

The tree Abraham planted at Beer-sheba

Two species of the shade tree, tamarisk, grow naturally in Kenyan drylands

BY FRANCIS GACHATHI

The book of Genesis 21:33 states that "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God" (R.S.V.). This comes after Abraham had successfully contended for the water well that King Abimelech's servants had seized. So what sort of tree is the tamarisk?

Tamarisk is a member of the *Tamarix* family *Tamaricaceae*, a genus of about 50 species of evergreen trees and shrubs having slender feathery branchlets, minute scale-like leaves and clusters of attractive pink or white flowers. The scale-like leaves and whip-like thin branches give the tree a cedar-like appearance.

Twelve of the *Tamarix* species are found in the Holy Land, often in high salt concentration soils. These are the dominant species on the shores of the Dead Sea.

Most botanists and Christian scholars are in agreement that the tamarisk tree that Patriarch Abraham planted at Beer-sheba was the *Tamarix aphylla*. This is the most popular and commonly planted species in the Holy Land. It is a well-branched evergreen tree that can grow to over 15m high. It can withstand high temperatures



Tamarix nilotica is common along river beds, growing on almost pure sand. (Photo: Francis Gachathi)



Natural regeneration of the *Tamarix nilotica* on the shores of Lake Kiambere, Kenya. (Photo: BGF)

and long dry spells by sending its roots deep down to find underground water.

During the heat of the day it secretes salt that drips from glands in the needle-like leaves. The salt dries on the leaves. During the night, the hygroscopic salt particles absorb water from the cool air. As the moisture increases, the water vapour adheres to and condenses into water droplets.

As the sun warms the air in the morning, water evaporates, creating a sort of natural air-conditioning, thereby cooling the tree's branches considerably. This gives the shade of a tamarisk tree a unique pleasant coolness and hence its popularity as a shade tree.

In the Middle East, the bark of tamarisk has long been used for tanning and its wood for building and making charcoal. Its branches provide fodder for animals. In Hebrew, *Tamarix aphylla* is called shel; and in Arabic athal. It is also called the athel pine and the athel tree. Because it excretes salt, it is sometimes referred to as salt cedar. In Kenya, two species of tamarisk grow

naturally in the drylands. *Tamarix aphylla*, the tree planted by Patriarch Abraham at Beer-sheba, has restricted distribution in the extreme north eastern region, around Mandera. It is called duur in Somali.

The other tamarisk species that grows in Kenya is *Tamarix nilotica*, which has much wider distribution in the dry lowland areas of northern, eastern, southern and coastal Kenya. It is common along river beds, growing on almost pure sand. It is particularly common along the lower Tana and also in Turkana. Local names for *Tamarix nilotica* include nzinzinda and malakote in Kamba, durtya jovu and durte galana in Orma, duur in Somali, and echeme or echekereng in Turkana.

Because of its graceful branches, tamarisk is planted as ornamental. In Turkana, it is popular for construction and for firewood. It is easily propagated from cuttings.

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