P. J. N. LAWRENCE

Bĕrôš—A STUDY IN TRANSLATIONAL INCONSISTENCY

The author is Research Assistant to Emeritus Professor K. A. Kitchen, University of Liverpool, and lives in Liverpool, England.

Introduction

The tree known in Hebrew as *bĕrôš* is relatively common in the OT, occurring 20 times. A variant *bĕrôt* occurs in Song 1.17; this may be an Aramaic or Northern Palestinian form of the same[1]. No clear consensus has emerged as to how this particular tree's name should be translated, but four options are discernible:

1) "cypress" - one of the options cited by F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs[2]. This is the meaning of the word in the Talmud[3] and modern Hebrew[4].
2) "pine" - So NIV. This is more specifically *Pinus halepensis* "Aleppo pine."[5]
3) "juniper" - So L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner[6], and D. J. A. Clines[7]. This is more specifically *Juniperus phoenicia* "Phoenician juniper," based on an equation with the Akkadian *burāšu* "juniper."[8]
4) "fir" - So AV and RV, one of the options cited by Brown, Driver, and Briggs[9].

All these options are conifers and evergreens[10].

We should note that there are other words in biblical Hebrew that are sometimes advanced as having the meaning of the above. Thus "cypress" is *tĕ'aššur*[11], "pine" is *'ōren*[12], and "juniper" *'arār*, and possibly *'almug / 'algum*[13].

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1 F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), 141b.

2 *Ibid.*, 141a, has "cypress or fir."

3 M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud* (N. Y.: Chareb, 1926), 191a.

4 *A Modern Hebrew and English Dictionary* (Yale University Press), 27a; R. Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary* (Tel-Aviv/Jerusalem: Massada Publishing, 1965), 287b.

5 *Flora and Fauna* (United Bible Societies), 162.

6 L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebraisches und Aramaisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (Vol. 1; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 148b.

7 D. J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 2* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 261a.

8 W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1965), 139b, "Wacholder" = "juniper"; A. L. Oppenheim, *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, B* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1965), 322b; see also A. Salonen, *Die Möbel des Alten Mesopotamien* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Tiedeakatamian Toimituksia 127, 1963), 215. We should note however that R. Campbell Thompson, *A Dictionary of Assyrian Botany* (London: The British Academy, 1949), 258, argues that *burāšu* is "pine" and the aromatic substance of the same name "turpentine-resin."

9 F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *op. cit.*, 141a, has "cypress or fir." M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible,* 106, notes "whenever berosh is coupled with Lebanon and erez (cedar) it probably refers to Cilician Fir *Abies Cilicia.*"

10 B. Hora, *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Trees of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 64.

11 L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *op. cit.* (Vol. 4; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 1546a, NIV, NASB. These two versions also render *tirzah* in Isa 44.14 as "cypress."

12 So NIV, CEV. *'ōren* is the modern Hebrew for "pine." The Septuagint translated *tidhar* by *peukē* "pine" in Isa 60.13; Saadya Gaon in his 10th century translation into Arabic rendered *tirzah* by "stone pine" (M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible,* 113); in the same work Zohary suggested *'es semen* is "Aleppo Pine," *ibid.*, 114.

13 So L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *op. cit.* (Vol. 3; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983), 836a. For *'almug / 'algum* see L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *ibid.*, 56a (Vol. 1); H. von Wissmann, *Paulys Real-Encyclopadie der klassischen Alterumswissenschaft* 12 (1970): 971-975.

The obvious question to be asked is whether biblical Hebrew had two or more words for the same tree[1].

Translational inconsistency

The most striking feature of the way *bĕrôš* has been translated is not the variety of translations, but the way in which the term has apparently been rendered inconsistently within a given translation.

Among ancient translations the Septuagint exhibits considerable variation, thus:

Reference	**Septuagint**
1Kgs 5.8(22)	*peukinos* adj. "made of pine"
1Kgs 5.10(24)	*peukē* "pine"
1Kgs 6.15	*peukinos*
1Kgs 6.34	*peukinos*
1Kgs 9.11	*peukinos*
2Kgs 19.23; Isa 37.24	*kyparissos* "cypress"
2Chr 2.8(7)	*arkeuthinos*
2Chr 3.5	*kedrinos* adj. "made of cedar"
Isa 41.19	*kyparissos*
Isa 55.13	*kyparissos*
Isa 60.13	*kyparissos*
Ezek 27.5	*kedros* "cedar"
Ezek 31.8	*pitus* "pine"
Hos 14.8(9)	*arkeuthos* "juniper"
Zech 11.2	*pitus*
Variant *bĕrôt* Cant 1.17	*kyparissos*

Ps 104.17; Isa 14.8; 2Sam 6.5; and Nah 2.3 (4) are omitted from this list as the Septuagint does not translate by tree names. In the last two cases the Hebrew text is commonly considered to be corrupt.

In the Septuagint *peukē / peukinos / pitus* "pine" is the preferred choice with seven occurrences[2], to *kyparissos* "cypress" with four[3]. We should note that *kedros / kedrinos* "cedar" and *arkeuthos / arkeuthinos* "juniper" also occur[4].

We should note that the Septuagint is consistent within books, except for 2 Chronicles and Ezekiel. The rendering of 2Kgs 19.23 may be governed by that of the parallel in Isa 37.24.

We should further note that in the Vulgate *abies / abiegnus* "fir" is the clearly preferred choice, with fifteen occurrences to a single instance of *arceuthinus* "juniper" in 2Chr 2.8 (7)[5].

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1 Some of the identifications are of course made with specific species.

2 The parallel 2Kgs 19.23 // Isa 37.24 is only counted once in this and other enumerations.

3 This and other citations exclude the variant *bĕrôt* in Cant 1.17.

4 We should also note that the Septuagint is not totally consistent in its rendering of *'erez* "cedar." It has *kedros / kedrinos* 63 times, and *kyparissos / kyparissinos* 5 times, but it is noteworthy that this variation is not as varied or as widespread as its treatment of *bĕrôš*.

5 This appears to be a direct translation of the Septuagint *arkeuthinos* "made of juniper."

The same translational diversity is also observable in the majority of English translations. Only AV, RV "fir" and NIV "pine" are consistent throughout. Translational diversity among other major English translations is illustrated below: (Changes between NEB and REB and TEV and CEV are highlighted in bold).

Reference	RSV/ NRSV[1]	NEB	REB	JB	NASB	JPS	TEV	CEV
2Sam 6.5	—	—	—	—	fir	cypr	—	—
1Kgs 5.8	cypr	pine	pine	junip	cypr	cypr	pine	pine
1Kgs 5.10	cypr	pine	pine	junip	cypr	cypr	pine	pine
1Kgs 6.15	cypr	pine	pine	junip	cypr	cypr	pine	pine
1Kgs 6.34	cypr	pine	pine	junip	cypr	cypr	pine	pine
1Kgs 9.11	cypr	pine	pine	junip	cypr	cypr	pine	pine
2Kgs 19.23 /Isa 37.24	cypr	pine	pine	cypr	cypr	cypr	cypr	cypr
2Chr 2.8	cypr	pine	pine	junip	cypr	cypr	**cypr**	**pine**
2Chr 3.5	cypr	pine	pine	junip	cypr	cypr	**cedar**	**pine**
Ps 104.17	fir	—[2]	—[2]	—	fir	junip	fir	fir
Isa 14.8	cypr	pine	pine	cypr	cypr	pine	cypr	cypr
Isa 41.19	cypr	pine	pine	junip	junip	cypr	**pine**	**cypr**
Isa 55.13	cypr	pine	pine	cypr	cypr	cypr	cypr	cypr
Isa 60.13	cypr	pine	pine	cypr	junip	cypr	pine	pine
Ezek 27.5	fir	pine	pine	cypr	fir	cypr	**fir**	**cypr**
Ezek 31.8	fir	**fir**	**junip**	cypr	cypr	cypr	**fir**	—[4]
Hos 14.8	cypr	pine	pine	cypr	cypr	cypr	[3]	
Nah 2.3	—	—	—	—	cypr	cypr	—	—
Zech 11.2	cypr	pine	pine	cypr	cypr	cypr	cypr	cypr
Variant Cant 1.17	pine	**fir**	**pine**	cypr	cypr	cypr	cypr	cypr

NEB and REB exhibit the least variation with one deviation from the standard. JPS has two, (N)RSV three, and NASB four deviations from the standard. No clear pattern to these deviations is discernible. JB has eight occurrences each of "juniper" and "cypress." TEV and CEV exhibit the most variation, each using four different tree names.

Geographical considerations

An examination of the OT passages where *bĕrôš* occurs enables us to see, albeit very partially, the geographical distribution of the tree.

1) It grew in Lebanon.

The Tyrian King Hiram sent Solomon cedar and *bĕrôš* logs for the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem (1Kgs 5.8-10; 9.11; 2Chr 2.8). Solomon would not have imported the timber if sufficient quantities of good quality timber had been growing nearer home. This may be an argument for rejecting "pine."[5]

Ps 104.17 refers to storks nesting in the *bĕrôš*, the immediate context is that of Lebanon (Ps 104.16). Isa 14.8 and 60.13 place the *bĕrôš* in Lebanon. Isa 37.24

1 In this subject the NRSV is the same as the earlier RSV.
2 NEB and REB have "in their tops," an emendation of *bĕrôšîm* to *bĕrō'sām*.
3 GNB has "evergreen."
4 CEV has "glorious."
5 R. Meiggs, *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 416.

(parallel 2Kgs 19.23) refers to the Assyrian King Sennacherib cutting cedar and *bĕrôš* in Lebanon, given the presence of cedar a high altitude may be implied. Hos 14.8 arguably fits a Lebanese context too, compare 14.5-7 and in Zech 11.2 *bĕrôš* occurs immediately after a reference to Lebanon and cedars.

2) The *bĕrôš* timbers from Sinir, that is, Mount Hermon in the Antilebanon range, were used in ship-building at Tyre (Ezek 27.5).

Descriptions of the tree

There is no detailed description of the *bĕrôš* in the OT, but several incidental details should not be overlooked.

1) It must have been sufficiently high for a stork to nest in it (Ps 104.17).

2) The implication of Ezek 31.8 is that it had broad boughs.

3) It is a "luxuriant"[1] (Hebrew *ra'ănān*) tree (Hos 14.8). We should note the reference to "your fruit" immediately following.

Uses of the wood

A number of the uses of *bĕrôš* wood are given.

1) It was used to make musical instruments, at least according to the Masoretic Text of 2Sam 6.5. Though we should note that the parallel 1Chr 13.8 and also the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scroll 4QSam[a] do not have this.

2) It was used to cover the floor of Solomon's temple (1Kgs 6.15).

3) It was used to make doors for the temple (1Kgs 6.34)[2].

4) It was used to panel (*hippāh*) the main hall (*habbayit haggadôl*) of the temple (2Chr 3.5).

5) It was used in boat-building; the whole ship except for the mast, oars, and deck was made of this wood (Ezek 27.5). Clearly its planks must have been of considerable size.

6) It was used to make spears (Nah 2.3). Clearly a straight shaft was required here.

7) If *bĕrôt* in Cant 1.17 is a variant form of *bĕrôš* then it was used to make rafters. These must have been able to take a reasonable weight.

None of the evidence cited above enables us to make a categorical identification with any of the four original options, though the fact that fir is vulnerable to rot and insect infestation and comparatively short-lived presents us with a good case for eliminating it, at least in examples of architecture and ship-building[3].

Bĕrôš* as an equivalent of Egyptian *'aš

Though there is no etymological connection with *bĕrôš* we should briefly discuss a tree mentioned in Egyptian texts as growing in Syria and Lebanon and known as *'aš*. V. Loret proposed that *'aš* was pine or fir, and when qualified by *maa* "true" it

1 NASB; F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, , 947a; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *op. cit.*, 1183b, "laubrach," "üppig."

2 We should note the observations of R. Meiggs, *op. cit.*, 408, 419. The Assyrians nearly always used cedar or cypress for the doors of palaces or temples; in Greece, *op. cit.*, cypress was the preferred choice for temple doors; there is no recorded instance of a temple door of fir. The doors of St. Peter's in Rome were made of cypress. Egyptian use of *'aš* wood for monumental doors is evidence to Meiggs that this term is not fir, see further page 7.

3 R. Meiggs, *op. cit.*, 56, 416.

referred to the Cilician fir *Abies cilicia*[1]. L. Manniche notes that a small calcite jar in the tomb of Tutankhamun (1336-1327 BC) was labelled "fir resin," and it still contained a small amount[2]. Loret argued that ancient Egyptian representations of *'aš* wood are not red (as would be expected of cedar) but yellow; texts imply that *'aš* was a straight, tall tree, while cedar was squat and often had a twisted trunk[3]. Since one of the principal uses of *'aš* wood was for flagstaffs erected against the faces of pylons of temples, which might require lengths of more than 30 metres, he argued that such timbers could not come from cedars whose massive girth limits their height; furthermore, most cedars have more than one main stem[4].

Despite Loret's assertion "cedar" is sometimes advanced as the identification of *'aš*[5], even though it is qualified by the term "so-called."[6] For some the term *'aš* is broader than just one species being the equivalent of "conifer."[7]

Etymological considerations

Etymology is sometimes used as a means to establish the identification of flora and fauna. Botanical terms are frequently borrowed, but we should not assume that there is an exact correspondence when terms are borrowed from one language to another. As F. N. Hepper has observed, " ... through the ages man has tended to switch a well-known name from one plant product to another more attractive or readily available one."[8] Etymological considerations especially when relating to trees are notoriously unreliable, compare the commonly cited example of Greek *phēgos* "oak," Latin *fagus* hence English "beech," and Russian *buzina* "elder."[9]

There is no doubt that the Akkadian *burāšu* provides the clearest etymological parallel to *bĕrôš*. We have seen earlier that the identification "juniper" is made. The *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* defines the range of the *burāšu*: it grew in the West, that is, on Mount Amanus in Syria; it also grew in Urartu, in what is now Eastern Turkey; and was planted in Assyria. It was used in roofing, and the wood apparently had sweet-smelling properties. It was used to make beds, chariots, doors, and columns. The tree produced products—"seeds," "leaves," "oil," "water," and even "flour." An aromatic substance was obtained from the tree which was used in fumigation. The identification with juniper is supported by the fact that the berry-like fruit of the tree is called *kirkirānu* while the cones of other conifers are called *terinnatu*[10].

The *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* further points out: "The designation *burāšu* for the conifers used in Urartu for roof beams may represent a transfer from

1 V. Loret, *ASAE* 16 (1916): 51.

2 L. Manniche, *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal* (London: British Museum Press, 1989), 64.

3 V. Loret, *op. cit.*, 45-48; see also M. Serpico in P. T. Nicholson and I. Shaw, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 431.

4 V. Loret, *op. cit.*; R. Meiggs, *op. cit.*, 406.

5 R. Meiggs, *op. cit.*, 405-409. He counters Loret's arguments by noting that cedars growing close together will grow to the height required by the Egyptian flagstaffs; cedars with more than one stem are exceptional. Cedar was found among the timbers from the boat found near the pyramid of Cheops (2593-2570 BC); there was no evidence of fir.

6 R. O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 49. M. Serpico, *op. cit.*, notes that the distribution of cedar is particularly significant. The more restricted distribution of *Abies cilicia* may lead to a modification of Loret's theory that *'aš* was more commonly fir.

7 K. A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated and Annotated,* V 187 (forthcoming).

8 F. N. Hepper, *PEQ* 109 (1977): 130.

9 J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 116.

10 A. L. Oppenheim, *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, B* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1965), 328b; *ibid., K* 352a 2/c doubts whether *kirkirānu* is pine or juniper seeds (1971).

the real juniper, whose wood is not suitable for such purposes. Since juniper is ubiquitous in the hills to the West and North of Mesopotamia, the frequent references to 'Mountain of *burāšu*-trees' could indicate that several conifers were designated by this term."[1]

A conclusion

From the Akkadian evidence a wider definition than purely the equation of *burāšu* with "juniper" seems to be emerging. If this observation is true for Akkadian then could it not also be true for Hebrew? We can apply this observation both specifically and generally. Specifically, we do not have to accept that because Akkadian *burāšu* equals Hebrew *bĕrôš*, then Hebrew *bĕrôš* must mean "juniper." Generally, Hebrew *bĕrôš* may in fact be wider than a single species, be it "cypress," "pine," "juniper," or "fir."

The "translational inconsistency" that we have noted in many of the main English Bible translations has to be explained. We cannot suppose that all were influenced by the translational inconsistency of the Septuagint. The translational inconsistency evident in many English versions suggests that a contextual rather than a concordant approach was preferred.

If we also take a contextual approach we may advance a variety of renderings for *bĕrôš*, yet there may be another conclusion that can be drawn.

That the *bĕrôš* grows in the Lebanon and Hermon mountains points to an identification with a conifer, the implied fruit of Hos 14.8 may be a reference to "cones,"[2] and its greenness in the same verse may point to the tree being "evergreen." *Bĕrôš* may be the equivalent of the Egyptian *'aš*, which is sometimes given the general meaning "conifer." The question should thus be posed if at least in some cases *bĕrôš* may be simply the Hebrew for a "conifer" or an "evergreen" tree. Indeed in Hos 14.8, the only place in the OT where God is compared to a tree and where botanical exactitude is not in focus, such a rendering of *bĕrôš* may be preferable, witness "evergreen" of TEV.

If it is true that *bĕrôš* is a generic term referring to a class of trees rather than a specific species, translators need not struggle to find specific lexical items to fit each context. "Conifer" or "evergreen" may suffice in some or all of the passages listed above.

This raises a further question as to whether other botanical and zoological terms should be understood generically rather than specifically in the OT. It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate this point, but it could be a fruitful field for further research.

1 A. L. Oppenheim, *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, B* 328b.

2 F. N. Hepper in *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 1587a, considers these cones as producing edible pine nuts and thus advances the "stone pine" *Pinus pinea* here. See also F. N. Hepper, *Encyclopaedia of Bible Plants* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 32, 122.