

Exploring Natural Themes *and* Symbolism *in* Biblical Literature

In teaching English and Bible at the high school level, I always look for ways to make the content clearer and more relevant to my students. I frequently use the Bible as a textbook—not only in religion class, but also for teaching biblical literature in my English classes.

Although the Bible is full of natural themes and symbolism, these allusions are mostly foreign to us, since modern society has moved away from an agrarian lifestyle. Everything from the challenges of sheepherding¹ to the planting of seeds² are unfamiliar to most children (and many adults!). If students fail to understand the symbols in natural references, they will certainly not comprehend the theological message embedded in that symbolism. For example, a student who has never seen a vineyard may have difficulty in understanding what Jesus was trying to convey when He used the grapevine for a metaphor of our connection with Him.³ Whether natural references are literal or symbolic, a clearer understanding of the natural world as described in the Bible will help us and our students to better understand the passages that include these elements.

This article will use a Bible passage with unfamiliar natural references as a case study of how to aid student understanding of this



and similar texts. I will also provide ideas for incorporating nature education in religion and English classes to increase student understanding of the Bible.

A Difficult Passage

The story of Jotham illustrates how a teacher can include nature education to provide insight about the meaning of a passage.⁴ Jotham, the youngest member of his family, is distraught when Abimelech kills all of his brothers in order to secure the throne. In Judges 9:8-15, Jotham marches to the top of

Mount Gerezim and tells a story that symbolizes what has happened to his family and the nation:

8 “Once the trees went forth to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us!’

9 “But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my fatness with which God and men are honored, and go to wave over the trees?’

10 “Then the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come, reign over us!’

11 “But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to wave over the trees?’

12 “Then the trees said to the vine, ‘You come, reign over us!’

13 “But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my new wine, which

BY CHRISTY YINGLING



If students fail to understand the symbols in natural references, they will certainly not comprehend the theological message embedded in that symbolism.

cheers God and men, and go to wave over the trees?’

14 “Finally all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come, reign over us!’

15 “The bramble said to the trees, ‘If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon’” (NASB).

Jotham uses indigenous plants as symbols of the injustice done to his family and his nation. However, it is very unlikely that my students have ever seen a fig tree or a cedar of Lebanon, making it difficult for them to understand the story.

How to Promote Understanding

The first challenge to understanding such references is a lack of knowledge about the flora and fauna. Even if a student has seen a picture of the item mentioned, he or she probably doesn’t know enough about it to make a connection to the name or to remember it when reading the passage. The second challenge:



Students probably know little about specific characteristics of the natural element that caused the author to use it as a symbol.

1. Teacher-Supervised Student Research

Several resources can help fill these gaps. Online resources can address both of these challenges. Google images provide a large collection of pictures for most topics.⁵ These images will show your students not only what the natural item looks like, but also provide an idea of scale. In looking up the plants in Jotham's parable, for example, I searched for "olive tree," "fig tree," "grapevine," "bramble," and "cedar of Lebanon." Each search produced pictures of the plant in dif-

The story of Jotham illustrates how a teacher can include nature education to provide insight about the meaning of a passage.

ferent stages of growth, photos with people to show scale, close-up shots of leaves and fruit, artists' renditions of the plant, and related images.

In researching the plant references in Judges 9, I found a descending hierarchy in both size and importance. Olive trees are valued because they produce olives and olive oil. The olive branch is a symbol of peace. The fig tree is smaller and less valuable than the olive tree, but also important for its fruit. The grapevine is smaller than the fig tree, but the fruit provides a financial benefit to its owner, though to a lesser degree than the other plants. This hierarchy ends with the lowly bramble, which is not very useful and has thorns that can harm those who try to destroy it, including even the giant cedar of Lebanon.

Along with the pictures of these plants, the teacher can provide some background information, or have students do further research about the characteristics of natural objects in books, magazines, encyclopedias, or a print library.⁶ They can also search for full-length books or magazine articles on the Internet.⁷

In Jotham's parable, the valuable plants that were offered the kingship represented those men who were more interested in the community than their own power. It could be that some of Gideon's other sons had been offered the kingship, and—judging from the natural symbols used for those sons—they were probably far more qualified than Abimelech. However, like Gideon their father, they felt it unnecessary to leave positions of value to the community to fulfill a role they believed should belong to God.⁸ Jotham points out the irony of a mere thorn bush offering shade and protection for the people—certainly impossible based on its size and properties.⁹ The irony in this passage could be lost if we fail to explore the symbolism.

2. Outdoor Learning Projects

Beyond Internet and library research, the best way to remedy students' lack of knowledge about nature is to give them firsthand experience by embedding information about the natural elements in the curriculum. While many allusions will not be indigenous to your area, others will be familiar. Even if the plant does not grow locally, you may be able to find one that has a similar appearance or characteristics.

Students generally learn most effectively when using all of their senses. That is why outdoor education is so important. While immersed in nature, students can see, touch, smell, hear, and sometimes even taste the natural objects they are studying. Although nature projects may require



some preparation in the classroom, the majority of time will be spent outdoors. The suggestions listed below can be cooperative projects that involve elementary and secondary students, or may be adapted to fit either group.

Bible Garden

Try creating a garden that is either partially or fully composed of plants that appear in the Bible. This is an excellent way for students to see the fruits of their labor while getting practical, hands-on experience with plants mentioned in the Scriptures. Begin by asking students to read Bible passages (from a list provided by the teacher) and to identify each plant referred to in these texts.¹⁰ Next, have students investigate whether these plants will grow in their region, and find substitute plants if necessary. Have them prepare the soil and plant the seeds. Allow some time each week for maintenance. Here is a list of helpful online resources:

- <http://www.biblicalgardens.org/>. Includes all the information you need to get started, including a growing zone map and many helpful links with further information. Also included are some activities for younger elementary children.
- <http://www.wikibin.org/articles/list-of-plants-for-biblical>

Beyond Internet and library research, the best way to remedy students' lack of knowledge about nature is to give them firsthand experience by embedding information about the natural elements in the curriculum.

[gardens.html](http://www.biblicalgardens.org/gardens.html). Contains a list of plants for a biblical garden.

- <http://www.raingardens.com/seedpage/bible.htm>; <http://www.borghesegardens.com/bible.htm>. Order seeds at these sites to create a biblical garden.

Practical Parables

Another project to help students understand natural symbols and themes is to have them read one of Jesus' parables and then go outdoors to either (1) act it out, or (2) find items in nature that appear in the story. Start with the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-8. Ask your students to locate local places similar to the locations in the parable where the seeds fell. Then get some seeds and have students scatter them in those places, placing markers so they can

find them later. Discuss with your students the significance of the symbolism in the parable. Wait a few weeks (check germination time on the seed package), then go back to the marked places to see whether the seeds came up. Finish your discussion of symbolism by asking the students to describe what they observed.

Many Bible texts lend themselves well to hands-on activities. One example is Matthew 7:16, which says, "You will



know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?” After having students research the plants using Google images or another source, take them outside to look for a thorn bush and a thistle. After everyone has examined the plants, discuss the significance of the symbols.

Try creating a garden that is either partially or fully composed of plants that appear in the Bible.

relationship with Him. Depending on available time and grade level, students could do more extensive research on their chosen topic and create a more elaborate object lesson.

Some topics may work well for academy students to present as children’s stories at elementary school worship or church.

Student-Created Object Lessons

After students have studied the parables of Jesus, ask them to create their own object lessons using items they find in nature. Start by taking them outside to look for three or four items. Ask them to research each item, and then to use the information to create a spiritual lesson they can present to the rest of the class.

Suppose a student comes back with a pine cone taken from an Eastern white pine, a conifer indigenous to regions between the Appalachian Mountains, in the U.S., to parts of southern Canada. Internet research reveals the following information about Eastern white pine cones: “Widely spaced dominant trees with full crowns produce the most seeds per cone.”¹¹ This could illustrate how God can help us produce more seeds for evangelism when we (1) are willing to go out of our Adventist communities and our comfort zones, and (2) allow Him to continually develop our “crowns,” helping us move into a deeper





OLIVES

Conclusion

Natural themes and symbols occur throughout the Scriptures. To understand the Bible writers' message, we must understand the object lessons they used. Children learn about the unknown through the known. If they don't understand the symbol, they can't understand the spiritual lesson.

Ellen White reminds us of the importance of nature education in every content area when she says, "God is love' is written upon every opening bud, upon every spire of springing grass . . . the delicately tinted flowers in their perfection perfuming the air, the lofty trees of the forest with their rich foliage of living green—all testify to the tender, fatherly care of our God and to His desire to make His children happy."¹² By integrating nature education with the English and Bible curriculum, we can not only help students understand symbolism in biblical literature, but also, and more important, we can help them understand God's character—His love for us and His desire for our happiness. ☞



Christy Yingling has taught English, Bible, and French at the high school level, most recently serving as the English Teacher and Librarian at Battle Creek Academy in Battle Creek, Michigan. Ms. Yingling is currently a full-time student pursuing a Master's degree in English at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. She is co-author of the book *Prime Time Living* (Pacific Press, 2005).

Prime Time Living (Pacific Press, 2005).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A lack of knowledge that would challenge our understanding of John 10:1-16.
2. Such as in the Parable of the Sower in Luke 8:4-15.
3. John 15:1-8.
4. All Bible texts are cited from the New American Standard Bible. Scripture texts credited to NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977.
5. See <http://images.google.com>. Please note that this site may contain images that are inappropriate for your students. Do a preview before asking your students to conduct any search.
6. Some search engines that will provide pictures as well as basic information include Google, Yahoo, and Dogpile (a combination of Google, Yahoo, Search MSN, Live Search, and Ask search engines).
7. An excellent source for this: <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/browse?type=lcs&key=Nature%20in%20the%20Bible>. This Website provides a list of full-length books about various natural references in the Bible. This is better used as a teacher resource than a page for students. You could isolate the links you want to use (eliminating the home page) for more appropriate student use.
8. Judges 8:23.
9. See the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1977), vol. 2, pp. 360, 361.
10. To find an extensive list of possible passages to use, use a topical index for Bible study and search for terms such as "plants," "botany," or "animals." Bible Gateway has an excellent topical search tool and shows a large list of resources under both "botany" and "animals": <http://www.biblegateway.com/topical/>.
11. See http://www.na.fs.fed.us/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_1/pinus/strobus.htm.
12. Ellen White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1956), p. 10.



CEDAR OF LEBANON