

Wood, trees, and timber

Although the environment of the Bible includes much dry, dusty land, trees do figure in significant ways. Zaccheus climbs a sycamore to see Jesus over the crowd (Luke 19: 1-10), the psalmist hangs his harp upon the riverside trees (Psalm 137:2), and cedars spread their elegant shade over the land. But most attention is focused on food trees: low growing olives, pomegranates, vines and figs. Their importance is in their fruitfulness; such trees are nurtured and tended for the food they provide. The Song of Songs (5) refers to the beloved as a special garden of precious things: an abundant richness. A barren tree is a useless luxury for the ordinary person, as Jesus demonstrated when he withered the fig tree (Matthew 21:20). He makes a spiritual point, - we too should bear fruit for the One who nurtures us. The ultimate spiritual tree is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. It bears a spiritual fruit, not one to assuage physical hunger, but a test of obedience - and which of us could keep our sticky fingers off it?

But the Bible says that God in his mercy also allows us to help ourselves out of the consequences of disobedience. If we grow trees, we can also cut and work them and so out of our industry come images of our salvation. Noah is charged to build a ship out of wood to specific instructions and this folly on dry land becomes the image of salvation when the rain falls. So too, when Jesus comes to die in order that we may have eternal life, he brings with him a wooden artefact, the cross, a thing made by human hands to effect torture and death, but turned into a symbol of life everlasting. What we do with natural materials is significant: the emptied ark is the vehicle of salvation; the empty cross a triumph over death itself.



USDA photo