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# Abraham's Trees<sup>\*</sup>

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## Abstract

Tree worship was a well known phenomenon in the Ancient World. In the Hebrew Bible we read that Abraham lived next to trees and also planted a tree, while Jacob buried Deborah under a tree. Thus we will investigate if the Patriarch Abraham was engaged in religious rites at these trees. The end result will show that Abraham lived next to trees for safety reasons; trees were used as shade, fuel for cooking, or food for the flock. It was later Biblical reading and later traditions which associated Abraham with sacred trees. Therefore, not surprisingly the Aramaic translators avoided translating the word "tree."

## 1. Introduction

In the stories about the Patriarch Abraham, the Book of Genesis mentions trees such as the terebinth of Moreh(12:6); and the terebinth of Mamre(13:18;14:13;18:1). In addition, we read that Abraham planted a Tamarisk tree at Beer-Sheba and invoked the name of the Lord (21:33). In the ancient world, the phenomena of sacred trees associated with sacred places were well known. In fact, sacred trees are frequent in Mesopotamian iconography. The trees symbolized fertility and were associated with the fertility gods. According to Robertson Smith, prayers were addressed to them for

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<sup>\*</sup> In memory of Jeff Parchman, a God-fearing man.

healing sickness, and for fertile seasons. Branches and leaves were used as medicine and for other ritual purpose. Many believed that oracles were received from the trees that the trees spoke with a voice and sometimes the voice of the tree was a wind in the branches which requires a soothsayer to interpret it.<sup>1</sup> Later we read that fertility cults were attractive to many Israelites, thus they built altars under trees and worshiped other gods. The book of Deuteronomy and other biblical texts condemn the places of worship “on the hills, under every verdant tree” (Deut 12:2; 1Kgs 14:23; 2Kgs 16:4; 17:10; Jer 2:20; Ezek 6:13; Hos 4:13). Thus, it’s no surprise that the official religion of Israel forbade the planting of the trees next to the altar (Deut 16:21). This paper will explore the subject of trees in the Abrahamic cycle . We will find out if they have any religious meaning and why they are mentioned in Genesis.

## 2. A. Terebinth of Moreh

Abraham, upon his arrival to the Promised Land, stopped at the terebinth of Moreh אֵלֹן מֹרֶה (Gen 12:6). In most commentaries the word אֵלֹן is translated as terebinth. However, Zohary says that many translators and exegetes misunderstood the names אֵלֶה *elah*, אֵלֹן *elon*, אֵל *el*, אֵלָה *alah* and אֵלֹן *allon*. According to him *allon* and *elon* should be rendered oak, Tabor oak (*Quercus ithaburensis*) or the evergreen oak (*Quercus calliprinos*), while *elah* and *alah* should be terebinth.<sup>2</sup> This is noted already by the Ramban in his commentary on Gen 14:6 where he cites Isa 6:13 אֵלֶה וְכָאֵלֹן and he translated it as a terebinth and as an oak where the reference is to various trees. Indeed, the Lxx translates our verse as ‘the high oak’ (τὴν δρῦν τὴν ὑψηλήν). While, Targum Onekols, Targum Neofiti 1 and Ps.-J renders for אֵלֹן “plain”. Likewise, Jerome rendered *convallis* in our verse and also in Gen 13:18; 14:13; 18:1, or by *vallis* Deut 11:30. According to Aberbach and Grossfeld the translation “plain of

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<sup>1</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1907), p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), pp. 108-11.

Moreh,” came to remove Abraham from any association with centers of tree worship.<sup>3</sup> Augustine Pagolu pointed out that the Hebrew word *elon* appears four times in Genesis, in two instances altars were associated with this tree (12:7;13:18). According to him: “the form *elon* seems to have had religious associations in all its occurrences in Genesis and Judges.”<sup>4</sup> However, we should stress that the Patriarch Abraham lived next to trees. The building of altars in Genesis came to commemorate God’s appearance and the trees have no religious significance as we shall see below.

Since the Hebrew word *moreh* means teacher, modern scholars speculate that it might be a reference to an ‘oracle giver’.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the tree served as a place where oracles could be obtained and, therefore, a survival of primitive tree worship<sup>6</sup>. Gunkel for example rendered “oracle terebinth”. According to him, the voice of the tree is perceived in the rustling of its branches and interpreted by the oracle or priest.<sup>7</sup> He points to the giant oak at Dodona, where its priest and priestess interpreted the noise of the leaves and the sounds of the spring that flowed out of its water.<sup>8</sup> In the Homeric epic we read about Odysseus who goes to Dodona “to hear the will of Zeus from the high crested oak of the god”. Because of their size, strength and longevity, many honored and revered these trees and attributed to them certain sanctity.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Sarna believes

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<sup>3</sup> Moses Aberbach and Bernard Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis* (New York: Ktav,1982), p.79.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine Pagolu, *The Religion of the Patriarchs* (JSOTSup 277;Sheffield Academic Press: England, 1998),p.58

<sup>5</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, trans. John J.Scullion S.J. (Augsburg: Minneapolis,1985),pp.153-154; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, (WBC 1;Word Books: Waco, Texas,1987),p. 279; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, (AB1;Doubleday: Garden City, New York, 1964),p.87.

<sup>6</sup> John Skinner, *Genesis*, (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1910), p. 246.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Mercer University Press: Macon, Georgia, 1997),p.166.

<sup>8</sup> Ovid, *Metam* 7.614-630.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Sirach for example in his praise to wisdom says: “Like a terebinth I spread out my branches and my branches are glorious and graceful.” 24:16.

that a tree of great antiquity was looked upon as a “tree of life” or as being cosmic. The stump of the tree symbolized the “navel of the earth” and its top representing heaven. The tree served as a bridge between the human and divine spheres and became an area of divine–human encounter.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas, modern scholars speculated that the word *moreh* is related to an oracle, it appears that the Aramaic targumists interpreted *moreh* differently. The primary function of this interpretation was to remove any association of Abraham with tree worshipping. Therefore, Targum Neofiti 1 translates “the Plain of the Vision;” thus, the place named Moreh was understood by the targumists as connected with *mrph*, “vision,” or “*rph*,” to see.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile Ps.-J translated *moreh* as ‘plain that had been pointed out,’ Evidently basing translation is based on the verb הורה *to point, give direction.*’

Alternatively, medieval commentators such as Ibn Ezra, Radak and Ramban gave *moreh* a different interpretation. According to them, Moreh is the name of a person who owned the plain. While, Rashi interprets here: “until the plain of Moreh-That is Shechem. He showed him Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, where Israel accepted the oath of Torah.” It appears that Rashi relates אָלוֹן homeilectically with אָלָה oath and מוֹרָה with Torah.

## B. Plains of Moreh

In Sotah 32a the Mishnah comments that the plain of Moreh (Gen 12:6) is identical with the plains of Moreh (אָלוֹנֵי מֹרָה) in Deut 11:30 which appear in the plural form. The place was in the vicinity of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal near the city of Shechem. The mountains mentioned here are connected with the blessings on Mount Gerizim and curses on Mount Ebal. As in his translation in Genesis, Tagum Onkols and Jerome translated מִישַׁרָא *plain*, for אלוֹן. Ps-Jon has “on the side of the vision of Mamre,” and Neofiti “the

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<sup>10</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (The Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 1989),p.91.

<sup>11</sup> F. Stummer, “Convallis Mambre und verwandets,” *JPOS* 12(1932):6-12.

Plains of the Vision”. Interestingly Ps-Jon translated here instead of Moreh Mamre. We must remember that Mamre belongs to the Hebronite tradition and not the Shechemite tradition (Gen 13:18). The plural *elonê* which appears in our verse is usually combined with Mamre (13:18; 14:13; 18:1). Cassuto suggested that the avoidance of translating the word as tree came to prevent the reader from connecting the narrative with the Samaritan belief in the holiness of a certain local tree.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the Sifre uses the term “plain” and not the specific terebinth. This might reflect the Sifre’s interpretation that all references to this place are to the city of Shechem.<sup>13</sup>

Tigay, claims that the place *elonê Moreh* was named for Canaanite diviners who once gave oracles at the trees. According to him, “Moreh” probably means “oracle giver”.<sup>14</sup> Driver says that Moreh is not a proper name but an appellative. The verb *הורה* indicates “direction” given by priests who gave answers to those who came to consult the oracle.<sup>15</sup> Weinfeld points to the fact that the author of Deuteronomy prohibits the planting of sacred trees at the temple (16:21); therefore, he intentionally changed “the oak” into “oaks” to indicate that it was not a sacred tree but: “a grove or a small wood serving some aesthetic or practical purpose (for shade or the like).”<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, The Samaritan text and the LXX have the singular oak here.

## C. Land mark and sheltered places

It is more likely however, that *אלון מורה* *elon Moreh* served as land mark since the Bible tells us that: “Abraham passed through the land

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<sup>12</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on The Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abraham (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1964),p. 326.

<sup>13</sup> Reuven Hammer, *Sifre A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1986),pp.113-112.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffery H.Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (The Jewish Publication Society: Philedelphia, 1996),p.117.

<sup>15</sup> S. R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T. Clark, 1951), p.134.

<sup>16</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11* (AB 5; Doubleday: New York, 1991), p.453.

as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh.”(Gen 12:6). By mentioning the tree the Bible gives us the precise location of Abraham’s dwelling. Indeed in verse 8 we read “From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.” Moreover, there isn’t any hint that Abraham was engaged in tree worship. The only religious act that the Bible describes in our text is the building of an altar. However, we must stress that this act followed the theophany. Abraham built the altar in gratitude for the promise of the land. As Sarna pointed out the patriarchs do not take part in existing cults; they always built new altars and used them.<sup>17</sup> Similarly Augustine Pagolu says that Abraham’s building an altar: “suggests that there had been no altar beforehand, which in turn suggests that there also been no shrine there.”<sup>18</sup>

Scholars who point to tree worshipping base it on ancient tradition that existed among the other nations and to the etymology of the word Moreh. However, Moreh can be interpreted in different ways as we see with the Targumim. It is noteworthy to point to Gen 22:2 which speaks of the Land of Moriah as the site of Isaac’s binding. Thus, can we say that people addressed the mountain in the land of Moriah for an oracle?

In the Book of Genesis the patriarchs are depicted as nomads who dwelled in tents and were constantly on the move, traveling for fresh pasture. Throughout their travels, they wandered to sites in the central mountain region and the Negev. Due to the climate, they traveled to the northern part of the Negev in the winter and spring and to the central mountain area in the summer and autumn.<sup>19</sup> From a geographical point of view, it appears that the patriarchs limited their migration to the area between Dotan and Beer Sheba, and thus avoided the northern part of the country, the coastal plain, and the Jordan River. Those parts of the land they avoided were extensively

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<sup>17</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p.92.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine Pagolu, *The Religion of the Patriarchs*, p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> S.Yevin, “Beer-Sheba the Patriarchal City,” *Zion* 20 (1953): 120(Hebrew).

populated with fortified urban centers.<sup>20</sup> We must remember that the patriarchs were heads of small nomadic groups that had to avoid military confrontations. On the other hand, the central mountain area and the Negev were less populated and, consequently, without a dominant power.<sup>21</sup> A closer observation of the path of their migration reveals some relevant information. The patriarchs stayed close to the cities, but they did not enter the cities or live in them unless compelled by danger of famine.<sup>22</sup> The patriarchs stayed close to urban centers where they could barter for the domestic necessities they required.

M.B. Rowton pointed out already that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C that the hapiru bands were very active in areas with considerable woodland, rocky land and roving nomadic tribes. According to him it was because it was very difficult to control effectively this kind of land with the military equipment available in antiquity.<sup>23</sup> It is not the purpose of this article to answer the long scholarly dispute: Are the hapiru and Hebrew related? However, we can see that Abraham follows a similar path. Abraham also lived in rocky areas of the central mountain which had considerable woodland and was less populated. We must remember that there was much more woodland in the second millennium B.C.E than there is today. The rocky area

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<sup>20</sup> S. M. Paul and W. G. Dever, eds., *Biblical Archaeology* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co., 1973), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), p. 47; S.

S. Yeivin, "Studies in the Patriarchal Period," *Beth Mikra* 16 (1963): 19 (Hebrew).

<sup>22</sup> M. Haran, "Descriptive Outline of the Religion of the Patriarchs," in *Oz Le David*, eds. Y. Kaufman et al. (Jerusalem: Kiryat-sefer, 1964), p.50 (Hebrew); Paul and Dever, eds., *Biblical Archaeology*, p.8.

<sup>23</sup> M. B. Rowton, "The Topological Factor in the Habiru Problem," in *Studies in Honor of Benno Landsberger on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. H. G. Güterbock and T. Jacobsen, (*Assyriological Studies* 16; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965), pp. 375-387.



with its woodland provided good cover. Thus it is also possible that Abraham lived next to trees because of safety reasons.

### **3. A. Terebinths of Mamre**

In addition to the terebinth of Moreh, we read in the Book of Genesis about Terebinths of Mamre. In two passages אֶל־נֵי־מַמְרָא *elonê Mamre* appears as a name for Abraham's dwelling place (Gen13:18; 18:1); which was located at Hebron (13:18). While the third passage Gen 14:13 makes reference to אֶל־נֵי־מַמְרָא with the personal name "Mamre the Amorite", brother of Eshcol and Aner. The LXX translated all three of these verses as 'oak of Mamre' (τὴν δρῦν τὴν Μαμβρη) where the oak is named Mamre, in the singular form. Also, in the Peshita it was translated in a singular form בלוטא *blwth* and in Arabic بلوط is an oak.<sup>24</sup> The singular oak appears also in the Testament of Abraham as the dwelling place of Abraham (1:2). While, Ramban in his commentary on Gen 14:6 says that the correct translation of אֶל־נֵי־מַמְרָא should be 'the oaks of Mamre' in the plural.

The Targum on the other hand did not translate the word tree. Thus, in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan we find בחזוי ממרא "in the vision of Mamre," a place you can see from afar as a plain place. Nf has "the plain of the Vision". Oneklos, translates all three verses as "plain of Mamre". In Midrash Rabbah 42 we find two views, one of R. Judah who translates plain of Mamre, while R. Nehemiah translates "palace of Mamre". The translation of 'plain' may be based on the similarity to the Greek word ἀλλῶν which means plain. Ginsberg speculated that in Hebrew existed a word אֶל־וֹן and in Ugaritic אֶל־וֹן which means plain. According to him, the word was known to the Jews of Palestine; however, it doesn't appear in the Bible with this meaning.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See also Gen. 35:8 were the Hebrew אֶל־וֹן render in NF as *blwth*; cf. Gen. R. 15,1.

<sup>25</sup> H. L. Ginsberg, "Ba'lu and his Brethren," *JPOS* 16(1936):142.

As to modern scholars it was de Vaux who claimed that a syncretistic cult was practiced there, therefore, the place is not mentioned in the Bible outside of the Book of Genesis. Whenever the place is mentioned it seems to be deliberately obscured. According to him, the plural in the MT, “the Oaks of Mamre,” represents an attempt “to water down the superstitious veneration of a particular tree.” Thus the singular version is the older reading.<sup>26</sup> However, as we shall see below, it appears that it was translated “oak,” in the singular form, because in the later period people would point at a certain oak as Abraham’s oak. It was Augustine Pagolu who pointed out correctly that the growth of legends around Mamre does not prove that the place was sacred during the patriarchal period. In addition he says there is no archeological evidence of occupation at Mamre in the first half of the second millennium.<sup>27</sup>

## B. Mamre the Amorite

We already mentioned that in Gen 14:13 Mamre appears as a personal name, Mamre the Amorite. Lipiński suggested to read 14:13 “he (i.e., Abraham) was dwelling at the Amorite sanctuary of Mamre;” thus Mamre can be a divine name or epithet “the (fatted) calf”- *mamrēc* being a toponymic form, \**ma-mrīc*, derived from S. Canaanite *mērīc* “fatted calf.”<sup>28</sup> Arbeitman, on the other hand, says that the name *mamre* is a Hebrew representation of the Hittite *mu-mar*, meaning friendship, peaceful relations, alliance”.<sup>29</sup> He also points to the associations of Hittites within the Hebron area (Gen 23). The Hittite *miu-mar* is semantically identical to Hebron “place of ally confederate”. His conclusion is that the author of Genesis 14

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<sup>26</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, trans. John Mchugh (Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1961), p. 292.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine Pagolu, *The Religion of the Patriarchs*, p.60.

<sup>28</sup> Lipiński, E. “CAnaq-Kiryat cArbac-Hebron et ses sanctuaries tribaux VT 24(1974):41-55.

<sup>29</sup> Yoël. L. Arbeitman, “Mamre,” *ABD* 4(1992):492.

later personified the name but the original tradition was “(Abraham) was dwelling at the Amorite sanctuary of Alliance”.<sup>30</sup>

The name Mamre is a non- Semitic name and does not appear outside of Genesis. In Gen 14:13, 24, we read that Mamre was Abraham’s ally. Rashi says that Mamre was the name of the owner. Similarly, Westerman says Mamre is the name of a person in Gen 14:13, 24.<sup>31</sup> However, according to the Ramban, whenever the Torah mentions Mamre alone, not with the plain of Mamre, as in 23:19 and 35:27, it is another name of a city (Hebron). Indeed Eusebius in the Onomasticon says that Mambre is Chebron where Abraham’s tomb is.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Jerome says that Mambre is Chebron, beside which Abraham was buried with Isaac and Jacob. As Eusebius, he says it was called Mambre for one of the friends of Abraham.<sup>33</sup> Most likely, Mamre was the name of an important family and the name was given to the city or to one of its quarters.

### **C. Mamre in History**

From testimonies of historians, we read that the place was considered a holy place through the centuries. The Jewish historian Josephus mentioned a very ancient tree north west of Hebron that was famous in the Second Temple times.<sup>34</sup> He calls this tree “Ogyges,” who was the mythical king of Athens said to have survived the flood that destroyed the human race. Hence, Josephus mentioned Ogyges in order to emphasize the antiquity of Abraham. Indeed, in another statement, he said that about three-fourths of a mile from the city of Hebron stood a huge terebinth tree since the creation of the world. The author of *Itinerarium Burdigalense* 333

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.493.

<sup>31</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, p. 181.

<sup>32</sup> The Onomasticon by Eusebius of Caesarea, trans. G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville (Carta: Jerusalem. 2003), p. 70.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *Wars* 4.533; *Ant* 1.186

A.D mentions the tree under which Abraham sat and dug his well, spoke with the angels and ate food with them.<sup>35</sup>

It was under this famous tree that the sale of Jewish slaves took place. There Hadrian sold the captives of the Bar Kokhba War into slavery. In the Talmud and Midrash, the site of Mamre is mentioned as Butnah(Butnan), a site of the trade fair for slavery.<sup>36</sup> It was forbidden to take part in this fair and it was considered idolatry. It was Constantine who ordered the destruction of the pagan temple next to the oak tree and instead a beautiful basilica was built. During the Crusades period, many pilgrims visited the tree and it was customary to hold the Feast of the Trinity connecting it to the feast that Abraham had with the three angels. According to the Chronicles of Jerahmeel the wood of the tree was used for medicinal purposes because it was believed that the usage of it prevented any illness.<sup>37</sup>

The pagan cult which was developed through the ages at elonê Mamre was the main reason why the Aramaic translators avoided translating the word tree. This was done in order to remove any association of Abraham with the pagan cult. The “Oak of Abraham” was venerated and many popular legends were ascribed to it. Many legends grew as a result of the association of Biblical Historical figures with different trees. With the passing of time the trees were thought to be sacred. Since people pointed to a certain oak as the oak of Abraham, the translators followed a similar path and translated it in the singular form, Oak of Mamre, and not in the plural as it should be.

## **D. Land mark for dwelling and Shade**

Reading Gen 13:18;14:13;18:1 shows that Mamre was Abraham’s dwelling place. Therefore, we read in the Hebrew Bible: “and came

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<sup>35</sup> *Itinerary from Bordeaux to Jerusalem*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: Adelphi, 1887), p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> TJ. AV. Zar. 1:4 38d; Gen. R. 47:10.

<sup>37</sup> *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, trans. M.Gaster (Ktav: New York, 1971), p.78.

to dwell (וַיֵּשֶׁב) at the terebinths of Mamre”(13:18); “The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre ; he was sitting(וַיֹּשֶׁב) at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.”(18:1); while in 14:13 “who was dwelling (שָׁכַן) at the terebinths of Mamre the Amorite”. In the first two verses, the Hebrew Bible uses the root ישב which means to sit, remain, or dwell. In 14:13 the Hebrew Bible uses the word שָׁכַן which means to camp or to sit in a place. One of the derivatives of the root is שָׁכַן , which means neighbor; thus, the narrative comes to tell us that Abraham was dwelling in the neighborhood of Mamre the Amorite, the brother of Eshkol and Aner. From the three occurrences of Mamre in the Book of Genesis only 13:18 refers to Mamre as a place of worship, but this is after God appeared to Abraham. Here we read that Abraham built an altar to God. As we mentioned before, this was the pattern in the book of Genesis, following the theophany we find the building of an altar to commemorate the event.

According to 18:1 the Oak of Mamre gave shade to Abraham. In a later legend we read that the Oak of Mamre gives shade to the righteous but withdraws its cover from the unrighteous.<sup>38</sup> Travelers were resting at midday in shade of the tree, as we read about the angels who came to visit Abraham (Gen 18:4, 8); similarly we read about the man of God who was sitting under the *terebinth* (1 Kgs 13:14). As we know, the oak is among the best shade trees in the land of Israel. It stands as tall as high as 20-25 feet, with a thick trunk and heavy branches. As we pointed out before, the book of Deuteronomy and other biblical texts condemn the places of worship “on the hills, under every verdant tree’ (Deut 12:2; 1Kgs 14:23; 2Kgs 16:4; 17:10; Jer 2:20; Ezek 6:13; Hos 4:13).<sup>39</sup> However, careful reading of these verses reveals that there isn’t any tree worshiping in those texts. What the Bible tells us is that the Israelites worshiped other Gods on mountains and under trees. The reason for choosing trees as the site of a sanctuary was because of the cool shade offered by a densely leafed tree. Indeed in Hos 4:13 we read: “They sacrifice

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<sup>38</sup> *Zohar* 1.102b.

<sup>39</sup> According to Winton Thomas תחת כל עץ רענן the reference is to a luxuriant tree thick with leaves. See: D. Winton Thomas, “ Some Observations on the Hebrew Word רַעֲנָן,” *VTS* 16(1967):387-397.

on the mountaintops, and offer on the hills, under oaks, poplars, and terebinths, whose shade is so pleasant.” The trees that are mentioned in our verse are not fruit bearing trees, they were chosen because their shade is good; thus they were deemed to be a proper setting for the worship of idols. According to Wolff “the shade of the trees is praised because it increases the pleasure of the sacrificial meals.”<sup>40</sup> He also added that the trees’ shadows served the other activities namely the sex rites. Keel claims that ‘the shadow’ of trees favored sexuality, eroticism and fecundity. According to him the trees in Canaan: “signaled an intense presence of mother earth blessings, to have sex under a tree meant to participate in her blessing and fecundity.”<sup>41</sup> He sees the verse from Hos 4:12-13 as the oldest example of polemic against tree cult.<sup>42</sup>

## 4. *Tamarisk*

### A. The different interpretations of Eshel

In Gen 21:33, we read that Abraham planted *eshel* (לִשְׁתֵּל) at Beer-sheba and invoked the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. The *eshel* לִשְׁתֵּל is also mentioned in I Sam 22:6; 31:13. In Arabic the tamarisk is called *athl* أثل which corresponds to the biblical eshel; thus it is probably one of the Tamarisk trees, namely Tamarisk aphylla or to another species of the genus. The LXX translated that Abraham planted a field (ἀρουραν), the Greek word represented an area of agricultural land as 100 square cubits.<sup>43</sup> This translation came to remove suspicion that Abraham had planted an item associated with pagan worship. Symmachus translated a “plantation,” Aquila a thicket. While in Ps-J and Neofiti 1, and Frg.

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<sup>40</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea*, trans. by Gary Stansell (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1974), p. 86.

<sup>41</sup> Othmar Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, (JSOTSUP 261; Sheffield Academic Press: England, 1998), p.54

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Herodotus II.14; Philo, *De Plant.*75; Robert Hayward, “Abraham as Proselytizer at Beer-Sheba in the Targums of the Pentateuch,” *JJS* 49(1998):25-26.

Tg. on Gen 21:33, we read that Abraham planted an orchard or garden. Ps-J added to the text 'and in it he prepared food and drink for those who went and came.' While Targum Neofiti 1 says: 'and within it gave food to the passerby.' This edition of the text was motivated by the understanding of the Hebrew word אָשֶׁל. Accordingly, it became acrostic of the words אכילה eating ; שתיה drinking; and לוייה escorting and came to portray Abraham as a model of hospitality.

A different interpretation to the word אָשֶׁל is found in Gen. Rab . 54:6 : "R. Judah said, *Eshel* means orchard, the word meaning "ask" (she'al) for whatever you wish, figs, grapes or pomegranates. R. Nehemiheah said: Eshel means "an inn," the word connoting, ask whatever you desire, meat, wine, or eggs.<sup>44</sup> Allison pointed out that instead of the people asking for the fruits of Abraham's orchard or for meals prepared at Abraham's inn, it would be easier to associate the asking with the tree itself. Therefore, a contributor or Testament of Abraham associated Abraham אָשֶׁל with שָׂאל thus Abraham planted a tree that responds to questions, i.e. an oracle.<sup>45</sup> To bolster his study he points to Ezek 21:26 where שָׂאל is used in consulting an oracle and in Hos 4:12 consulting a tree or wood. However a question should be raised can someone plant a holy tree?

## **B. The Testament of Abraham**

Like the legends that were developed around elonê Mamre, we also find an interesting testimony in the Testament of Abraham about the eshel. In spite of its title "testament" this book exhibits only a few traits of testimony genre, and it is more related to the apocalyptic dramas. It is believed by scholars that the book was composed between 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E up to 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E. In chapter 1 we read that God sent Michael to prepare Abraham for his upcoming death. The archangel appeared in the field as human to Abraham and was invited to Abraham's house (ch.2). On the way home, Abraham

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<sup>44</sup> See also Sotah 10a.

<sup>45</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr. *The Testament of Abraham* (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2003), pp.111-112.

understands the language of the tree. According to the Long Recension, it was a cypress tree, while the Short Recension mentions a tamarisk. Abraham hears the tamarisk tree with its three hundred and thirty one branches (the Hebrew אשל by Gematria is 331) singing a song about some misfortune (3:3). Tears fall from his eyes as he was washing the feet of the archangel. Michael also weeps, his tears turning to pearls, which Abraham catches hiding them under his cloak.

Trees don't speak in the Hebrew Bible. We find trees that speak in the form of a fable. Thus, in Judg 9:8-15, we read Jotham's poetic speech about the trees that looked for a tree to rule over them. The crown was offered to different trees and each tree apart of the last one refused. In 2Kgs 14:9 we read that Jehoash of Israel sent back this message to the King Amaziah of Judah: "The thistle in Lebanon sent this message to the cedar in Lebanon, 'Give your daughter to my son in marriage.' But a wild beast in Lebanon went by and trampled down the thistle." In addition, we have several verses in a poetic form where the meadows and trees are praising God (Ps 65:14; 96:12; 148:9; Isa 35:1-2; 44:23; 55:12; 1Chron 16:33). A similar description is also found in the Talmud Hag 14b in the story about R. Johanan b. Zakkai. Legends were developed about the trees of Eden as being able to speak. Thus in the treatise Aboth d. R.Nathan we read that when the serpent tried to touch the Tree of Knowledge to prove that God's prohibition was unnecessary, the Tree spoke and said: 'Villain, don't touch me' and in addition, quoted a verse from Ps 36:12 "Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked shake me".<sup>46</sup> Legend is also found in Targum Sheni on Esther, where we read about several trees that spoke and gave their reason why Haman should not be hanged upon them.<sup>47</sup> The story in some aspect is very similar to the Jotham's fable.

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<sup>46</sup> *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, translation and commentary by Anthony J.Saldarini, S.J. (Leiden : E. J. Brill,1975),chapter 1,p.33

<sup>47</sup> *The Two Targums of Esther*, translated, with Apparatus and Note by Bernard Grossfeld (Liturgical Press: Collegeville Minnesota, 1991), chap 7,pp.181-183.



## C. Place of Judgment and Burial

Tamarisk is also mentioned in 1Sam 22:6 where we read: “Saul was then in Gibeah, sitting under tamarisk tree on the height.”(22:6). In contrast to Genesis where Targum Jonathan translates eshel for “orchard,” it here translates eshel as tamarisk. The LXX is consistent and here translates eshel as a field (ἄρουραν). A similar description to our verse is also found in 1Sam 14:2, where we read: “Now Saul was staying on the outskirts of Gibeah, under the pomegranate tree of Migron.” In Jud 4:5 we read that the prophetess Deborah, who was judging Israel, would sit under the ‘palm of Deborah’ as the people of Israel came up unto her judgment. The verb yāšabh (sit) is used in the Bible in the sense of presiding as Judge (1Kgs 21:8; Isa 28:6; Ps 9:7). It is unlikely that the author describes the prophetess as having her house or tent beneath a holy tree as some scholars speculated.<sup>48</sup> This description of sitting and judging people was prevalent during the period of the Judges and early monarchical period. Later however, we read that the kings were sitting in their palaces on the throne of Justice (1Kgs 7:7-8). King Saul, like the prophetess Deborah, was sitting under a tree to judge the people of Israel. Indeed, in Gen R. 54:6 which we mentioned earlier we read: R. ‘Azariah said in the name of R. Judah: Eshel means a court of law, as in the verse, *Now Saul was visiting in Gibeah under the eshel in Ramah.*

In 1Sam 31:11-13 we read about the burial of King Saul and his sons. According to the story, the people of Jabesh-gilead removed the bodies of Saul and his sons and then burned them, burying the bones under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh. As in I Sam 22:6 Targum Jonathan translates here tamarisk for eshel, while the LXX, field (ἄρουραν). Interestingly, in the parallel text of 1Chron10:11-12, there is no mention of the burning of the bodies. Here we read that they buried the bones, but this time it was under an oak tree. According to McCarter terebinth is a “far more frequently mentioned

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<sup>48</sup> C.F. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (Ktav: New York, 1970),p.86

tree and therefore less likely have been original to the account.”<sup>49</sup> Burial under a tree is also mention in Gen 35:8. Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse died and was buried under the oak below Bethel and it was named Allon-bacuth, which is interpreted to mean “the oak of weeping”. Gunkel pointed to fairy tales and legends in which the soul of the dead dwells in such trees.<sup>50</sup>

According to Keel: “since the dead are said to return to the womb whence they came (Job 1.21; Sir 40.1; Ps 90.3,5 cf. Gen 1.11-12;Ps 139.15), the trees, at least in these two passages, are related to the mother earth.”<sup>51</sup> However, it is more likely that Deborah, Rachel’s nurse and King Saul and his sons were buried under a tree because trees served as a memorial to the dead. Genesis 35 that records the death of Deborah recounts also the death of Rachel. Interestingly, we read that Jacob set up a pillar, a stone memorial marker over her grave (v.20). In contrast, there is no pillar over Deborah’s grave. Instead, her memory was kept alive by the oak of weeping, which her grave was beneath. The bones of Saul and his sons were buried first under the tamarisk which served as memorial to them. Later, however, we read that King David took the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan and gave them an honorable burial. King David reburied them in the family grave (2 Sam 21:14). Even today there is a custom in the state of Israel in which trees are planted for preserving the memory of the dead. There is also a possibility that the trees helped people to identify the burial site. Indeed, in the story of the purchase of the cave of Machpelah by Abraham, for a burial site for his wife Sarah, we read that he purchased the cave and all the trees around the field (Gen 23:17). Specifications of trees in land sale were common in ancient contracts at all periods. Indeed, the Babylonian bill of sale listed trees along property.<sup>52</sup> From the second temple period we read that a person who purchases a field with trees in it, had a claim for

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<sup>49</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel* (AB 8; Doubleday: Garden City, New York, 1980), p. 442.

<sup>50</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, p.368.

<sup>51</sup> Othmar Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh*, p.49.

<sup>52</sup> Eberhard Schrader, *Keilinschriftliche bibliothek* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1889-1915),iv.101,161,165.

the ground around it.<sup>53</sup> Thus it is possible that burial under trees served as a land mark for the burial and claim of ownership.

## D. Planting a Tree.

Genesis 21:33 is the only place where Abraham plants a tree. We are not told why Abraham planted the tree. According to Gunkel, Abraham is a cult founder, but we should ask 'can one plant a holy tree'?'<sup>54</sup> According to Benno Jacob the reason for the planting of the tree was that "The tree shall be a permanent memorial of the event."<sup>55</sup> When Abraham planted the tree he saw it as a marker for the place where he called on his God. Tree planting is similar to altar building and marked the foundation of the great shrine of Beersheba. However, there is no evidence for any previous sanctity of the place. The Patriarch does not use any cultic objects. According to Radak, Abraham planted the tree next to the well as a testimony that the well belonged to him, it was a public demonstration of his undisputed ownership of the well. We have to remember that trees were often used to mark the boundary between fields belonging to different owners. By planting the tree Abraham was claiming the territory, for which he had made an agreement with Abimelech as rightfully his.

The *eshel* that Abraham planted was probably *Tamarix aphylla* which is found in the Negev and not *Tamarix pentadra* which is common to the Sinai desert. It is a tall tree that requires very little water and suitable to the sandy soil of the northern Negev desert area. It is noted for its cool shade and ability to withstand heat and dry spells. In addition, it was used as a fuel for cooking. The Bedouin planted this tree because of its soft branches, which the flocks eat. Thus it is possible that Abraham in addition to his demonstration of ownership planted the tree for shade, for fuel, and food for the flocks. It is interesting to note that Abraham's first stop in the Promise land was by a tree (Gen12:6). In 13:18 He built an altar by

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<sup>53</sup> Baba Bathra 82b; Mish. Baba Bathra 5:4.

<sup>54</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 233.

<sup>55</sup> B. Jacob, *The First Book of The Bible: Genesis*, trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (Ktav: New York, 1974), p.141.

the tree of Mamre. He lived near trees (14:13), and in 18:1 he entertained Yahweh under the trees. Finally here he plants a tree.

## **5. Conclusions**

The terebinth of Moreh, terebinths of Mamre, and Tamarisk were land marks which marked the place of habitat of the Patriarch Abraham. In ancient times trees were often used to mark the boundary between fields belonging to different owners. The rocky area with its woodland also provided good cover. Thus Abraham lived in area which had a considerable amount of trees for safety reasons. In addition, trees also had some other practical usage such as shade, fuel for cooking, or food for the flock. People were also buried under trees which served as a memorial to the dead as a land mark and as a sign of ownership. With the passing of time, and because of the association with important biblical figures, the places became sacred. Review of the Book of Genesis shows that there is no trace of the patriarchs' engaging in any religious rites at these trees. It is only in later periods that we read about the Israelites who worshiped Yahweh 'on high mountains, on hills under any spreading tree (Deut 12:2; 1Kgs 14:23; Jer 2:20). It was this late Bible reading and later traditions which associated Abraham and sacred trees. Thus, not surprisingly the Aramaic translators avoided translating the word "tree." Instead they give it a different meaning in order to avoid any association of Abraham with paganism.

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