

## Article

# He Is Like a Tree: Arboreal Imagery for Humans in Biblical Wisdom Literature

Andrew E. Steinmann

Division of Theology, Concordia University Chicago, Chicago, IL 60305, USA;  
Andrew.Steinmann@cuchicago.edu

**Abstract:** Arboreal imagery used to describe human life and circumstances is fairly common in the Hebrew Bible's wisdom literature. This study examines the varied uses of comparisons between trees and humans in several wisdom psalms, in Job, and in Song of Songs. It is concluded that this imagery was adaptable and malleable enough to serve the sages' purposes in teaching moral and ethical values through vivid descriptions of trees and their various characteristics.

## 1. Introduction

One of the most common yet often overlooked analogies in the Israelite wisdom literature is the comparison of humans with trees. This trope occurs multiple times in Job, in several wisdom psalms, and in Song of Songs. This analogy is fairly widespread as a sapiential image, so it is helpful to explore this figure of speech and how it is used and adapted by various writers to express their view of human life and circumstances in creative ways. It is the thesis of this study that arboreal images used to depict humans are a distinct topos used primarily in the wisdom literature of the Bible (though it also occurs in non-wisdom psalms and some prophetic books). Furthermore, these topos can be used positively to depict human strengths and virtues and negatively to portray human failings and weaknesses. It should be noted that when examined as a group, it is possible to see connections between various occurrences of this trope that mark it as a rhetorical convention in its own right, but one that is flexible and adaptable for various depictions of human attributes and life situations.

## 2. Discussion

My discussion will cover the use of arboreal imagery as a means of depicting various traits of humans in psalms, Job, and Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible. As will be seen, arboreal imagery at times references generic trees, but in other instances, mentions specific types of trees.

### 2.1. Arboreal Imagery Applied to Humans in the Wisdom Psalms

Since the work of Hermann Gunkel, the category of wisdom psalm has been recognized by many who have studied the biblical psalms, including Gunkel's student Sigmund Mowinckel, as well as Roland Murphy, Leo Perdue, and J. Kenneth Kuntz (Kuntz 2000). However, there is little agreement concerning which features mark a psalm as wisdom. Kuntz lists seven rhetorical elements and sixty-four wisdom vocabulary terms that can be used to identify wisdom psalms (Kuntz 1974). Avi Hurvitz argued that the use of wisdom jargon is a prime criterion for determining which psalms are wisdom compositions (Hurvitz 1988). A short list of psalms frequently regarded as wisdom psalms include 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, 127, 128. Others would include Psalms 19B, 73, and 119 either as wisdom psalms or psalms that reflect the concerns of wisdom without being full-blown wisdom psalms. Still, other scholars would propose even more expansive lists of wisdom psalms.<sup>1</sup> In this study, I confine my observations of arboreal imagery to the short list of wisdom psalms of which Psalms 1, 37, and 128 contain references to humans as trees.



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### 2.1.1. Psalm 1:3: A Faithful Person as a Generic Tree

Psalm 1:3 compares the person who delights in Yahweh's teaching (בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה; Psalm 1:2) to a tree:

וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שָׁתוּל עַל-פְּלִיגֵי מַיִם אֲשֶׁר פִּרְיוֹ יִתֵּן בְּעֵתוֹ וְעָלְהוּ לֹא-יִבּוֹל וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה יִצְלִיחַ.

He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.<sup>2</sup>

This comparison is not unique to Israelite wisdom but can be found as a stock item in other Ancient Near Eastern texts as, for instance, in the Egyptian Wisdom of Amen-em-Opet.<sup>3</sup> Nor is this comparison confined in the Hebrew Bible to wisdom literature. In fact, Psalm 1:3 is quite similar to Jeremiah 17:8. Creech has argued that the text is partially dependent on the Jeremian text, but where it deviates from it, Psalm 1 incorporates imagery from texts associated with the temple, particularly the phrase פְּלִיגֵי מַיִם, "flowing streams" (literally "streams of water"), which Psalms 46:5 (English 46:4) and 65:10 (English 65:9) depict as flowing from God.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the author of Psalm 1 draws this figure closer to the palm and cedar trees of Psalm 92:13–15 (English 92:13–14), which flourish in the courts of God as well as to the olive tree in God's house of Psalm 52:10 (English 52:8).

Yet Psalm 1 sets the tree imagery in a distinct wisdom context. There is no direct association with the house of God since explicit temple connections are rare in the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>5</sup> The water does not flow from God via the temple to the tree but flows from God's instruction (*tōrah*), on which the man meditates continually. As Craigie notes,

The state of blessedness or happiness is not a *reward*; rather, it is a result of a particular type of life. Just as a tree with a constant water supply *naturally* flourishes, so too the person who avoids evil and delights in Torah *naturally* prospers, for such a person is living within the guideline set down by the Creator. Thus the prosperity of the righteous reflects the wisdom of a life lived according to the plan of the Giver of all life. (Craigie 1983, p. 61)

Moreover, in Psalm 1, the contrast is between the blessed man who is like a tree and wicked persons who are like chaff (Psa 1:4). This is different from either the Wisdom of Amen-em-Opet, where both the wise and foolish are compared to trees, or to Jeremiah 17:5–8, where those who trust in human strength are compared to a bush, and those who trust in God are compared to a tree. Instead, in Psalm 1, the righteous person is like a tree—a perennial plant—and the wicked are like chaff, the useless detritus of an annual plant (wheat or barley). The implied difference is that the righteous person endures while the wicked person flourishes only for a short time and then becomes only the unusable stubble of short-lived annual plants rather than a thriving, perennial green tree (see Psa 1:5–6). Thus, what appears at first blush to be the simple use of a static stock image—a healthy green tree as a metaphor for a human blessed by God—is transformed in Psalm 1 and made into a dynamic depiction of a person whose wisdom derives from Yahweh through his word in the Torah. As will be seen below in the discussion of Job 14:7–10, the hardness of a tree can be employed both as a positive trait for humans (as here) or employed as a contrast to humans, as in Job 14.

### 2.1.2. Psalm 37:35: A Wicked Person as a Native Tree

In contrast to Psalm 1, Psalm 37:35 depicts a wicked person as a tree:

רָאִיתִי רִשָּׁע עָרִיץ וּמִתְעַרֵּה כְּאֹרֶחַ רִעֲנָן

I have seen a wicked, violent person well-rooted, like a flourishing native tree.

Craigie notes, "In this proverb, a metaphor from Ps 1:3 is developed in reverse. The righteous, in Ps 1, are like a tree planted by water that flourishes and grows. Here, the wicked flourish at first 'like a luxuriant native tree'" (Craigie 1983, p. 299). In using this figure, the psalmist makes the wicked person appear to be as blessed as the righteous man of Psalm 1. Moreover, the wicked man is in his own element—a native (אֹרֶחַ). All seems

to be well for this man, although he is wrong and unjust from a moral perspective, a man who is violent (עָרִיץ). Yet, as the psalmist notes in the next verse:

וַיַּעֲבֹר וַהֲגִהָ אֵינֶנּוּ וְאִבְקֶשְׁהוּ וְלֹא נִמְצָא

Then I passed by and noticed he was gone; I searched for him, but he could not be found.

This quick reversal of fortune creates a whipsaw effect for the reader, emphasizing the tenuous nature of the life of the wicked. They may seem to be prospering, and one might even be tempted to envy them. However, this is an illusion since their future is not to be desired. They have nothing to which to look forward. Only the righteous have a guaranteed future from Yahweh (Psa 37:37–40).

Once again, what appears at first glance to be the use of a stock arboreal trope, in this case, is made vibrant and vivid through the sage's depiction of surprising, swift, and unexpected consequences. The divergence of arboreal imagery in this passage and that of Psalm 1 is highlighted by what is missing here: a reliable source of water. Unlike the righteous person of Psalm 1, the wicked person of Psalm 37 is not sustained by God through his teachings (*tōrah*).

### 2.1.3. Psalm 128:3: Children as Young Olive Trees

The arboreal imagery in Psalm 128:3 is of a different kind than either Psalm 1 or Psalm 37:

אֲשֶׁתְּךָ כְּגֶפֶן פְּרִיָּה בֵּיתְךָ כְּנֵיף בְּנֶיךָ כְּשֹׁתְלֵי יִתְיִם סְבִיב לִשְׁלֹחֶנְךָ

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house, your children, like young olive trees around your table.

Here the man blessed by Yahweh has both vine and olive, plants that provide two staples of the Mediterranean diet. His children who are compared to *young* olive trees (כְּשֹׁתְלֵי יִתְיִם, literally “like shoots of olives”). Not only has the psalmist chosen a particular type of tree, but one that was and still is highly valued in Mediterranean culture. Olives are long-lived trees, some surviving well over a millennium while retaining the capacity to bear fruit. By comparing the children to the young olive tree, the psalmist evokes images of long and fecund life for the next generation, thereby ensuring multigenerational blessing. By choosing a specific tree instead of a generic tree as in Psalms 1 and 37, the arboreal figure is once again transformed and enlivened. As will be seen in the discussion of Job 15:33, the use of the olive tree as an arboreal trope can also be transformed so as to depict a negative attribute in humans rather than the positive one put forward in Psalm 128.

### 2.1.4. Summary: Arboreal Imagery for Humans in Wisdom Psalms

In wisdom psalms, arboreal imagery is always of a tree that appears to be flourishing. However, the image is adapted to each context to convey a particular truth. In Psalm 1, the tree flourishes because of God's blessing. In Psalm 37, the tree appears to thrive only to suddenly disappear, conveying the sudden judgment of God on a wicked person. In Psalm 128, children are like a specific tree—a young olive that promises blessings on a future generation. This positive perspective can serve both to speak directly of blessing from God and to portray God's judgment indirectly and ironically. The trees in Psalms 1 and 128 are both healthy and depictions of a hopeful future for the humans they portray.

## 2.2. Arboreal Imagery Applied to Humans in Job

Three passages in Job compare humans to a generic tree, while one, like Psalm 128, uses the image of an olive tree. While the wisdom psalms uniformly portray thriving trees, in three of the four passages in Job, the trees are distressed or failing.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.2.1. Job 14:7–10: Contrasting Humans in Death and Trees That Have Been Felled

Does a person have hope for life after death? The central character of the book, Job, knows that trees appear to have such hope:

כִּי יֵשׁ לַעֵץ תְּקוּנָה אִם יִכָּרֵת וְעוֹד יִחְלִיף וַיִּנָּקֶתוּ לֹא תִחַדֵּל  
אִם יִזְקִין בְּאֶרֶץ שָׁרְשׁוֹ וּבְעֵפֶר יָמוּת גִּזְעוֹ  
מִרֵּיחַ מַיִם יִפְרַח וְעֵשָׂה קִצִּיר כְּמוֹ נֹטַע  
וְגִבֹּר יָמוּת וַיִּחַלֵּשׁ וַיִּגְוַע אָדָם וְאִי

There is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its shoots will not stop budding.<sup>7</sup>

If its roots grow old in the ground and its stump starts to die in the soil,  
the scent of water makes it thrive and produce twigs like a sapling.  
But a person dies and fades away; he breathes his last—where is he?

Job 14:7–9 describes the continuing prospects of a felled tree: The stump remains in the ground, and when watered, it sends forth new growth. Interestingly, this passage contains the only use in the entire Hebrew Bible of the verbal root מוּת, “die”, applied to a plant. Humans and other animate life die, but plants dry up (יָבַשׁ; e.g., Psalm 129:6; Isa 40:7–8) or wither (נָבַל; e.g., Isa 1:30; 40:7–8). However, as recognized by both CSB and NET English versions, the sense of the verb מוּת is inchoative: “begins to die”<sup>8</sup>. That is, the tree does not actually die as a human would. It is revived with water, and new twigs are produced.

But in contrast to a tree, even a vigorous, strong man (גִּבֹּר; Job 14:10) will die, and apparently without the hope that is attributed to the tree. This is confirmed in the following verses (Job 14:11–12), where humans are compared to water disappearing or draining from a lake or stream, leaving only a dry bed. As Chin notes:

The parallels in the text reinforce the idea of human helplessness; the hope of the tree is set up as a foil for human despair, which hope and despair are contrasted further by the drastic change of mood between vv. 9 and 10. From an almost idyllic description of a budding tree, the author shifts to three repetitions of words indicating death (‘languish’, ‘die’, ‘expire’) in only two lines and ends the verse with a pointed rhetorical question. (Chin 1994, p. 100)

This distinction between a tree and a human is part of Job’s constant search for an answer to the question, “When a person dies, will he come back to life?” (Job 14:14) This question will linger until at least Job 19:23–27, one of the most well-known passages in the book and one whose interpretation is highly controverted.<sup>9</sup>

With the contrast between tree and human, Job has turned the positive arboreal imagery of a thriving tree on its head. In psalms, trees were like humans who thrived or at least appeared to thrive (Psalm 37:35). In Job 14, trees are unlike humans. Psalms present tree imagery as a comparison. Job 14 presents this trope as a contrast. Job is searching for hopefulness amidst his dire circumstances, but the dissimilarity between humans and trees leaves him little aspiration for the future. Thus, arboreal imagery is applied to humans both in noting the similarity to trees and as a contrast to them.

## 2.2.2. Job 15:33: A Wicked Person as a Distressed Olive Tree

Eliphaz’s second reply to Job also employs arboreal imagery, perhaps prompted by Job’s use of it. Eliphaz, however, does not use contrast but the comparison between humans and trees, this time a wicked person and a distressed tree:

יִהְיֶה מִסַּבֵּן כְּבָקָר וּמִיֶּשֶׁלֶה כְּזֵית נֹצֵתוֹ

He will be like a vine that drops its unripe grapes and like an olive tree that sheds its blossoms.

Here a wicked person is compared to both a vine and an olive tree under distress. Neither yield useful fruit. Clines notes, “The evildoer’s end is to be cut off in the middle of his life cycle, none of his plans coming to fruition” (Clines 1989, p. 363). Hartley adds, “So too the undertakings of the wicked person which promise to produce wealth will never again bear fruit” (Hartley 1988, p. 254).

More intriguing, however, is the similarity of the imagery here to that of Psalm 128:3, discussed above, which also pairs the grapevine and the olive tree. In Psalm 128, the righteous person has a fruitful vine, his wife, and budding olive shoots, his children. These two, wife and children, may also be the intended referents here since the following verses speak of the childlessness of the godless whose only offspring is evil and deception:

For the company of the godless will have no children,  
and fire will consume the tents of those who offer bribes.  
They conceive trouble and give birth to evil;  
their womb prepares deception. (Job 15:34–35)

With this tree analogy, Eliphaz sought to undermine any slim hope Job might have had for his future. Like the wicked man described here as a distressed olive, Job has no offspring. They have perished (Job 1:18–19). Eliphaz is not necessarily implying that Job was a wicked man, but indirectly and obliquely pointing out to him that his situation is comparable to the godless, perhaps in an effort to call him to confess his sins. Once again, the arboreal trope using a specific tree—the olive—can be employed for comparison, either leading to a positive, hopeful future (Psalm 128) or to a negative, hopeless destiny (Job 15).

### 2.2.3. Job 18:16: A Wicked Person as a Languishing Tree

Like Eliphaz, when Bildad utters his second reply to Job, he also briefly uses tree imagery to speak of a wicked person:

מתחת שרשיו יבשו וממעל ימל קצירו

His roots below dry up, and his branches above wither away.

Hartley notes implied sequence of events:

The wicked person languishes and dries just as the *branch* of a beautiful tree withers after its *roots dry up*. Since the attack strikes at the tree's roots, it takes a while before the fatal blow becomes visible. But eventually the leaves of the stricken tree turn brown and fall off. So too, the plague begins to work against the wicked person long before its effects become visible. Obviously, there is no chance of renewed growth for a tree whose roots have dried out. With this metaphor Bildad categorically rejects Job's search for hope in his reflection: "There is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again (18:17)". (Hartley 1988, p. 279)

Bildad goes even further than Eliphaz did in describing what this arboreal metaphor implies for a wicked person: Memory of him perishes (Job 18:17). He dies, no longer part of inhabited world (Job 18:18). He has no descendants (Job 18:19). Other people view his demise with horror (Job 18:20).

Bildad's use of the tree analogy was intended to utterly obliterate any remaining hope that Job had of relief from his miserable state. He extends the analogy beyond Eliphaz's use of it and implies that Job's present state was a result of some evil act that Job had committed. However, unlike Eliphaz, Bildad uses generic tree imagery for a similar intended effect—to move Job to confess the sin that Bildad assumes caused Job's misery. For readers who are reading canonically, the attack upon the tree's roots as they dry up forms a stark contrast with the tree in Psalm 1, which has a perpetual source of water.

### 2.2.4. Job 29:19: Job Claims to Have Been a Well-Watered Tree

Job abandoned any tree analogy following the harsh use of it by his two friends. He returns to it only after they had quit speaking. He simply reversed Bildad's use of arboreal imagery to describe his former, prosperous life:

שרשי פתוח אֵלַי מִיָּם וְטֵל לַיְלָה בְּקִצְרִי

[I thought:] My roots will have access to water, and the dew will rest on my branches all night.



In his life, before Satan struck it, Job was secure, and he assumed he would be like a tree that had constant access to water (cf. Psalm 1). This life was one in which he was favored by God (Job 29:1–6), commanded the respect of others (Job 29:7–11), and lived a righteous life, favoring needy and punishing the unjust (Job 29:12–17). Given his suffering as Job spoke these words, the tree imagery takes on a bitterly ironic tone—in contrast to the beatific tenor of Psalm 1, which also uses the figure of a tree with access to water. Job seems more like the languishing tree described by Bildad, yet despite Bildad’s insinuation, Job will go on to insist that his current situation is not due to wicked living on his part (Job 31:1–35).

## 2.2.5. Summary: Arboreal Imagery for Humans in Job

Arboreal imagery in Job is quite adaptable for expressing various aspects of human existence as it applies to Job’s suffering and existential dilemma: from hope for regeneration that appears to elude humans in death (Job 14) to judgment that befalls the wicked (Job 15, 18). Even when Job wistfully remembers his former state as favored by the Almighty, the well-watered tree becomes a biting sardonic image since it suggests the privileged position from which Job has fallen.

## 2.3. Arboreal Imagery Applied to Humans in Song of Songs

Unlike psalms or Job, arboreal imagery in Song of Songs always references specific trees, never generic trees. In the Song, faunal and floral imagery is abundant, and the tree metaphor is just one component of this. As Grossberg notes, “In the first two chapters of the Song alone, there are fourteen (!) comparisons of the human characters to flora and fauna. There is scarcely a single metaphor in these two chapters that is not drawn from the animal and vegetable kingdoms” (Grossberg 2005, p. 233).

### 2.3.1. Song 2:3: Man as an Apple Tree

Following the man’s comparison of his beloved to a lily among thorns (Song 2:2), the woman compares him to an apple tree among the other trees in the forest:

כַּתְּמוּחַ בְּעֵצֵי הַיַּעַר כֵּן דּוֹדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים בְּצִלּוֹ חֲמֻדָּתִי וְיִשְׁכְּבָתִי וּפְרִיּוֹ מְתוֹק לְחֹכִי

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my love among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.

The comparison focuses on the apple tree that bears sweet fruit as contrasted to other trees in the forest which do not (Garrett and House 2004, p. 149). Grossberg observes, “In Song. 2:3, the woman seeks the shade of her beloved as well as the shadow of the apple tree; she relishes the fruit of his love (cf. 4:13–16; 5:16), just as she desires the apple of the tree” (Grossberg 2005, p. 236). The shade of the tree is significant. While the fruit signifies the sweetness of love, including its sexual dimensions (see Song 2:5), the shade surely alludes to the protection and companionship that she seeks from the man she loves. Longman comments of the woman sitting in the tree’s shade, “... she places herself, figuratively, under his protecting and comforting branches ...” (Longman and III 2001, p. 112). The desirable fruit of the apple tree in this passage is a positive attribute similar to the implied future fruit of the olive shoots in Psalm 128.

### 2.3.2. Song 4:12–15: Woman as a Garden of Delightful Trees and Plant Products

In Song 4:12–15, the man describes his beloved as a garden (גֵּן). This is not simply a flower or vegetable garden, but more akin to a park with trees and shrubs:

גֵּן נָעוּל אֲחֻתִּי כְּלָה גֵּן נָעוּל מַעֲיָן חֲתוּם  
שְׁלֹחֶיהָ פְּרִדִּים רְמוֹנִים עִם פְּרִי מִגְדִּים כִּפְרִים עִם גִּרְדִּים  
גִּרְדִּי וְכַרְכֶּם קִנָּה וְקִנְמוֹן עִם כָּל עֵצִי לְבוֹנָה מֵרֹאשׁ הַלּוֹת עִם כָּל רֹאשֵׁי בְשָׁמִים  
מַעֲיָן גִּנִּים בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים וְגִזְלִים מִן לְבָנוּ

My sister, my bride, you are a locked garden—a locked garden and a sealed spring.

Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard,  
nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh  
and aloes, with all choice spices—  
a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.

The locked garden and sealed spring clearly reference the woman's chastity as she awaits conjugal union with her beloved.<sup>10</sup> The initial description of the garden is an orchard of pomegranates (פְּרָדִים רְמוֹנִים). The noun פְּרָדִים, which is related to the English word *paradise*, is a cognate of the Late Babylonian word *pardēsu*, meaning *garden* or *park*. (The Babylonian word itself is a loanword from Avestan (Persian) *pairīdāeza* where it originally meant "rampart", or "the domain of the king".)<sup>11</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, it occurs only two other times. In Nehemiah 2:8 it refers to a forest. However, in Ecclesiastes 2:5, it is a reference to stands of planted fruit trees, that is, orchards. The woman's pomegranate orchard presages the physical union of the man and woman as she later invites him to drink the juice from her pomegranate (Song 8:2).

However, the arboreal image is not confined to the pomegranate orchard, as her garden contains "all choicest fruits." In addition, there is cinnamon, a product obtained from the bark of trees of the genus *Cinnamomum*, most notably the cassia tree. There are also "trees of frankincense" that produce the aromatic resin burned for its fragrant smoke. Finally, another tree resin used for perfume and incense, myrrh, is mentioned.

The man here delights in his beloved's chastity while awaiting their marital union when he can savor the treasures of her garden. She not only invites him into her garden (Song 4:16), but he accepts that invitation (Song 5:1). Trees, along with other plants and plant products, supply the rich imagery of the delight that the man finds in his beloved. Grossberg observes:

Love is certainly like luxuriating in a verdant and fruitful garden—a veritable intoxication and excitation of all senses. Such is the power of love and such is the force of nature. Song 4:13–15 build to a crescendo, as the lover revels in sensual stimulations of the human and natural garden. (Grossberg 2005, p. 241)

### 2.3.3. Song 5:15b: Man as a Majestic Cedar

In the second line of Song 5:15, the compares the man to the cedars of Lebanon:

מֵרֶאשׁוֹ כִּלְכֵּנוֹן בְּחוֹר כְּאַרְזִים

His presence is like Lebanon, as majestic as the cedars.

This comment concludes the woman's description of the man from head to foot (Song 5:10–15a). Here, she compares him to Lebanon and then more specifically to the sturdy cedars for which Lebanon was known. Garret comments, "She employs the comparison to Lebanon because the trees of the forest are both strong and beautiful (yet without excessive floral coloring) and so are an appropriate symbol of male beauty" (Garrett and House 2004, p. 224). The change in description of the man from a shade-and-fruit providing apple tree to a mighty cedar once again demonstrates the adaptability and flexibility of arboreal imagery in describing humans.

### 2.3.4. Song 7:8–9a (English Versions 7:7–8a): Woman as a Palm Tree

In one of the most sexually explicit metaphors of the Song, the man compares his beloved to a date palm:

זֹאת קוֹמָתְךָ דְּמִתָּהּ לְתִמְרַי וְשִׁדְיָי לְאִשְׁכָּלוֹת

אֲמַרְתִּי אֶעֱלֶה בְּתִמְרֵי אֶחְזֶה בְּסִנְסִינָיו

Your stature is like a palm tree; your breasts are clusters of fruit.

I said, "I will climb the palm tree and take hold of its fruit."

This figure is so vivid, and it needs little comment other than to note that it recalls the advice given to husbands in Proverbs 5:19: “... let her breasts always satisfy you; be lost in her love forever”.

### 2.3.5. Summary: Arboreal Imagery for Humans in Song of Songs

Arboreal imagery in Song of Songs employs metaphors that reference specific trees in order to make vivid the attraction that the man and the woman have for one another. Their tree similes and metaphors evoke not only sexual passion but also display their appreciation for each other and a desire for companionship. In the Song, trees are used to depict humans' attractive physical and sexual attributes in contrast to both psalms and Job, where the trope concentrates on spiritual and moral attributes.

## 3. Conclusions

Arboreal imagery used to portray humans is particularly adaptable to a wide range of images and associations in biblical wisdom literature. It is neither simply a stock figure of speech nor a hackneyed trope that is passed over lightly. Instead, the Israelite sages crafted each individual use of tree metaphor for maximum effect in context. Sometimes this called for reference to a specific type of tree, but in many cases, a generic tree was useful. In addition, the tree metaphor could be expanded by contrast to other plants (as in Psalm 1) or by supplementing the image with other floral figures (as in Psalm 128:3, Job 15:33, or Song 4:12–15). Yet despite this flexibility, the various occurrences of arboreal imagery as applied to humans demonstrate commonalities shared among them, marking it as a distinct rhetorical device. Of course, arboreal imagery for humans is not unique to wisdom literature in the Bible. It can be found in the prophets (e.g., Ezekiel 17:1–24; Daniel 4:10–27).<sup>12</sup> In addition, one passage in Judges is reminiscent of the use of tree imagery supplemented by other flora that is found in the wisdom books: Jotham's fable (Judges 9:8–15). Nevertheless, of all the genres found in the Hebrew Bible, it is only wisdom literature that consistently applies arboreal comparisons to humans to instruct in morals and ethics. This would influence later Israelite wisdom literature such as Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon.<sup>13</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, (Weeks 2005) lists Psalms 1, 10, 14, 19B, 25, 32, 34, 37, 49, 52, 73, 90, 94, 112, 125, 128.

<sup>2</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture citations in English translation are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

<sup>3</sup> (Carroll 1986, p. 351) notes the common use of a green tree as a trope for a person blessed by the deity in Ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts. (Pritchard 1969, p. 422) offers a translation (by J. A. Wilson) of the Wisdom of Amen-em-Opet: As for the heated man of the temple, He is like a tree growing in the open. In the completion of a moment (comes) its loss of foliage, And its end is reached in the shipyards; (Or) it is floated far from its place, And the flame is its burial shroud. (But) the truly silent man holds himself apart. He is like a tree growing in a garden. It flourishes and doubles its yield; It (stands) before its lord. Its fruit is sweet; its shade is pleasant; And its end is reached in the garden ...

<sup>4</sup> (Creach 1999, pp. 41–43). (Holladay 1986, 1993) argue that the Jeremian text is dependent on Psalm 1.

<sup>5</sup> The only direct mention of Jerusalem's temple, of which I am aware in the wisdom books, is Ecclesiastes 5:1: “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Better to approach in obedience than to offer the sacrifice as fools do, for they ignorantly do wrong.”

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the passages treated below, one might argue that Job 15:30, which mentions shoots of a plant (יִצְחָק), and Job 15:32, which mentions a branch (פֶּתַח), also reference tree imagery. However, neither word is specific to trees, and both can be used for plants in general (see Job 8:16; Isa 9:13; 19:15).

<sup>7</sup> CSB reads “will not die”. However, לֹא יִפְּחַח means “will not cease”, which in reference to shoots of a tree must mean “will not cease budding”.

<sup>8</sup> See also (Clines 1989, p. 284) who notes that the previous verb (יִצְחָק) is an inchoative hiphil, “grow old” and imparts this meaning also to the following verb as “begins to die” (יָמִית).

<sup>9</sup> (Hartley 1988, pp. 295–96) briefly describes four major ways in which Job 19:23–27 has been interpreted.



- <sup>10</sup> For the same figure in the Egyptian literature, see (Fox 1985, pp. 283–87).
- <sup>11</sup> Entry 7707 פִּרְדֵּס in (Koehler and Baumgartner 1994).
- <sup>12</sup> Entry 7707 פִּרְדֵּס in (Koehler and Baumgartner 1994).
- <sup>13</sup> See especially the discussion in (Osborne 2018).

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