peace in a life no longer under the curse, but instead under the blessings and provision of God. Shalom!