

Abraham's Tamarisk

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Genesis 21:33 states that “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba” without giving any explanation for this act. One possible explanation for the tamarisk’s significance, based on religious and magical uses of tamarisk in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, is that Abraham plants the tamarisk to zone off the area around his altar in Beersheba as an outdoor shrine.

KEYWORDS: *Abraham, Tamarisk, Purity, Shrine, Magic, Ancient Near Eastern religion*

INTRODUCTION

In Gen 21:33 we are told that “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.”¹



Fig. 1: Tamarisks growing in Beersheba.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all English quotes from the Bible are taken from the RSV.

If the author had felt more charitable towards his future readers, bereft as we are of the cultural background that might elucidate this intriguing verse, he might have added a few lines explaining the significance of Abraham's actions. He could have saved biblical interpreters from generations to come a lot of grief if he had just included a good description of what an *'ešel* is. (It was not obvious to everyone, as many of the ancient translations attest. The Septuagint translates the rare word with ἄρουρα, a "plowed field"). But perhaps the author or redactor was merely relating an already ancient tradition, and was not quite sure what to make of it himself. In any case, the perplexing verse stands erect in a wilderness of seemingly non-relevant narrative, like the tamarisk which it mentions. My purpose here is to provide a possible cultural ancient Near Eastern milieu surrounding tamarisks that might just help us understand what this tree meant to Abraham and those telling and listening to his story.

First of all, I suppose that it is imperative to establish what sort of tree the text alludes to. Twelve species of *tamarix*, as they are classed scientifically, grow in the Holy Land. One species can grow to a height of 60 m. (200 ft.). Its miniscule leaves are overlapping scales that together resemble evergreen needles.



Fig. 2: By John M. Randall, The Nature Conservancy, Bugwood.org

Tamarisks require a high intake of water.² In spite of this, the tamarisk is, as Nahum Sarna describes it, "particularly suitable to the

2. John A. McLean, "Tamarisk," *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. David Noel Freedman; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1274.

sandy soils of the northern Negeb area.”³ Through the ages, the bark of the tamarisk has been used for tanning and its wood for building and making charcoal. The Bedouin plant tamarisks for their shade and the branches that provide grazing for animals.⁴ It can be used for firewood, although it produces a lot of thick, choking smoke, as I know from experience burning it in our wood stove in Beersheba. Some scholars have argued that the manna in the wilderness was the product of tamarisks, or, rather, an insect that exuded a white substance after feeding on the tamarisk, but this is based on a Christian tradition no earlier than the third or fourth century.⁵



Fig. 3: Tamarisk in Flower

3. Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 149.

4. John H. Walton and Victor H. Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 49.

5. McLean, “Tamarisk,” 1274. See F. S. Bodenheimer, “The Manna of Sinai,” in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* (ed. G. Ernest Wright and David Noel Freedman; Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), 76–80; repr. from *BA* 10 (1947): 2–6. For a collection of arguments against this as the source of manna, see Horatius Bonar, *The Desert of Sinai, Notes of a Spring Journey from Cairo to Beersheba* (London: James Nisbet & Co. 1857), 146–151.

I find it odd that Abraham planted, of all things, a tamarisk in Beersheba. As anyone who has looked over the bank of the Beersheba River knows, tamarisks are perfectly capable of planting themselves in pestilential numbers in that locale. This has prompted me to look for the writer's motive in putting this in the Abraham story.



Fig. 4: Beersheba River

POPULAR INTERPRETATIONS OF GEN 21:33

In medieval times, Gen 21:33 was spiritualized, and even today many popular commentators, both Jewish and Christian, are fond of such an approach. Jewish Midrash tends to use word plays to explain what Abraham's tamarisk was. Most often, it becomes a symbol of Abraham's hospitality. For instance, *Ber'eshit Raba* provides an anagram: the tamarisk (*'ešel* in Hebrew), refers to the fact that whatever someone should ask for (*šo'el*) in Abraham's hostel, that is what they would get.⁶ Rashi says that *'ešel* is an acrostic for *'ākîlâ* ("food"), *šētiyâ* ("drink") and *lewwiyâ* ("companionship").⁷ For Calvin, the tamarisk signifies the

6. *Ber'eshit Raba* 54:6. The text records an argument between a number of sages about *'ešel*, whether it is a garden, a sanhedrin, or a hostel. None of them consider it to be a literal tree. Cf. BT Sotah 10a–10b.

7. Rashi, *Commentary on BT Khetuvot 8b*. Cf. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 103.

rest into which God was leading Abraham.⁸ Even today, exegetes are not immune to allegorical explanations of the tamarisk.⁹

More recent explanations, although less allegorical, can be no less fanciful. For instance, one commentary compares Abraham's action to the later Jewish custom of planting trees to commemorate the birth of children.¹⁰ In fact, one ancient commentary, *Bekhor Shor*, had anticipated this interpretation, with the suggestion that Abraham planted the tamarisk *lēhiyôt lēzīkarôn 'al habērît*, ("to be a memorial to the covenant").¹¹ Augustine Pagolu mentions the use of tamarisk in Babylonian rituals, which we will explore next, but concludes that these texts are not relevant because he believes the tamarisk in these texts is not planted, nor is it associated with worship. Instead, Pagolu agrees that the tamarisk memorializes the covenant with Abimelech, since planting a tree is an appropriate act to accompany the procuring of water rights.¹² Wenham believes that the planting of the tamarisk is somehow an act of gratitude.¹³ Other, more practically minded scholars have suggested that the tamarisk(s) had an agricultural function, such as a windbreak.¹⁴ Perhaps what is most surprising is that many commentators simply choose not to address the tamarisk at all.¹⁵

8. John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis: Volume 1 (Chapters 1–23)* (ed. and trans. John King; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847).

9. One particularly vivid example is Witness Lee, *Life-Study of Genesis, Vol. IV: Messages 56–77* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1997), 747–48.

10. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations), 1981.

11. *Bekhor Shor* 24. See also Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, 149; Walton and Matthews, *Genesis–Deuteronomy*, 49; Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," (*NIB*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:492; R. N. Whybray, "Genesis," *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. John Barton and John Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 53.

12. Augustine Pagolu, *The Religion of the Patriarchs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 109.

13. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2, Dallas: Word), 1994, 95.

14. Louis I. Rabinowitz, *Jerusalem Post* (November 3, 1969), 13. Cf. Martin Sicker, *The Trials of Abraham: The Making of a National Patriarch* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2004), 160.

15. E.g., Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (rev. ed.; trans. John H. Marks; London: SCM, 1972), 237; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis (Interpretation)*; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 179; John C. Gibson, *Genesis, Volume 2* (The Daily Study Bible Series,

Jerome's Vulgate took a different route, with *nemus*, i.e., "grove," evocative of Greek and Roman places of worship. Many commentators today have continued to follow in the tradition of Jerome. For instance, John McLean says that Abraham planted the tamarisk "to identify the place where he called upon the name of the Lord."¹⁶ Sarna goes further, suggesting that the planting of the tamarisk "is linked to the act of worship."¹⁷ More than a century ago, Jamieson, Faussett and Brown offered the picturesque image of a tamarisk grove "in which sacrificial worship was offered, as in a roofless temple."¹⁸ Gunkel concurred, and called the tamarisk a "*heiliger Baum*" that was planted with the institution of the cult in Beersheba.¹⁹ Robert Alter calls the tamarisk a "cultic tree."²⁰ Kenneth Matthews regards the function of the tamarisk, in light of Gen 13:18, to be an "echo" of Abraham's custom to offer sacrifices in the vicinity of a holy tree, and believes that in this way "the narrative prepares us for the chief act of worship to follow (sacrifice of Isaac) . . . Abraham's gesture of planting the tree expressed his devotion to and recognition of God as the source of his prosperity."²¹

Numerous scholars viewed the tamarisk as a vestige of pre-monotheistic worship. For instance, Harry Emerson Fosdick said that it was among "the obvious remnants of the original primitivism."²² Walter Bowie continued in this same vein, but tempered it a little:

Far older than Abraham was the belief among ancient peoples that awesome or grand objects of nature might be dwelling places of the divine. Some mighty oak or other majestic tree could suggest the

Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1982), 106.

16. McLean, "Tamarisk," 1274.

17. Sarna, *Genesis*, 149.

18. See also *Haydock's Catholic Family Bible and Commentary* (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother), 1859, as well as Matthew Henry's comments on this verse.

19. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (HKAT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901), 214.

20. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton and Company, 1996), 102.

21. Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* (NAC 1B; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 282. Cf. Eugene Roop, *Genesis* (Believers Church Bible Commentary, Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1987), 141.

22. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible: The Development of Ideas within the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 202.

numinous. That could be superstition: but it can also be the symbolic poetry of worship . . . Abraham may have been led to larger thoughts of the LORD, the everlasting God, within the grove he planted at Beer-sheba.²³

Naturally, we should expect some arguments countering this explanation of the tamarisk, and we find them. Claus Westermann insists that the planting of the tamarisk “does not refer to the founding of a cult. The tree is intended as a landmark.”²⁴ The commentators of the NET Bible agree: “The planting of the *tamarisk tree* is a sign of Abraham's intent to stay there for a long time, not a religious act. A growing tree in the Negev would be a lasting witness to God's provision of water.”²⁵

RELIGIOUS AND MAGICAL USES OF TAMARISK IN THE ANE

Although there is no reason to multiply Abraham's tree into a grove, the religious connotation of the Vulgate seems to be justified by the role of the *bīnu*, or tamarisk, in Akkadian texts.²⁶ Akkadian literature presents us with intriguing possibilities regarding the place of the tamarisk in ancient Near Eastern culture and religion that provide far more satisfying solutions to the riddle posed by this text. For instance, the *bīnu* is referred to as the “chief exorcist”²⁷ and finds its place in numerous pharmaceutical and magical formulas. It is called “holy” and even pictured as the bones of divine beings. These and other references to *bīnu*'s numinous qualities will be explored in following paragraphs.

23. Walter Russell Bowie, “Exposition of the Book of Genesis,” (*NIB*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:641. Cf. M. M. Kalisch, *Genesis* (Historical and Critical Commentary on the Old Testament, A New Translation; London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 287.

24. Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (trans. David E. Green; London: T & T Clark, 2004), 158.

25. *New English Translation*, (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies, 1996–2005).

26. The meaning of *bīnu* has been established by means of the Aramaic word for tamarisk, *byn* or *byn'*. See the entry “byn, byn' (bīn, bīnā) n.m. tamarisk,” in the *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, online: <http://cal.huc.edu/searchroots.php?pos=N&lemma=byn>, downloaded on 3 March 2012.

27. VAT 10 102, line 26.

One text designates the tamarisk as the GIŠ.ŠINIG ^dEN.LÍL (“the tamarisk of Enlil”).²⁸ Another describes it as the *ešemti* ^dIg[igi] (“the bones of the Igigi”),²⁹ deities of heaven who, according to one story were thrown down by the Annunaki when they rebelled against them and refused to do any more work. The picture of the tamarisk as the bones of the gods appears elsewhere, where we find *ešemti ilūti* GIŠ.ŠINIG *qudduši* (“of divine bones, of holy tamarisks”).³⁰ The adjective *qudduš*, “holy,” actually seems to have been a popular description of the tamarisk.³¹ In one of the bi-lingual lists of theonyms, we even encounter ^d*Be-el-ŠINIG* (“Lord Tamarisk”),³² although this could also be translated the “Lord of the Tamarisk.” The same text gives us ^dLugal.[giš.šinig] (“King Tamarisk Tree” or “King of the Tamarisk Tree”).³³ In another text the tamarisk is equated with Anu, the god of heaven.³⁴

Tamarisks were a component of oaths,³⁵ and they were utilized in divination.³⁶ The tamarisk shows up in numerous magical and medicinal texts. Tamarisk leaves were a popular component in concoctions,³⁷ and tamarisk branches were used to construct magic circles.³⁸ Perhaps the reason that tamarisk was used so often in these

28. TCL, 1145:6.

29. Gerhard Meier, *Die assyrische Beschwörungssammlung Maqlû* (Berlin: 1937), VI 5.240.

30. AAA 22 (1935): PL. 11 II 10.

31. *Ibid.*, *Babylonian Records in the Library of J. Pierpont Morgan* 4 6:46.”

32. Edward Chiera, *Sumerian Lexical Texts from the Temple School of Nippur* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1929), 122 iv 20.

33. *Ibid.*, 122 iv 1. See also TCL 15 10:444.

34. Stephen Langdon, *Sumerian Liturgies and Psalms* (Publications of the Babylonian Section, University Museum; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1919), 10/4 12 i 4 (p. 336).

35. Erica Reiner, *Šurpu: A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* (Graz Weidner, 1958), VIII 74.

36. *CT* 40 50:43.

37. *Assyrian Medical Texts* 90, 1 r. iii 8; *ibid.* 28, 7:9 + 78, 1:12; *KUB* 37 1:14.

38. H. Zimmern, *Beiträge zur Keilschrift-forschung* (Berlin: 1921/22–1925), No. 74–78: 22.

ways stems from its association with purification. It seems that tamarisk was valued for its supposed ability to ward away evil influence and cleanse from spiritual uncleanness.

For instance, a penitential text pleads, GIŠ.ŠINIG *libbibanni* (“may I be purified by tamarisk”).³⁹ Another text designates it as GIŠ *bi-[nu] mu-u[l]-li-lu* (“the purifying tamarisk”).⁴⁰ Another name for tamarisk is actually Ú *túl-lal* (“the ‘you purify’ plant”).⁴¹ The leaves could be chewed to purify the person who was afflicted with impurity.⁴² Indeed, the tamarisk is capable of removing evil.⁴³ A text from the Namburbi rituals explains the kind of “impurity” that tamarisk was capable of averting. If a person observes a bad omen by agency of a lizard, he or she is to sweep off the roof, sprinkle water, build an altar and offer sacrifices upon it, and then make a model of the lizard in clay and place it upon the altar in a bowl with a special design drawn in it. Then the victim of the omen utters a number of spells while standing upon tamarisk wood and holding the hand of the priest.⁴⁴

In my opinion, the greatest light on Abraham’s tamarisk is cast by the fable of the “Tamarisk and the Palm.” In this text, we encounter what, as far as I know, is the only other reference to planting a tamarisk in ancient Near Eastern narrative. A king plants a tamarisk and a palm in his courtyard. He feasts in the shade of the tamarisk. The two trees then carry on an extended debate about which of the two is superior.

At one point, the tamarisk brags about how many different items are made from his wood. And as he builds to the climax, he claims to be the *rab-maš-maš-a-ku-ma* (“chief exorcist”). Then the tamarisk says, *bīt ili ú-da-aš* (“I renew the house of the god”).⁴⁵

A text from the Baal Epic may help us at this point to understand better what it means to “renew the house of the god.” The sentence *bt* .

39. Stephen Langdon, *Babylonian Penitential Psalms* (P. Geuthner, 1927), pl. 6 K.2999:10.

40. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 48:24.

41. H. Zimmern, *Beiträge zur Keilschrift-forschung* (Berlin: 1921/22–1925), No. 11 r. i 6.

42. *CT* 39 36:96, restored after *ibid.* 38 r. 9.

43. E. Reiner, *Šurpu*, 54.

44. Richard I. Caplice, *The Akkadian Namburbi Texts: An Introduction* (Sources and Monographs: Sources from the Ancient Near East 1/1; Malibu: Undena, 1974), 19.

45. VAT 10102, line 26. The transliterated text, with a translation, can be read in W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom*, 158–9.

arzm . ykllnh / hm . bt . lbnt . y' msnh appears in the pericope dealing with the construction of Baal's palace.⁴⁶ This is a contested text, but one possible translation of it is, "Will he complete a house of cedars; shall he construct a house from tamarisk?"⁴⁷ Mark Smith has translated the text differently: "Is it a house of cedar that he would complete, Or a house of bricks that he would construct?"⁴⁸ Smith's translation depends on the identification of *lbnt* as a cognate of the Hebrew word *lēbēnâ*, an identification that is strengthened by an earlier occurrence of *lbnt*, in which Il, prompted by the request of Athirat to allow Baal to build a house, questions whether she is a slave whose job is to make bricks all day, *hm . amt . atrt . tlbn / l bnt*,⁴⁹ ("Or [is] Athirat a servant who molds bricks?").⁵⁰ However, Smith's reading ignores the apparent parallelism between the two lines. In each stich, according to my interpretation, reference is made to a type of sacred wood that would be a suitable material for building Baal's temple-palace, cedar and tamarisk.

If this interpretation of this text can be accepted, it opens up a broad vista of possibilities. First of all, it explains how the tamarisk could boast of temple renovations. Evidently, tamarisk wood was valued as being particularly suited to carpentry work being done for religious purposes. The tamarisk's associations with purification and exorcism may have a great deal to do with this. For Mesopotamians, tamarisks and tamarisk wood could thus function as boundary markers between the unclean and the holy, in much the same way as the font of holy water in a Catholic church.

CONCLUSION

All of this provides the cultural backdrop for the author/redactor of the Abraham story to narrate that he planted the tamarisk next to the shrine

46. UDB 1.4 V:10–11.

47. On *bnt* as "tamarisk," see Nick Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilimilku and His Colleagues* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 72, n.15.

48. Mark Smith, "The Baal Cycle," in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (ed. Simon Parker; Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 129–30.

49. UDB 1.4:IV:61–62.

50. Smith, "The Baal Cycle," 129. It is not at all clear to me that Smith has found the proper interpretation here. He depends upon fusing the beginning of line 62 to the end of line 61. If the entirety of line 62 is read as a sentence, the result matches my argument here fairly well: "*l bnt . ybn . bt . l b{l*," which I suggest could be read as, "From tamarisk may a house be built for Baal."

that he founded in Beersheba. Like a Mesopotamian king, Abraham plants a tamarisk in what is essentially his courtyard. Perhaps the tamarisk-planting underlines the preceding episode in which Abraham asserts himself as an equal to Abimelech. But the real significance of the tamarisk is its religious connotations. Since the planting of the tamarisk immediately follows the interaction with the Philistines in the text, it is possible that here the purifying properties of tamarisk are hinted at, with Abraham immediately planting the tree to cleanse the sacred environs of his well after its recent profanation on the part of the Philistines. In any case, Abraham, nomad that he is, does not build a temple, but his tamarisk, with its purifying, sanctifying properties, helps him to craft a simple but functional place of worship where he can call on the name of the Lord. According to the Genesis account, Abraham is a Mesopotamian chieftain and follows Mesopotamian customs in his planting of the tamarisk, and by so doing creates a shady place to enjoy sacrificial banquets zoned off from threats to ritual purity.⁵¹

51. At the 2011 SBL conference where I read the paper from which this article is developed, Professor Edward Greenstein of Bar-Ilan questioned whether or not the mention of the tamarisk in Gen 21:33 might be etiological; i.e., Beersheba was known for the large number of tamarisks that grew there, and so the tradition developed that Abraham was responsible for planting the first one. This is an interesting possibility that surely deserves more attention. However, I remain convinced that the tamarisk in Gen 21:33 has a religious function, due to its being linked to Abraham's calling on the name of the Lord.

