

Overall Goal: The overall goal for all the lessons by Fig Tree Ministries is to help people deepen their understanding of the biblical text.

Class Learning Objectives: Gain a better understanding of how the writers of the Bible employ specific plants as a metaphor to help their readers grasp an abstract or complicated idea.

Cultural Background: The Bible is an ancient Near Eastern (*ANE*) book. The biblical style of communication is fully immersed within the culture of the ancient Near East. The *ANE* style of communication is vastly different than that of our modern western culture. This fact alone creates difficulty for us when we read our Bible because we filter all communication through our own cultural lens.

Ancient Near East communication is considered “high context.”¹ Truth is conveyed using concrete symbolism that carries the message rather than being explicitly stated. We in the west (particularly the United States) rely on low context communication. Everything is explicitly stated.

We in the west often want our Bible to communicate as we do – “*Just tell us plainly what we need to know!!*” – rather than learning how the culture of the east communicates. When we gain even the smallest of insights into how the culture of the Bible communicates – the world of the scripture comes alive in a way we’ve never seen it before.

1. Read **Jeremiah 17: 5-8** and notice that the prophet is making a comparison:

| Difficult or abstract Idea | Plant as a Metaphor |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| “cursed...trust in man” (v. 5) | “like a bush” (v. 6) |
| “blessed...trust in God” (v. 7) | “like a tree” (v. 7) |

Notes:

¹ Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2014.

2. Plant Metaphor:

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|--|
| Concrete: using a plant known to the audience brings a concreteness to your message. |
| Specific Plant: the bible writers are particular as to which plant they choose to employ their metaphor rather than using a generalized term such as “bush.” |
| Characteristics of the Plant: they choose a specific plant for its unique qualities. When we know the specifics of a plant, it makes the message more powerful. The downside of this technique is that not everyone in the audience will know the details of the plant. |

3. The Oak and the Reed: Around 600 BC Aesop told fables as a way to convey truth principles through simple stories. Fables are differentiated by their use of plants or animals that take on human characteristics (the Tortoise and the Hare). One of his famous fables uses the comparison of an Oak Tree with a Reed.

| Characteristics | |
|---|---|
| Oak Tree | Reed |
| Strong Does not bow to political winds | Flexible Bows whichever direction the wind blows |

Matt. 11:17 “what did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?”

The metaphor of an Oak or a Reed can either be positive or negative. In Aesop’s original fable, it is the Oak that is in the wrong because it is standing proud, and its pride eventually becomes its downfall.² We could compare this to Proverbs 16:18, where “pride comes before the fall.”

On the other hand, Jesus’ uses the same metaphor to remind people that John was a prophet whose role it is to speak truth to those in power. In this case, John was not like a Reed that bent in whatever direction the political winds wanted him to go. John is portrayed as an Oak who stood strong – as you would expect a prophet to do. Unfortunately, things do not often end well for those Prophets who stand firm in front of those in power.³

Notes:

² <http://www.read.gov/aesop/011.html>

³ Romans 11:3; Matt. 23:35 and 37.

4. Scholarly resource for this lesson:

Desert and Shepherd in Our Biblical Heritage, Nogah Hareuveni

Nogah Hareuveni was born in Israel in the 1930s. His parents, Dr. and Mrs. Hareuveni, were both botanists. They worked to identify every plant mentioned in the Bible that can be found in Israel.

Nogah Hareuveni established a Biblical plant reserve in Israel - <https://www.neot-kedumim.org.il/>

5. The *Arar*

- a. The *Arar* (*Calotropis Procera*)⁴ is found growing in the Jordan River Valley and the surrounding Dead Sea basin.
- b. The local Bedouin tribes refer to the bush by two names:
 - a. The Apple of Sodom
 - b. Cursed Lemon
- c. The plant is inedible, although it looks healthy on the outside.
- d. A fruit grows on the tree and will grow to the size of a grapefruit.
- e. The fruit feels plump – but when you open it, you realize it was just full of air. A larger fruit will even make a *ḥffī* noise when opened as the air releases.
- f. There is no nourishment to the fruit.

Notes:

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calotropis_procera

6. Cursed Lemon

- a. The Hebrew word for “curse” is *Arar* (ארר). This word sounds exactly like the plant *Arar* (ערער) but they are spelled differently.
- b. The Arabic word for “curse” sounds like the Hebrew (as many of the languages in the east have similar soundings). This may explain why the Arabic Bedouin people call it the “cursed apple.”
- c. When Jeremiah 17 is spoken in Hebrew, the audience would be able to pick up on the wordplay (assonance or consonance) that is happening between the word “cursed” and the *Arar*. This is a common literary technique in the Hebrew bible that brings attention to the message Jeremiah intends to convey.

7. Characteristics for an *Arar*:

| |
|----------------------------------|
| a. Looks Healthy on the Outside |
| b. Appears to Bear Fruit |
| c. Inside is emptiness and death |

8. Have you ever met an *Arar*? Have you ever been an *Arar*?

Have you ever met someone who on the outside had the appearance of being emotionally or relationally healthy, but as you got to know them better – or worked closer to them – you began to notice that what was lurking beneath wasn’t life-giving, but brought death. A person who selfishly uses others to gain an advantage for themselves. Someone who will betray a friend at any opportunity. Someone who charms their way into your life only to devastate you in the end. This person is an *Arar*.

Maybe you recognize that you were like an *Arar* before you had a relationship with God. You were living your life trusting in humanity’s rules, but the result was leaving you empty. Your interactions with others were not life-giving for you or the other person.

Notes:

9. Examples of modern day *Arars*-

Unfortunately, *Arars* still exist all around us. Sometimes they manifest themselves in a person. Other times in a city or an idea. Can you think of any other examples of modern-day *Arars*?

Here are two examples that immediately come to mind:

a. Las Vegas – When your city’s motto is “*What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.*” Unfortunately, there is a seedy side to the glittery lights of Las Vegas – drugs, gambling addiction, and prostitution, to name a few. Many go to Vegas enchanted by the thrill of living richly, only to leave broken and defeated.

b. Hollywood – The PR department of Hollywood wants their image to remain unblemished and on the screen. Yet, as is regularly exposed, the worst abuses and relationships come out of Hollywood and the movie star culture. Unfortunately, the exploitation of other human beings is commonplace in an effort to gain riches, power, or fame.

9. The other location that we find the word *Arar* is in Psalm 102: 16-17, although you would never know it by its English translation. Here – in English – *Arar* is translated ‘the destitute.’ In that, God will hear the prayer of the destitute.

Nogah Hareuveni notes that the leaves of the *Arar* appear to be praying.

Is it possible that when God redeems the world that even the *Arar* – the cursed bush – will be redeemed if it prays to God?

God – more than anything – wants to redeem the *Arar*.