

# Plants and Trees of the Bible

## Acacia Tree

### **Biology**

Various species of this thorny tree grow in the dry desert areas.

### **Human Connection**

It is the only hardwood that grows in the dry wilderness areas and so becomes the wood used by Moses when building the tabernacle and its worship furniture. Its long-burning wood was used for building fires. And because camel saliva can soften its thorns, it provides nourishment for them in settings with little forage.

### **Bible Examples**

Exodus 25:10, 13, 23, 28; 27:1; Isaiah 41:19

## Almond Tree

### **Biology**

The almond tree thrives throughout all but the driest areas of the promised land. In January it produces a beautiful pink and white flower ahead of the leaves, an indication that spring has arrived. By March, the flowers fade as the leaves and nuts appear.

### **Human Connection**

Both the green and dried almonds are very rich in nutritional value. Sweet almonds were used as a cough suppressant and a headache remedy. The tree is associated with alert and hopeful expectation.

### **Bible Examples**

Exodus 37:19–20; Numbers 17:8; Ecclesiastes 12:5; Jeremiah 1:11–12

## Cedar of Lebanon

### **Biology**

This is a conifer with silvery-blue needles that grow from long branches that reach out like arms from the mature tree's trunk. They are most common in the Lebanon mountains north of the promised land, where they grow more than a hundred feet tall in their one-hundred-plus-year lifespan.

### **Human Connection**

The reddish tones, pleasant aroma, and straight grain made this cedar the standout choice for construction if one could afford the price. It is associated with prestige, power, and beauty.

### **Bible Examples**

2 Samuel 5:11; 1 Kings 5:6–18; 7:1–7; Psalms 29:5; 92:12; Song of Songs 5:15; Ezekiel 31:10–17

## Fig Tree

### **Biology**

The fig tree grows throughout the promised land. When its ashen gray trunk is coaxed to life by the winter rains, it produces fruit and small leaves marking the start of spring. The earliest set of fruit is called *page*, but the tree repeatedly bears new sets of fruit into the fall. It is easily distinguished by its massive, lobed leaves.

### **Human Connection**

The leaves provide some of the most effective shade in the region. And the natural sugars in its fruit were used as a sweetener. Dried figs offered an energy boost for travelers. It is a tree associated with the good life (Micah 4:4).

### **Bible Examples**

Genesis 3:7; 1 Kings 4:25; Song of Songs 2:13; Hosea 9:10; Matthew 21:19–21; Mark 13:28

## Grapevine

### **Biology**

The grapevine is a deciduous climber that grows throughout the land but thrives particularly in the hill country of Judah, maturing with the aid of dewfall during the dry summer months.

### **Human Connection**

This vine, which grew wild in the promised land, was among the first plants to be domesticated. Its fruit was eaten when fresh and dried into raisins. Its juice was drunk fresh and fermented into wine to supplement the meager supply of fresh water. It was associated with joy and the good life (Micah 4:4). Because it is so intimately linked to the promised land and God's chosen people, it is often used as a symbol for them.

### **Bible Examples**

Numbers 13:24; Psalm 80:8–13; Song of Songs 7:7–8; Isaiah 5:1–7; John 15:1–5

## Oak Tree

### **Biology**

Five different species of oak inhabit Israel, all of which produce acorns and all of which grow in widely spaced stands with meadowland between them. They thrive from the mountains of Samaria all the way to Mount Hermon. It is the most widely represented of the wild-growing trees in Israel and also has produced the oldest surviving tree in Israel at a little over five hundred years of age.

**Human Connection**

The sturdy wood from this tree was used to make tool handles, plows, and yokes. Its chemical properties were used in the tanning of leather and as a traditional folk medicine used to lower blood pressure and cure eye infections. It became a symbol of strength and fertility.

**Bible Examples**

Joshua 24:26; 2 Samuel 18:9–14; Psalm 29:9; Isaiah 1:29–30; 57:5; Amos 2:9

**Olive Tree****Biology**

The olive tree thrives in the mountains of Israel, producing the highest quality olives in Samaria. Wild olive trees were domesticated to enhance the olive harvest, which occurs in September.

**Human Connection**

Both the green and more mature black olives were eaten after processing. Special effort was made to extract the oil from the olives. It was used for cooking, as a medicine, for cosmetics, in the production of soap, to anoint leaders, and as the fuel burned in lamps. The olive tree is associated with beauty, health, stability, nobility, and divine favor.

**Bible Examples**

Genesis 8:11; Exodus 30:22–25; Job 29:6; Psalm 23:5; Jeremiah 31:12; Matthew 25:3–10; Luke 10:34

**Pomegranate Tree****Biology**

The pomegranate is one of the signature trees of the promised land (Deut. 8:8). It produces beautiful red flowers in the spring. Its fruit ripens over the dry summer months and is harvested in fall.

**Human Connection**

The moist, delicious fruit of this tree was enjoyed and celebrated because it ripened just as the cistern water was at its lowest quality. Pomegranate juice was drunk fresh and fermented into wine. According to the rabbis, the pomegranate has 613 seeds. That links it to the Torah, in which the rabbis found 613 laws. This is why Torah scroll handles are adorned with the pomegranate and perhaps why this fruit appears so frequently in the art that adorns the Old Testament sanctuary.

**Bible Examples**

Exodus 28:33–34; Numbers 13:23; 1 Kings 7:18, 20, 42; 2 Kings 25:17; Song of Songs 6:7; Haggai 2:19

**Sycamore Tree****Biology**

The biblical sycamore tree is not related to the sycamore trees of the Western world but is rather a type of fig tree. It is a very large tree with a rounded crown that produces a copious amount of shade. While rare today, it was present along the coastal plain and filled the foothills during Bible times.

**Human Connection**

The small fig produced by this tree along all its external surfaces, including the trunk, is eaten though it is of lower quality than the true fig. Its ripening can be enhanced by puncturing its skin, something shepherds like Amos were often hired to do as they watched their flocks (Amos 7:14). The branches of this tree combine the qualities of lightness and strength; consequently, they were employed as roof rafters.

**Bible Examples**

1 Kings 10:27; 1 Chronicles 27:28; Psalm 78:47; Isaiah 9:10; Luke 19:4

**Tamarisk Tree****Biology**

The tamarisk (also called a salt cedar) makes its home in the hottest and driest parts of the promised land where the soil is too salty for many other plants to survive. It extrudes a bit of that salt onto its linear leaves in order to attract moisture from the atmosphere, which it then absorbs through its leaf structures.

**Human Connection**

As one of the only trees that grows in the arid areas of this land, it was used for cooling. Although its leaves offer precious little shade, a freshening microclimate is created when the excess water that gathers on the salt-laden leaves evaporates in the late morning hours.

**Bible Examples**

Genesis 21:33; 1 Samuel 22:6; 31:13

# Wild Animals of the Bible

## Bear

### *Habitat and Habits*

The Syrian brown bear, more tan than brown in color, is an omnivore that lived in the mountain forests of Israel. It was the largest of the large predators that lived in this land with males tipping the scale at more than six hundred pounds. Despite their size, threatened bears could charge at speeds up to thirty-five miles per hour.

### *Human Connection*

While bears generally avoided contact with humans, their size, speed, and unpredictability presented a real threat to shepherds and travelers. The risk increased dramatically if the encounter was with a sow accompanied by her young. The bear was a symbol of power and strength.

### *Bible Examples*

1 Samuel 17:34–37; 2 Samuel 17:8; Proverbs 28:15; Lamentations 3:10–11; Daniel 7:5; Amos 5:19

## Deer

### *Habitat and Habits*

Three different types of deer lived in the forests of Israel during Bible times. The red deer was the largest of them, standing five feet tall at the shoulder. Only the males had antlers. The fallow deer was just three feet tall at the shoulder. It was distinguished by the spots that both males and females had on their coats and by the thick, moose-like antlers sported by the males. The roe deer was the smallest of all at less than three feet at the shoulder with short, erect antlers. In all cases, deer used forest cover to remain out of the sight of predators, resorting to their speed and agility when spotted and threatened.

### *Human Connection*

Listed among the clean animals, the deer was eaten by the Israelites. It was a symbol of beauty, agility, and speed.

### *Bible Examples*

Deuteronomy 12:15; 1 Kings 4:23; Psalms 18:33; 42:1; Proverbs 5:19; Song of Songs 2:9, 17; Isaiah 35:6; Habakkuk 3:19

## Dog

### *Habitat and Habits*

Dogs are wild pack animals by nature, carnivores, and descendants of the wolf. But some of these canines with a more docile inclination found their way into the company of humans, living in their cities and near their camps. Interbreeding of these more

docile animals diminished the wildness in them, opening the door for a closer relationship with humans.

### *Human Connection*

In Egypt and Mesopotamia, dogs were employed as hunting assistants, herd protectors, and watchdogs. References to the last two roles are found in the Bible. But it was the semi-wild, scavenging packs of dogs in Israel that led to their more negative characterization in the Bible. They are pictured not as cuddly companion animals but as menacing creatures that eat untended and unburied bodies. Thus to be associated with a dog was to be regarded as lower class and disgusting.

### *Bible Examples*

Exodus 22:31; 1 Samuel 17:43; 2 Kings 9:36; Job 30:1; Psalm 22:20; Isaiah 56:10–11; Matthew 7:6; 15:26–27

## Dove

### *Habitat and Habits*

This medium-sized bird is present in all but the driest locations of Israel. The most common species are the rock dove, collared dove, turtle dove, and laughing dove. The subtle, pastel tones of their plumage make them among the most attractive birds in Israel. These birds are vulnerable when on the ground, and a burst into flight is their only defense against predators.

### *Human Connection*

Doves were quick to abandon natural nesting sites for buildings or dove-cotes. Dove-cotes are structures built by humans that mimic nesting habitat so that the doves are drawn to build their nests where it is more convenient to gather eggs or doves themselves for food or sacrifice. Their dung was also collected and used to fertilize gardens. Doves symbolized gentle innocence, beauty, and vulnerability.

### *Bible Examples*

Leviticus 1:14; Psalms 55:6; 74:19; Song of Songs 1:15; 2:14; 5:2; Jeremiah 48:28; Hosea 7:11; Matthew 3:16; 10:16

## Eagle

### *Habitat and Habits*

Many species of eagles are either resident in Israel or migrate through, including the imperial eagle, short-toed eagle, golden eagle, and Bonelli's eagle. All effortlessly rise on thermals, soaring in search of snakes, birds, small mammals, or carrion for food. They build their nests in remote locations, particularly high rocky outcroppings where they are fiercely protective of their young.

**Human Connection**

Although the eagle was listed among the unclean animals (Lev. 11:13), the Israelites were captivated by this bird, particularly by the majesty of its flight. The eagle symbolized loving care, youthful vitality, and wondrous speed.

**Bible Examples**

Exodus 19:4; Deuteronomy 32:11; 2 Samuel 1:23; Proverbs 30:19; Isaiah 40:31; Jeremiah 49:22; Revelation 8:13

**Fox****Habitat and Habits**

Several species of fox inhabited ancient Israel, but the one mentioned in the Bible is the red fox, which lives in the mountain forests. It is about twenty-four inches in length, with shorter legs and a tail that can be longer than the rest of its body. This dusky red fox is a solitary hunter that will consume everything from small mammals to lizards to insects to fruit. It tends to hunt in a home range, where it establishes multiple holes in which to cache its food.

**Human Connection**

Among the predators of Israel, the fox barely deserves a rank, viewed more as a nuisance than a mortal threat. In Greek and Roman fables, the fox became a symbol of cunning.

**Bible Examples**

Judges 15:4–5; Nehemiah 4:3; Song of Songs 2:15; Matthew 8:20; Luke 13:32

**Gazelle****Habitat and Habits**

The gazelle is a member of the antelope family and has a tan back and lighter underbelly separated by a dark brown side stripe. The larger mountain gazelle is three feet tall at the shoulder and prefers the habitat of northern Israel, where grasses abound. The Dorcas gazelle is just two feet tall at the shoulder with slightly more red in its coat. It prefers the drier southern reaches of Israel, where it acquires the majority of its water from the plants it eats. The male Dorcas gazelle has sweeping horns that form a heart shape when viewed from the front.

**Human Connection**

The gazelle was consumed as food by the Israelites but appears most frequently in the Bible as a symbol of speed and beauty. When threatened, the gazelle's initial burst of speed can top fifty miles per hour. Its long neck, athletic build, and dark eyes set off by facial stripes assure its place among the most beautiful of God's creatures.

**Bible Examples**

Deuteronomy 12:22; 2 Samuel 1:19; 2:18; 1 Chronicles 12:8; Song of Songs 2:9, 17; 7:3; Isaiah 13:14

**Ibex****Habitat and Habits**

The Nubian ibex, or wild goat, has a sandy brown coat with a white underbelly that matches well with the arid environment it calls home. Males are about three times larger than females and sport a striking set of horns that curve gracefully over their backs, achieving a length of more than fifty inches. Food and water call them from the steep mountain slopes, but they quickly return to this near-vertical habitat, which provides security from predators.

**Human Connection**

The wild goat was hunted and eaten by Israelites. Its handsome appearance made it a symbol of beauty. And its effortless and graceful movement on sheer mountain faces caused mortals to marvel and list it among the wonders of God's created world.

**Bible Examples**

Genesis 22:13; Deuteronomy 14:5; 1 Samuel 24:2; Job 39:1; Psalm 104:18; Isaiah 13:21; 34:14

**Leopard****Habitat and Habits**

This eight-foot-long carnivore is distinguished from all others in ancient Israel by its spotted coat. The leopard is a solitary, nocturnal hunter that uses stealth and slow, purposeful movements to get into proximity of its prey. It then pounces and delivers the death blow by using its powerful jaw muscles to break the neck of its victim, whether wild goat, domesticated livestock, or human traveler.

**Human Connection**

The leopard was among the large predators that ancient travelers and shepherds feared. As the fastest predator in the biblical world, it became a symbol of agility and speed.

**Bible Examples**

Song of Songs 4:8; Isaiah 11:6; Jeremiah 5:6; 13:23; Daniel 7:6; Hosea 13:7; Habakkuk 1:8; Revelation 13:2

**Lion****Habitat and Habits**

Tipping the scale at over five hundred pounds, this predator joined with the bear in being the largest carnivores in the region. Rather than relying upon speed and solo hunting tactics, lions hunt in prides, using the cover of darkness and carefully orchestrated attacks to confuse and bring down prey animals with the strength that is their signature trait.

**Human Connection**

While lion hunting is depicted as a royal sport in Mesopotamia, the residents of Israel lived in fear of this predator mentioned more

than any other in the Bible. It attacked sheep as well as ancient travelers. While the lion was feared, its qualities were deeply respected and used as metaphors when speaking about the courage and strength of celebrated mortals. Those who survived encounters with lions were deserving of special recognition.

### **Bible Examples**

Genesis 49:9; Deuteronomy 33:22; Judges 14:5–6; 1 Samuel 17:36–37; 2 Kings 17:25; Psalm 22:13, 21; Isaiah 11:6; 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 5:5

## **Owl**

### **Habitat and Habits**

Eight species of owl either inhabit or migrate through the promised land. The eagle owl (great owl) is the most easily recognized given its seventy-nine-inch wingspan, piercing orange eyes, and upright ear tufts. The little owl is the most easily seen. This plump bird is the owl most likely to be active during the daylight hours. Owls of all types are generally nocturnal and live secretive lives, preferring to live in ruins or in remote places that allow them to avoid contact with people.

### **Human Connection**

Because of owls' habitat and nocturnal habits, most people would not have seen them, although they may have heard them from time to time. Consequently the owl became a symbol of social isolation or abandonment.

### **Bible Examples**

Leviticus 11:16–18; Job 30:29; Psalm 102:6; Isaiah 14:23; Jeremiah 50:39; Micah 1:8; Zephaniah 2:14

## **Raven**

### **Habitat and Habits**

This member of the crow family is represented in Israel by the common raven (north) as well as the fan-tailed raven and brown-necked raven (south). The common raven stands twenty-five inches tall with a wingspan of fifty-five inches. Its impressive size and glossy black plumage distinguish it from other birds. Ravens are omnivores that eat everything from locusts to frogs to fruit, and they scavenge on carcasses.

### **Human Connection**

Among the Jews, ravens were listed among the unclean animals because of their tendency to eat carrion. Yet there is great respect for this bird's intelligence given their problem-solving skills. It is the intelligence of the raven that likely influences its mention in the lives of Noah, Elijah, and Jesus.

### **Bible Examples**

Genesis 8:7; Leviticus 11:15; 1 Kings 17:6; Job 38:41; Psalm 147:9; Proverbs 30:17; Song of Songs 5:11; Isaiah 34:11; Luke 12:24

## **Rock Hyrax**

### **Habitat and Habits**

The rock hyrax, which resembles a marmot or guinea pig, lives in noisy colonies that can have dozens of members. Hyraxes have a gray-brown furry coat with a creamy underbelly, short ears, and long black whiskers. They also have very distinctive foot pads that allow them to move efficiently about their rocky homes. Their diet consists of vegetation of all kinds, from which they also derive a good share of the water they need. The greater part of their day is spent basking in the sun, never wandering far from the rocky outcroppings where they can quickly find shelter in the rocky crags from eagles patrolling the area for a meal.

### **Human Connection**

The Bible lists the hyrax among the unclean animals. Although it lacks natural defensive skills, its wisdom is celebrated in choosing rocky crags as its home.

### **Bible Examples**

Leviticus 11:5; Deuteronomy 14:7; Psalm 104:18; Proverbs 30:26

## **Snake**

### **Habitat and Habits**

Thirty-six species of snakes reside in the promised land, six of them equipped with poison. These species inhabit all sectors of the land and range in size from one to six feet in length. Their diet consists of insects, lizards, birds, and small mammals. As cold-blooded animals, they regulate their body temperature by changing their environment. They are most likely to be seen when basking in the sun and most likely to strike foot or hand when disturbed while hiding in a cool recess away from the sun.

### **Human Connection**

The ancients regarded the snake as among the shrewdest and most mysterious of the animals. The encounters with poisonous snakes led to the view that snakes were dangerous creatures. Thus *snake* became a derogatory term for someone deemed undesirable and dangerous.

### **Bible Examples**

Genesis 3:1; 49:17; Exodus 7:9–10; Numbers 21:6; Proverbs 23:32; Amos 5:19; Matthew 10:16; 23:33; Mark 16:18; Luke 10:19; Revelation 20:2

## Stork

### *Habitat and Habits*

The white stork is the largest member of the stork family, identified by its long red beak and its long red legs, which lift it to a standing height of three feet. It is easily distinguished in flight by its tendency to find thermals on which it soars with wings set in place. In flight, the striking white leading edge of the wing contrasts with the black trailing edge. The white and black storks (the latter having a glossy black back and white belly) migrate through Israel, stopping to feed where they can find shallow standing water around which they hunt for various small animals.

### *Human Connection*

During the migration seasons, the sky can fill with thousands of storks, leaving ground-bound mortals to marvel at their flight. While listing them among the unclean animals, the biblical authors celebrate their choice of season for migrating and energy-saving method of flight.

### *Bible Examples*

Leviticus 11:19; Job 39:13; Psalm 104:17; Jeremiah 8:7; Zechariah 5:9

## Vulture

### *Habitat and Habits*

The griffin vulture is the largest of the birds of prey, with a wingspan of up to eight feet; it was the most common vulture in the promised land during Bible times. It leaves the nests it builds on high cliffs each morning to fly on the thermals generated as the ground warms. The heavier vulture flies chiefly by soaring with its wings set in a shallow V shape. It flies to high altitudes from which it can use its highly refined eyesight to spot dead animals, which it consumes.

### *Human Connection*

As a carrion eater, the vulture is listed among the unclean animals. The great majority of Bible references are associated with its method of flight and its passion for settling on dead animals.

### *Bible Examples*

Genesis 15:11; Leviticus 11:13; Job 15:23; Proverbs 30:17; Micah 1:16; Matthew 24:28

## Wild Ox

### *Habitat and Habits*

The auroch, or wild ox, was the ancestor of domestic cattle in the promised land, thriving in those places where natural pastures formed. It is now extinct, making it necessary to rely upon ancient descriptions and surviving skeletal remains to re-create the appearance of this animal. The bulls weighed in at 1,500 pounds and stood six feet at the shoulder, carrying horns that were up to thirty-one inches in length and seven inches in diameter.

### *Human Connection*

The wild ox was the largest and most powerful hoofed animal in Israel during Bible times. It was threatening, fierce, and powerful. It came to symbolize vitality, independence, and menacing strength.

### *Bible Examples*

Numbers 23:22; Deuteronomy 33:17; Job 39:9; Psalms 22:21; 29:6; 92:10; Isaiah 34:7

## Wolf

### *Habitat and Habits*

The Iranian wolf, which prefers the northern part of Israel, and the Arabian wolf, which prefers the desert south, are both medium-sized wolves at just twenty-six inches tall at the shoulder and between forty and sixty pounds. These are highly effective predators who stalk their prey before striking with jaws that have twice the clamping force of the average domesticated dog. If the initial strike fails, the wolf has the endurance and tenacity to pursue its fleeing prey until exhaustion forces the animal to the ground.

### *Human Connection*

The wolf was a threat to the livestock of those living in Bible times though less dangerous to humans than the lion and the bear. It came to symbolize those who were aggressive, capable, and threatening.

### *Bible Examples*

Genesis 49:27; Isaiah 11:6; Jeremiah 5:6; Ezekiel 22:27; Zephaniah 3:3; Matthew 10:16; John 10:12; Acts 20:29