‘People Are Plants’ – a Conceptual Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture had a profound impact on the socio-economic structure of ancient Israel. Moreover, the great religious festivals were organised around an agrarian calendar. The importance of agriculture is underscored by the multiple references to plants in the Hebrew Bible. The diverse flora provided the biblical Hebrew authors with a repository of metaphors to describe the divine-human relationship and to portray the Israelites in different historical situations. Given the prevalence of plant imagery in the Hebrew Bible, this contribution endeavours to analyse the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS from a cognitive linguistic perspective. The notions of conceptual mapping and metaphorical instantiations are discussed in order to elucidate the aforementioned metaphor.

INTRODUCTION

As an agrarian society, ancient Israel relied on agriculture for their daily existence. According to Zohary (1982:36) ‘The social structure, livelihood, and domestic life of the ancient Israelite family revolved … around agriculture …’ (cf. also Ryken et al. 1998:269). Apart from its role and importance in the economic and social life, agriculture ‘influenced ancient Israel’s ideology through religion and laws’ (Borowski 1987:10). Furthermore, agriculture influenced the cultic calendar and the support of cultic centres and their functionaries relied on agricultural surplus (Borowski 1987:11; cf. also Cebulj

1 ‘The early inhabitants of the Promised Land lived mostly in valleys and plains, where plenty of water and rich soil fostered the development of agriculture’ (Krymow 2002:1). This is underscored by the evocative description of the Promised Land in Deut. 8:7-8: ‘For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey …’.

2 Cf. for example Exod 22:4-5; Lev 19:19; 33:3-5; Deut 11:14-15; Isa 7:23; Jer 5:17; Hos 14:8; Mic 4:4.
It should therefore come as no surprise that the Hebrew Bible is replete with references to plants and related terminology. Riede (2002:6) draws attention to the significance of plants when he remarks that ‘Pflanzen spielen in den biblischen Schriften eine wichtige Rolle. Nicht nur die Tierwelt ist hier allgegenwärtig; auch auf die Pflanzenwelt wird in allen Schriften des Alten Testaments in den unterschiedlichsten Kontexten Bezug genommen. Das zeigt sich daran, daß diese mehr als 110 Pflanzenarten erwähnen’. Moreover, the allusions and metaphors proclaim the importance and ubiquity of plants in the daily life of our biblical counterparts. In different historical situations, the biblical Hebrew writers utilized the treasure trove of plant imagery as a means of describing the state and disposition of the Israelites and the relationship between Yahweh and his people. Despite the prevalence of the plant-people metaphors in the Hebrew Bible, the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS has not been analysed from a cognitive linguistic perspective. This paper addresses this issue by drawing upon some of the tenets of cognitive linguistics in order to illuminate this basic conceptual metaphor and its instantiations. Furthermore, the notion of conceptual mapping as an important underpinning of the abovementioned approach will be discussed. The exploration will demonstrate that a cognitive analysis of the various plant-people representations in the Hebrew Bible is indeed a worthy enterprise.

B PLANTS IN THE BIBLE

In the introduction, reference was made to the importance of agriculture in ancient Israel. The aim of this section, as the heading suggests, is not to discuss all the different plants found in the Hebrew Bible, but to investigate the role of plants in the biblical representations.
plants in the daily life of the ancient Israelites. Already the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 tell us that God created plants and fruit-bearing trees as food for man and the animals of the field (cf. Gen 1:9-13, 29, 30; 2:8, 9, 16; cf. also Ps 104:14). Even though the agricultural inventory was not very rich, it was adequate to sustain life’s everyday need; a notion recurring throughout the Hebrew Bible (cf. Zohary 1982:41). The different agricultural products consumed by the ancient Israelites were amongst others wheat, barley, chickpea, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, dates, etcetera (cf. for example Gen 14:18; Num 13:23; Deut 8:7-8; Judg 7:13; 2 Sam 17:28; Amos 9:13). Furthermore, certain agricultural products like cereals, olives oil, wine and condiments were exported. Trees were chopped down to supply humans with fuel and building material (cf. Deist 2000:142; Nielsen 2002:117). The fact that ancient Israel was a crossroads of international commerce connecting north, south and east and leading to the great kingdoms of the Orient fostered the trade in agricultural commodities (Zohary 1982:42). Whereas certain plants were used as provisions and merchandise, others (balm, olive, fig, hyssop to mentioned but a few) were utilised as remedies for healing (cf. Isa 38:21; Jer 8:22; 46:11; 51:8) (LaSor 1965:85; Silberstein 2002:36-43). The Israelites relied on ‘herbal folk remedies, simple powders, ointments and salves for treatment’ (Krymow 2002:16). Moreover, plants featured in religion and worship.7 Whereas the oak, terebinth and poplar trees had a magic or religious connotation, the palm and the pomegranate were popular in sculpturing of religious nature (cf. Nielsen 1989:290-292; Deist 2000:140; Kottsieper 2002:175-184).8 Almond or almond blossoms appear on the tabernacle’s candelabrum (cf. Exod 25:33). Cedar wood was utilised in purification rituals (cf. Num 19:6) and in the shade of an oak fertility ceremonies were performed (cf. Ezek 6:13) (Deist 2000:140). Moreover, the link between the plant world and the religious sphere finds expression in the timing of the three great

7 Brown (2002:71) argues that, ‘In much of the Pentateuchal and Deuteronomistic literature, particular trees and groves were considered evocative of divine presence. Such arboreal settings were thought to provide settings for theophany, an encounter with the deity’ (cf. Gen. 12: 6, 7; 13:18; 18:1, 2; 21:33; Josh. 24:26).

8 Zohary (1982:45) writes ‘Rarely has ancient nation attributed holiness to so many plants as did the Hebrews during the biblical period. Scripture abounds with rites, feasts, and commands associated with plants and their cultivation’. Compare also Krymow (2002:2) ‘Tithes were set for products of the land, daily offerings of crops were burned on the altar of the temple, bitter herbs were required for the Passover feast and four different plants were part of the Sukkoth celebration’.
festivals (cf. Passover, Lev 23:10; Pentecost, Deut 26:2; Tabernacles, Exod 34:22) in accordance with the agricultural calendar\(^9\) (Zohary 1982:45).

**C THE CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR ‘PEOPLE ARE PLANTS’**

According to Steen & Gibbs (1999:2) ‘Conceptual metaphor and its relation to linguistic expression is the central area of investigation for cognitive linguists who are interested in metaphor’. For cognitive linguists ‘language use reflects inherently metaphorical understanding of many areas of experience’ (Balaban 1999:131; cf. also Johnson 1987; Sweetser 1990). As an organizing factor in language and cognition metaphor is not a mere linguistic figure of speech but an intrinsic part of our everyday reasoning and thought processes. Furthermore, metaphor is a powerful cognitive capacity and explanatory tool that suffice our lives with meaning (cf. Ungerer & Schmid 1996). Gibbs (1994:6) contends that ‘conceptual metaphors arise when we try to understand difficult, complex, abstract, or less delineated concepts ... in terms of familiar ideas ...’. Conceptual metaphors thus have the ability to guide people’s abstract reasoning (cf. Boers 1999:55; Gibbs 1999:145). Another important underpinning of cognitive linguistics is the fact that metaphor is the mapping of a set of correspondences between two experiential domains i.e. the source domain and the target domain (cf. Taylor 1989; Sweetser 1990; Barcelona 2000:3). By virtue of this projection, the target domain is partially understood in terms of the source domain. In the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS a plant in the source domain is mapped onto a person in the target domain. However, this metaphor lacks any experiential basis fundamental to the structuring of the target domain. We do not have direct experience that connects the source and the target domain, as would be the case with LIFE IS A JOURNEY or HAPPY IS UP. As a possible solution, Lakoff & Turner (1989:84) points out that metaphors may be grounded not only in experience but also in knowledge. As far as the metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS is concerned the amount of rich knowledge focuses on the constituent mapping of the metaphor, the mapping according to which the life cycle of plants corresponds to the cycle of human life (cf. Kövecses 1999:179). This elaborate knowledge organises much of our knowledge about people. Since the metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS is used unconsciously at a conceptual level, it becomes conventionalised in expressions such as ‘They \textit{withered} away’ and ‘She is a late \textit{bloomer}’. Through this metaphor people can be viewed ‘as plants with respect to the life cycle – more precisely, they are viewed as that part of the plant that burgeons and then withers or declines, such as leaves, flowers, and fruits, though sometimes the

\(^9\) Ryken et al (1998:270) observe ‘The Mosaic laws confirm the agrarian status of Hebrew society ... The system of religious festivals was largely built around harvest times, the Passover at the beginning of the barely harvest ... the Feast of Weeks at the end of the wheat harvest ... and the Feast of Tabernacles at the end of the full harvest of grain and fruits’. 
whole plant is viewed as burgeoning and then declining as with grass or wheat’ (Lakoff & Turner 1989:6; cf. also Kövecses 2002:229). The stages of life of human beings (e.g. being born, growing up, settling in a certain location, growing old, dying) correspond to the stages of the plant life cycle (e.g. being planted, sprouting, bearing fruit, withering away) (cf. Lakoff & Turner 1989:27). The conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS utilises the metaphorical instantiation potential associated with the concept of plants (cf. Kövecses 1999:179). Applied to the examples attested in the Hebrew Bible, the following entailments of the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor emerge.

1 A planted tree is a person restored

• You will bring them in and plant (נשת) them on the mountain of your inheritance … (Exod 15:17).
• ... I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant (נשת) them … (2 Sam. 7:10).
• They are the shoot I have planted (נשת), the works of my hand … (Isa 60:21).
• They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting (נשת) of the Lord … (Isa 61:3).
• The Lord Almighty who planted (נשת) you, has decreed disaster for you … (Jer 11:17).
• My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant (נשת) them and not uproot them (Jer 24:6).
• I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant (נשת) them in this land with all my heart and soul (Jer 32:41).
• Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the LORD … have replanted (נשת) what was desolate … (Ezek 36:36).
• ‘I will plant (נשת) them in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them,’ says the LORD your God (Amos 9:15).
• I have seen Ephraim, like Tyre, planted (שנה) in a pleasant place … (Hos 9:13).
• He will be like a tree planted (שנה) by streams of water … (Ps 1:3; cf. also Jer 17:8).10

10 Pohlig (2005:117,118) advances the hypothesis that conceptual metaphors and their instantiations are often elaborated and expressed by means of similes.
• With your hand, you drove out the nations but *planted* (נשת נשת) our fathers … (Ps 44:3).

• You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations, but *planted* (נשת נשת) it (Ps 80:9).

2 A plant taking root is the foundation of a person in a specific location

• In the days to come Jacob will take *root* (חרב) … (Isa 27:6).

• He brings princes to naught … no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take *root* (חרב) in the ground … (Isa 40:23-24).

• He will be like a tree … that sends out its *roots* (רששי) by the stream (Jer 17:8).

• Like a cedar of Lebanon, he will send down his *roots* (רששי) (Hos 14:6).

• I myself have seen a fool taking *root* (חרב) (Job 5:3).

• He is like a well-watered plant in the sunshine, it entwines its *roots* (רששי) around a pile of rocks (Job 8:16-17).

• You brought a vine out of Egypt, … and it took deep *root* (חרב)… (Ps 80:9-10).

3 A blossoming and flourishing plant is the growth, vitality and prosperity of a person.

• A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will *bear fruit* (ארת) (Isa 11:1).

• I will make you *fruitful* (ארת); I will make nations of you … (Gen 17:6).

• Now the Lord has given us room and we will *flourish* (ארת) in the land (Gen 26:22).

• Israel will *bud* (צמר) and *sprout* (ארת) and fill the entire world with fruit (Isa 27:6).

• The Lord called you a *thriving* (렇ין) olive tree … (Jer 11:16).

• Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard …, it was *fruitful* (ארת) and full of branches (Ezek 19:10-12).

• Israel was a *spreading vine* (נשת ברקים); he brought forth *fruit* (ארת) for himself (Hos 10:1).

• I will be like the dew to Israel; he will *blossom* (ארת) like a lily … his *shoots* (-analytics) will go forth (Hos 14:6, 7).
I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing (רהנן) like a green tree in its native soil (Ps 37:35)

But I am like an olive tree, flourishing (רהנן) in the house of God (Ps 52:10).

In his days the righteous will flourish (חרם) (Ps 72:7).

All evildoers flourish (חרם) (Ps 92:8).

The righteous will flourish (חרם) like a palm tree, they will thrive (שנה) like a cedar of Lebanon planted (שניל) in the house of the LORD they will flourish (חרם), in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit (렇ין) in old age, they will still be fat and green (.GREEN) (Ps 92:13-15).

4 The deterioration and destruction of a plant is the deterioration and destruction of a person.

In furious anger and in great wrath the LORD uprooted (נתם) them from their land and thrust them into another land, as it is now. (Deut 29:28).

He will uproot (נתם) Israel from this good land that he gave to their forefathers … (1Kgs 14:15).

You will be like an oak with withering (נבל) leaves … (Isa 1:30).

The Lord enters into judgment against the leaders and elders of his people: ‘It is you who have ruined (כתלמ) my vineyard …’ (Isa 3:14).

Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: ‘I will remove (畬) its hedge, and it will be destroyed (بعثת); I will break down (מתומט) its wall, and it will be trampled (بعثת). I will make it a wasteland ((Route) ...’ (Isa 5:5-6).

But your root (נזר) I will destroy (פחית) by famine; it will slay your survivors (Isa 14:30).

It will be as when a reaper gathers (אכלת קנים) the standing grain and harvests (קינים) the grain with his arm … (Isa 17:5-6).\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Here the metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS is elaborated via a scenario of cultivation of plants in which the plants at the end of their life cycle are harvested. The harvesting of grain corresponds to the death of a person (cf. Lakoff & Turner 1989:13, 41). Death itself is identified as the reaper, i.e. the agent of harvesting in the harvesting scenario who brings about the event of death (EVENTS ARE ACTION metaphor). The composition of PEOPLE ARE PLANTS with EVENTS ARE ACTIONS allows for the mapping of the reaper who is not conventionally mapped by the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor (Lakoff & Turner 1989:75).
All men are like grass … the grass withers (בש) and the flowers fall (בש) because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely, the people are grass. The grass withers (בש) and the flowers fall (בש) … (Isa 40:6-8).

Let no外国er who has bound himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree (גש)’ (Isa 56:3).

With the roar of a mighty storm he will set it on fire (לה בא), and its branches will be burned (ונר) (Jer 11:16).

… they had plotted against me, saying, ‘Let us destroy the tree with its sap (☕) and let us cut (חף) him off from the land of the living (Jer 11:19).

This is what the L ORD says: ‘… I will uproot (תח) the house of Judah from among them. But after I uproot (תח) them, I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to his own inheritance and his own country. But if any nation does not listen, I will completely uproot (תח) and destroy (כן) it,’ declares the L ORD (Jer 12:14-17).

I destroyed the Amorite before them … I destroyed his fruit above and his roots below (אומר פרסי ממללה והשדים מאחד) (Amos 2:9).

Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard … but it was uprooted (תח) in fury … the east wind made it shrivel (בש), it was stripped (רף) of its fruit; its strong branches withered (בש) and fire consumed (אהב) them … Fire spread (אשת) from one of its main branches and consumed (אשת) its fruit … (Ezek 19:10, 12, 14).

His branches will not be green (ירן). He will be like a vine stripped (רף) of its unripe grapes, like an olive tree shedding (רף) its blossoms (Job 15:32-33).

For like the grass they will soon wither (מלל), like green plants they will soon fade (בש) away (Ps 37:2).

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12 Read (גש) (‘they will be burned’) instead of the Masoretic (רף) (‘and they will be broken’). See also Van Selms (1972:177); Thompson (1980:341); Holladay (1986:348) and Craigie et al (1991:167).

13 The LXX and the Targum have the equivalent of ‘Let us put wood in his bread (מלכתה)’. Following the proposal of the BHS, the above translation emendates דה החלקה (‘with its sap’) (cf. Deut. 34:7) and retains (מלכתה) (‘destroy’). For a similar emendation, cf. Holladay (1971:175); Koehler & Baumgartner (1974:499) and Schreiner (1981:82).
• My days are like the evening shadow; I wither (בָּשַׂךְ) away like grass (Ps 102:11).

• May all who hate Zion ... be like grass on the roof, which withers (בָּשַׂךְ) before it can grow ... (Ps 129:5-6).

• Ephraim is blighted, their root is withered (בָּשַׂךְ), they yield no fruit (חֲרָמִים) ... (Hos 9:16).

• Then I will uproot (גָּזַה) Israel from my land, which I have given them ... (2 Chron 7:20).

D CONCLUSION

In this article, I have tried to explicate the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS in terms of a cognitive linguistic approach. The investigation highlighted the mapping of a set of correspondences from the source domain of plants to the target domain of people. Furthermore, the range of associations bears witness to the biblical Hebrew authors’ cognitive utilisation of the storehouse of plant metaphors to describe the relationship between Yahweh and his people and to portray the Israelites in various historical situations. Moreover, a cognitive linguistic analysis of the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS have shown that by examining the appropriate linguistic expressions of this metaphor different metaphorical instantiations emerge. These entailments point to a structured cognitive application of the knowledge of the entire plant life cycle as a means of depicting biblical Israel.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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