

# As It Is Written

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Bible translators have long recognized that the only reliably correct way to understand biblical Hebrew, a long dead language, is to look at context. For example, consider Isaiah 55:12:

*“For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (NRSV).*

A literal reading of the phrase seems straightforward. A tree of the field is a tree standing in an open field, right? Not quite. First of all, the verse is a beautiful poetic expression of celebration. So, right away we accept the metaphor of singing mountains and clapping trees. And, alerted to the metaphorical nature of the verse, we might ask, “what kind of trees?” After all, Isaiah did not use “trees of the forest” or “trees of the park” or simply “trees”. We look to other verses in the Bible that might give us clues as to the meaning of this phrase. To that end, note that this phrase occurs in 11 different verses<sup>1</sup> and so let’s try to glean its meaning from the context of these other verses.

The book of Joel (in verse 1:12) offers some initial help by associating “trees of the field” with fruit. However, Leviticus 26:4 is even more explicit:

*“I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit” (NRSV).*

The context of these two verses (and the others), point in the same direction. A “tree of the field” is a fruit-bearing tree (as an exercise, you may want to study the other verses referenced in the footnote below).

In this brief study, we learn that phrases do not necessarily get their meanings from the words used to construct them. There’s nothing odd about “field” indicating “fruit” in this context. For example, “strawberries” don’t grow in straw and “wild animals” can be calm. And in the Bible, as we just learned from context, “field trees” are fruit trees.

Now, go and study.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 9:25; Leviticus 26:4; Isaiah 55:12; Jeremiah 7:20; Ezekiel 17:24, 31:4, 31:5, 31:15, and 34:27; and Joel 1:12 and 1:19.