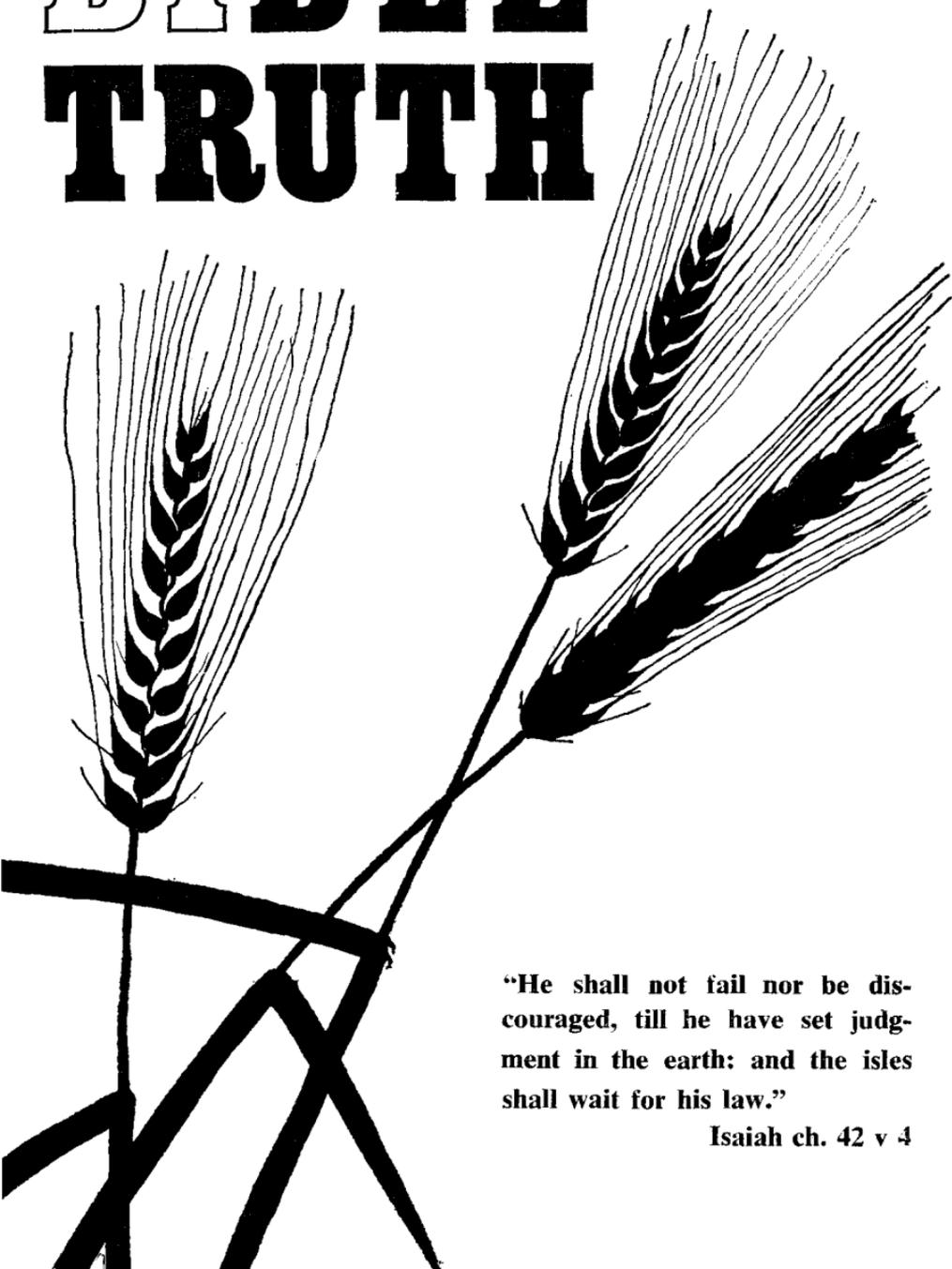


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“He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.”

Isaiah ch. 42 v 4

TREES IN THE PLAN OF GOD

Part 1 - Trees Past and Present

by Dr. Michael D. Bennett

Confronted with the title, 'Trees in the plan of God', most people react with surprise or bewilderment. They know that trees feature in the plans of their local Council's department of parks and gardens. They know that trees are often drawn on architects' plans to beautify the designs. But they will probably not know that trees feature in the plan of God in such important ways.

Men should not be surprised that God is concerned with, and about, trees. After all, God was active in the department of parks and gardens long long before any local council. And He is the supreme architect who knows how to beautify His design! No human art can match the Creator's activity. So Joyce Kilmer (1888-1918) wrote in her poem called 'TREES':

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

God's character being what it is (He is the Creator), He made not just one tree but thousands and thousands, and with them He clothed the earth's surface. Their beauty is still undeniable.

Beautiful as they are, it is not the purpose of this article to extol the beauty of trees. Rather it is to examine what God has revealed about their place and purpose in His plan(s).

Most people have a natural affinity with gardens, finding peace and pleasure in environments filled with green plants.

To men of faith this is hardly surprising, since God started human life on earth in a garden. Moreover, Adam and Eve lived in that garden, in God's plan. But then sin entered their lives spoiling everything and causing them to be banished from the garden which God planted for them.

Given that human life started in Eden, one important question is, "What kind of garden was it?". Although it contained flowers and vegetables it was not predominantly a flower or a vegetable garden. The truth is, it was predominantly a tree garden — an arboretum. The trees were mainly fruit trees. This much is clear from the Genesis account, which speaks repeatedly of trees, and especially of fruit trees.

“And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow **every tree** that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the **tree of life** also in the midst of the garden, and the **tree of knowledge** of good and evil . . .

And the LORD God commanded the man saying, Of every **tree** of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

(Genesis ch. 2 vv. 8-9 & 16-17)

“ . . . the woman saw that the tree was good for food . . . she took of the fruit . . . and they knew that they were naked: and they sewed fig leaves together (**from fig trees!**) and made themselves aprons . . . And Adam and his wife hid themselves . . . amongst the **trees of the garden.**”

(Genesis ch. 3 vv. 6-8)

It is very much a story of trees: fig trees, fruit trees, tree of knowledge and tree of life. Clearly trees were the major feature of the landscape in Eden.

All the trees were there for a purpose. Certainly the major purpose for their presence was to act as the major source of food. Adam and Eve were free to eat any plant material, but the fruit of trees was the major component of their diet:

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest **freely** eat:”

(Genesis ch. 2 v. 16)

The theory of evolution teaches that man came down from the trees. However, the true story of how man came down from the trees is found in Genesis. Originally man did not have to work for his food. It just grew by itself, quite perfect. All man had to do was pick it. After the fall that all changed. Separated from the orchards of Eden man had to work in the dirt to eat and live. What a come down!

“ . . . cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat **the herb of the field**. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat **bread**, till thou return unto the ground. . . . Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, **to till the ground** . . . he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way to keep the way, of the tree of life.”

(Genesis ch. 3 vv. 17-19 & 23-24)

One way of life was ended and another begun. The fall was marked by a change in human diet from mainly fruit from trees, to mainly the products of arable farming --- cereal grain for bread. It was also marked by a change in experience. Previously man ate “freely” (Genesis ch. 2 v. 16), but now eating was costly in time and effort. So this is the truth of how man came down from the trees! No longer the upward look and a life of plenteous ease. Now it became a fight for survival, staring at the dirt.

The sudden destruction by sin of man’s tree-based life style has been followed by a continued destruction of the trees on which that life style was based. The history of agriculture records the massive clearing of the forests to make way for open fields and pastures. This process continues throughout the world. The march of progress in British agriculture has resulted in bigger and bigger fields

and fewer and fewer hedgerow trees and woodlands. Government grants are available to farmers to grub out hedges, showing that the trend has official approval. Trees have become so few in some parts of our country that the local councils have lists of them, and many are the subject of tree preservation orders. During the author's lifetime there has been a very noticeable decline in the number of trees in the landscape. Besides the clearance just noted, Dutch Elm Disease recently had an additional and drastic effect, decimating the British tree population. Moreover, the loss of wild species has now been matched by the mass destruction of orchards of fruit trees in Britain directly due to British membership of the EEC. Unable to compete with fruit growers from more sunny climes (notably France and Italy) British fruit growers have grubbed out their orchards and gone over to growing cereals. The result of all this is fewer and fewer trees, and especially fewer and fewer fruit trees, in our land.

It is worth pausing here to note what God's law says about fruit trees. It may come as a surprise to many, but God's law is specifically against the destruction of fruit trees. You can read about this subject in Deuteronomy chapter 20 (vv. 19-20):

“When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down **(for the tree of the field is man's life)** to employ them in the seige. Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy and cut them down . . .”

(In the above text from Deuteronomy we see that under certain circumstances, namely in time of war, unfruitful trees could be destroyed, but not fruitful trees. So we understand that John the Baptist was announcing a time of war when he said:

“And now also the axe is laid unto the root of **the trees**: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.”

(Matthew ch. 3 v. 10)

Meanwhile, in that we recognise the wisdom of God's law, and the foolishness of Britain's flirtation with the nations of Europe it naturally follows that every British Israelite would be wise to plant as many fruit trees as possible, as an act of faith, and in the sure knowledge that events will demonstrate the wisdom of so doing.

God knows the importance of trees in general, and of fruit trees in particular. His word makes a clear statement of their importance for human life — “**for the tree of the field is man's life**”. We would do well to ponder this subject further.

So far only the destruction of trees in Britain has been noted. Now I want to widen the horizon to consider their destruction on our planet. It is a fact that a time of destruction of trees was clearly foretold in Bible prophecy. So we read in Revelation first of a time when trees were to be spared, but then of a time for their destruction:

“ . . . another angel . . . cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given **to hurt** the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor **the trees**, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads . . . ”

(Revelation ch. 7 vs. 2 & 3)

“The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the **third part of trees was burnt up**, and all green grass was burnt up.”

(Revelation ch. 8 v. 7)

What does this prophecy mean? Some commentators have proposed symbolic interpretations, and these may be correct. However, prophecy can have more than one real fulfilment. What is clear is that never hitherto has this prophecy had

a literal fulfilment with one third of the trees being destroyed on earth, together with one third of the sea creatures (v. 9). However, it appears that we have arrived at a time when the literal fulfilment of such prophecies is beginning to happen. In this connection it is interesting to note what Prof. Paul Raven of the Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis, U.S.A. said in a major invited lecture at the 13th International Botanical Congress in Sydney, Australia in August 1981. Speaking of tropical forests he said:

“How many kinds of organisms are going to become extinct in the near future? One knows that there is a tremendous loss of species when tropical forest is disturbed and one knows that at present rates most, nearly all, tropical forest will have been disturbed to some extent by early in the next century and by the time that has happened one would certainly expect a major population of tropical organisms to have become extinct **How many? Well, say a quarter or a third.**”

If that large a proportion of tropical organisms were actually to become extinct that would mean the loss of a quarter or 20% of all the diversity of living things on earth during the lifetime of the majority of the people who are alive during the present day. Now that's why Ed Wilson and others have said that the 1980's will be remembered primarily as the time when the extinction of life on earth really gathered speed and began to assume an unprecedented proportion, when the character of the biosphere was altered permanently.”

In the recent war in Indo-China, the Americans used chemical sprays from the air to defoliate millions of acres of forest. This practice may be extended in future wars resulting in the destruction of trees and crops in literal fulfilment of Bible prophecy.

It seems probable that the destruction of trees, and the loss of species of trees as they go extinct, are both a literal fulfilment of Bible prophecy. What is already certain is that

the loss of trees cannot go on without series repercussions for the human race. Trees are not optional extras in the biosphere, but an essential component of our planet's life support system. Destroy a lot of trees and the consequences are serious: remove too many trees and the damage to human life style and eventually to human life is irreparable.

Trees for Rain

It is necessary to consider a few important facts about trees and the purpose of their creation. Each tree transpires water into the atmosphere as vapour via its leaves. Indeed, one big tree can easily transfer 200 gallons of water into the air in a day. Scaling up shows that a forest can give off enough water vapour to significantly affect the weather for hundreds of miles around. Fell the forest and rainfall may decrease elsewhere. Even deserts may be produced where none were before. Exactly this is happening in parts of Africa today, and nothing is being done to reverse the trend. Destroy the trees in one place, and it will often destroy the agriculture (pastoral or arable) on which human life depends elsewhere. So forests are an essential, if only to maintain the humidity of the atmosphere.

Trees for Soil Stability

Trees and hedges reduce ground level windspeed and prevent erosion. Even in so-called civilised countries the temptation to wring the last bit of production from the land at the risk of producing dustbowls is not resisted. The regular loss of soil in East Anglia, known locally as fen blows, is clear proof of this fact. Elsewhere, especially in the tropics, indiscriminate felling of trees without replanting is quickly followed by terrible erosion. Once the top soil is lost it takes centuries to produce more by natural processes, so the damage is virtually irreversible. The productive capacity of the land is destroyed for generations to come. Such rape of the land is destroying millions of acres each decade, as man

extracts valuable timber with no thought for the long term effects. Now the forest will run out in our lifetime. This is another way in which cutting down the trees can result directly in the formation or growth of deserts.

Trees for Medicines

Every tree was created for a purpose, but man has lost much of his knowledge of these matters. This is not wishful thinking, but Bible revelation. As is often the case, God has given us a working example to illustrate His knowledge of the special uses of trees. In this case for water purification:

“And . . . they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried unto the LORD; and **the LORD shewed him a tree**, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: . . .”

(Exodus ch. 15 vv. 23-25)

Plants, including trees, are sources of many potent molecules placed there for use as medicines. This too is part of the Bible's revelation, for this Divine National Health Service will one day be restored to man:

“In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life: . . . and **the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.**”

(Revelation ch. 22 v. 2)

Plant scientists are finally realizing the value of such products and the real danger that many will be lost to man even before they are “discovered” as the species from which they come become extinct. As a result, scientists are living with primitive tribes in a desperate attempt to learn from them concerning new sources of potent plant molecules! Man will probably understand just too late how right God was when He said, “. . . the tree of the field is man's life.”

Trees for Renewal

Forests are a wonderful source of energy and raw

materials. Moreover, unlike coal or oil, trees are renewable. Wood for building and burning; rubber; coconut matting and cork are just some of the non-edible materials obtained from trees.

Like any investment, all is well while one spends only the income from it, but spend the capital and soon nothing remains. So it is with trees. Their products can be harvested without damage up to a point, but take more and the resource is progressively destroyed. Today the wealth available to man as trees is being spent at an alarming and profligate rate. The capital is almost gone. Tree products are being harvested at a far higher rate than that at which they are replaced. If the trend continues the result will be the ending of the supply within just a few decades. Already in parts of Africa, where trees abounded in living memory, none remain. The natives have used them all as firewood for cooking. As the supply of wood reduces man uses more and more of the other non-renewable, i.e. sources of coal, gas and oil for energy and materials. This hastens the day when their strictly limited supply is also exhausted. It is a vicious circle, and without sufficient trees man's future is bleak indeed. In creating the forests God gave man a renewable supply sufficient for his reasonable needs. To illustrate its value, beauty and utility God ordained wood for His tabernacle, and His temple. He ordained all sorts of wood, from Shittim to Cedar, easy or difficult to work, ugly or beautiful, all had its use in God's plan. God knew its importance to man, but man has ignored that truth and soon he will pay a heavy price for his foolishness. In destroying the trees, he is destroying himself.

Trees for Food

Trees supply a remarkably nutritious and varied range of foods. Many tree products are richer sources of protein than is steak or cheese, for example, avocado pears. Many

others are rich in fats and oils and give rich supplies of, for example, palm oil and olive oil. Yet others are rich sources of sugars, for example, maple syrup, dates, and raisins. While this is common knowledge, nevertheless many will say, "But we can't live on trees!" The fact is that we could, and should. Studies to compare the maximum yield of foodstuffs per acre per year over long periods agree in showing that the highest yielding crops are not cereals or potatoes, but peaches, apricots and grapes! True it takes a while to establish the orchards, but over long periods (including this establishment time) they are the highest yielding crop species known to man.

Even in recent times there have been societies which have depended heavily on their trees for their life and life style. Under 'palm trees' Cruden's Concordance states:

"The palm, especially the date palm, is one of the most important trees in the East. The fruit is the daily food of millions; wine is made from the sap; the seeds are made into a food for camels; the fibres of the leaf-stems are woven into ropes and rigging; the tall trunk is a valuable timber; its leaves are made into many different articles."

Much the same can be said of the coconut palm in the life of many tropical islands even today. The trees supply all the necessities of life; wood and thatch for their houses; milk and meat for their people; and much else besides. The explorers who first discovered such islands thought the life of their inhabitants near idyllic as they considered how easily they obtained the essentials of life. Were they correct? What is the good life?

Ask a modern Englishman what he considers the good life to be, and he will probably talk of owning a Rolls Royce car, and a colour T.V. set, etc. How does this compare with God's revelation to His people Israel of the good life?

There is no talk of each man sitting in his Rolls Royce but there is repeated talk of each man sitting under his own fruit trees. The reigns of David and Solomon were the golden age of Old Testament Israelite History. Here is the picture of an Israelite in clover:

“And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, **every man under his vine and under his fig tree**, From Dan even to Beer-sheba, all the days of Solomon.”

(I Kings ch. 4 v. 25)

No communism here! In that it says “his vine” and “his fig-tree” it clearly shows us a nation of owner occupiers. Moreover, the vines referred to are not miserable little plants trained up a short pole on a bleak hillside. They are big enough to sit under. Certainly the vine can grow into a big tree producing many hundreds of pounds of fruit each year. The great vine at Hampton Court Palace is a good example for British people to see. Fruit from such a vine was chosen by Joshua and Caleb to illustrate the fruitfulness of the promised land:

“And they came unto the brook of Eshcol, and cut down from thence **a branch with one cluster of grapes**, and they bare it between two upon a staff; and they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs.”

(Numbers ch. 13 v. 23)

So far, aspects of the place of trees in the plan of God in the past and the present have been considered. The second part of this article will discuss what Bible prophecy reveals about the future of trees before and after the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(To be continued)

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