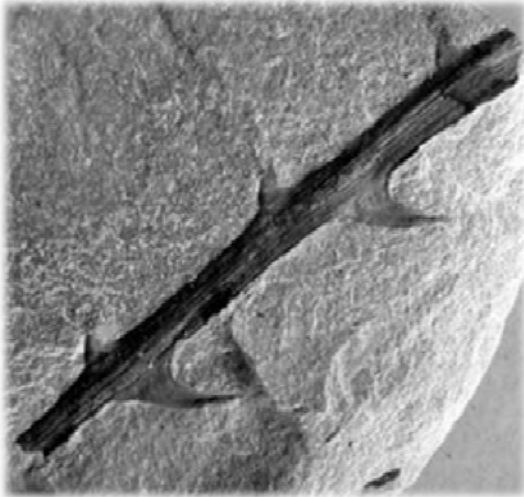


Biblical Thorns

A Thorny Issue



In 2007 and 2009 John Mackay and colleagues found fossils of plant stems with sharp thorny projections. Some critics have questioned whether these are really thorns. One botanist has asserted that technically these are not thorns, but spines.

So let us deal with two questions:

First: Would the hard pointed structures on our fossil stems be called “thorns” in the way the Bible refers to “thorns”?

Second: Are they thorns, spines or prickles according to modern botanical definitions, and does it matter?

To answer the first question we looked all uses of the Hebrew word translated “thorns” in English versions of Genesis 3:18: which states “thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.”

Thorns are God’s Judgement

Genesis 3: 17-18 states that one of the Creator God’s judgements on Adam’s sin involved a change in plants. God said:

Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee.” (KJV)

The Hebrew word (קץ) translated “thorns” in Genesis 3:18 is rendered into Latin script as *qôts* or *kotse*. In the Hebrew Dictionary of *Strong’s Concordance* this word is listed as item H6975 and defined as follows:

קץ קוצ: *qôts qôts; kotse, kotse*,
From H6972 (in the sense of pricking); a thorn:—thorn.

Notice the underlying meaning is that thorns cause physical damage and pain. God’s pronouncement makes it clear that thorns (among other things) would cause suffering.

Before man sinned God had declared His creation to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Plants would not have caused any harm, and would not have had any pricking structures that are nowadays called thorns, spines or prickles. Plants originally sustained humans and animals, providing food, habitat and were “pleasing to the eye”, *i.e.* they were good for the soul, as well as for the body. (Genesis 1: 29-30, 2:9) In that good world, Genesis also tells us, there were neither animal carnivores nor death. It was a world without suffering or survival of the fittest. The injuries and pain caused by thorns serve as a constant reminder of the destruction and suffering caused by sin, and the need for a Saviour.

Thorns in the Old Testament

The word *qôts* is also used to mean “thornbushes”. In the law of Moses we read:

If fire break out, and catch in thorns, so that the stacks of corn, or the standing corn, or the field, be consumed therewith; he that kindled the fire shall surely make restitution.

Exodus 22:6, KJV)

Such thornbushes were dry, useless plants that were a fire hazard as well as a physical hazard.

The association of the word *qôts* with injury, pain, suffering and judgement is seen its use in other parts of Old Testament. When Gideon was pursuing two Midianite kings, he asked the elders of a city named Succouth to supply his army with bread. They refused to help and mocked him. Gideon warned them that he would take vengeance on them:

Therefore when the LORD hath delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into mine hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.”

Judges 8:7, KJV

After Gideon defeated the Midianites he carried his promise, as described in v16:

And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson.”

Judges 8:16, ESV

Sometimes *qôts* is used metaphorically, and we moderns need to remember that metaphors are only meaningful if they are based on a widely known reality. In David’s last words, he describes evil or worthless men as being:

...like thorns that are thrown away, for they cannot be taken with the hand; but the man who touches them arms himself with iron and the shaft of a spear, and they are utterly consumed with fire.

2 Samuel 23:6-7, ESV



Note the meaning here: evil men (like thorns) cause damage when handled with bare hands, therefore they are to be treated as dangerous.

This meaning is also seen Psalm 118, where the Psalmist is describing how God enabled him to defeat his enemies:

They compassed me about like bees: they are quenched as the fire of thorns: for in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.

Psalm 118:12, KJV

One of many warnings of judgement given by the prophet Isaiah to complacent sinful, people was that their previously fruitful land will not provide for them, and:

Upon the land of my people shall come up thorns and briers

Isaiah 32:13, KJV

Further on Isaiah warns:

And the people shall be as the burnings of lime: as thorns cut up shall they be burned in the fire.”

Isaiah 33:12, KJV

Here we see the stark contrast between the plants of the very good world that provided for human needs of food, shelter and beauty, and the thorny plants of the cursed world that were a hazardous nuisance only fit for destruction.

The Lord, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, uses the worthlessness of thorns and thornbushes when exhorting sinful people of Judah to repent, e.g.

For thus saith the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, ‘Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.’

Jeremiah 4:3, KJV

Further on, the Lord tells Jeremiah that because of their sin He is ceasing to provide for His people, and again uses the image of thorns as judgement:

They have sown wheat, but shall reap thorns: they have put themselves to pain, but shall not profit: and they shall be ashamed of your revenues because of the fierce anger of the LORD.

Jeremiah 12:13, KJV)



The judgement is that their labour is in vain, producing a useless, hazardous crop, in spite of their good intentions and hard work. This is an extreme fulfilment of the original judgement on Adam, when God cursed the ground, and also made work hazardous and frustrating:

Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Genesis 3:17-19, KJV

The phrase “thorns and thistles” using the same Hebrew words, is used in God’s judgement of Israel’s idolatry, as spoken by the prophet Hosea:

The high places also of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed: the thorn and the thistle shall come up on their altars; and they shall say to the mountains, Cover us; and to the hills, Fall on us.

Hosea 10:8, KJV

Greek Thorns

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *qôts*, as used in Genesis 3:18, is translated into the Greek word ἄκανθα, *ákantha*. Like the Hebrew word *qôts*, *ákantha* is used in two ways: referring to individual thorns; or referring to thornbushes, briars, brambles or other thorny plants.

Thorns in the New Testament

Ákantha is also a word used for thorns in the New Testament. For example, Jesus in his warning against false prophets stated: “You will recognise them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?” (Matthew 7:16) It is also the word for “thorns” in the parable of the sower.

The most significant use of the word “thorns” (Greek: *ákantha*) is the crown of thorns placed, no doubt with considerable force by a tough, uncaring Roman soldier, on Jesus’ head before he was sent to the cross. (Matthew 27:29, John 19:2) Here, these real, flesh tearing thorns were, and still are, a sign of what Jesus did for us on the cross: He took the judgement that was ours for our sin, and suffered God’s just punishment, so that all who would accept Jesus’ death on the cross as sufficient payment for their sin, would be freed from eternal judgement and enabled to have eternal life in the New Heavens and Earth. The New Earth is described as a place wherein righteousness dwells, i.e. a sin-free world. There will be no more curse (Revelation 22:3) and therefore, no thorns, no suffering, and no death.



Do the fossil thorns we found fit the technical definition of thorns, spines or prickles? Does it matter?

In technical 21st century botanical language hard pointed structures on plants are defined according to how they develop as the plant grows. “Thorns” are the sharp pointed bases of branches that have failed to develop or have fallen off. Sharp pointed structures formed when leaf bases fail to develop, or are left when leaves have fallen off are labelled “spines”. Surprisingly, the sharp protrusions on rose stems which everybody calls “thorns” are technically defined as “prickles,” which differ from spines and thorns by being formed by overgrowth of the outer layer of tissue on the rose stem.

Whilst precise technical terminology is useful for scientific and research purposes, in describing the method of growth of pointed thorns, spines or prickles, the Biblical word in Genesis 3 for ‘thorns’ clearly covers all of these, and is meant to convey the effect which it does with great accuracy! A problem only arises when a scientist thinks their definition is the be all and end all of the subject. However, when it comes to God’s word they will always have to bow the knee in humility.

According to current technical definitions, the pointed structures on our fabulous fossils seem to be “spines”. These are often smaller than thorns, but tend to be narrow and sharp, and can certainly do a lot of damage.

John Mackay & Diane Eager, Creation Research, 2010

For more about our fossil thorns see “Thorny Problem” slideshow on the Creation Research Evidence website: [click here](#)

Our fossil thorns are also featured on the Creation Research DVD *Darwin on the Rocks*. To see a preview of this DVD [click here](#)

APPENDIX ONE

Technical Language Limits

Not all technical language involves the use of unique words that are not used in common language by people outside a particular profession. Much technical language involves the use of words from the common language. It is their use in a technical or professional context that gives them their precise meaning. For example: the common English word for the whole human upper limb is “arm”. In technical anatomical language the “arm” is the region between the shoulder and elbow. The region between the elbow and wrist is the “forearm”. However, if one of your friends turned up with a cast extending from the elbow to the wrist and told you he had “a broken arm” you would know what he meant, even if you had studied anatomy. Furthermore, you would not tell your friend he was wrong, and give him a lecture on anatomical terminology.

Every human activity or area of study has its jargon, and there is no need to be afraid of it. Think of the sports or hobbies you may participate in, as well as your professional activity. They all have their technical language, which may be common words given special meanings, or words that are unique to that activity. People you talk to know what you mean by the context you are using the words.

Whilst technical language is useful for precision in well defined circumstances, it should never be used to confuse or intimidate people, or to avoid answering questions properly. Don't let anyone use technical language against you. If someone uses a technical term you do not understand, ask them (politely) to explain it. If they are unable, it may be because they don't really understand themselves and are just hiding behind technical jargon, as so many scientists do when they want to avoid admitting the Bible has a lot to say about the real that they study.

John Mackay & Diane Eager, Creation Research, 2010

For more evidence of Creation, Noah's flood, Tower of Babel, *etc.* from fossils, rocks and living things see the Creation Research Evidence Web Museum. [click here](#)

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APPENDIX TWO

Other Words for Thorns

Hebrew and Greek are rich and varied languages, often having more than one word for the same thing (just as English does). Therefore, in the Bible other words are used for thorns and thorny plants, but in every case they refer to plants that are harmful or useless, except as hedging, which make use of their spiky structure as a deterrent to roaming animals or intruders.

Below is a detailed list of the words used for thorns from the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*.

THORNS, THISTLES, etc.

thôrnz: There are very many references to various thorny plants in the Bible, and of the Hebrew words employed great uncertainty exists regarding their exact meaning. The alternative translations given in the text of English Versions of the Bible and in the margin show how divided are the views of the translators. In the following list the suggestions given of possible species indicated, usually by comparison with the Arabic, are those of the late Professor Post, who spent the best years of his life in study of the botany of Palestine. In the great majority of instances, however, it is quite impossible to make any reasonable suggestion as to any particular species being indicated.

(1) אֶצְטָד, *'aṭādh* (Jdg 9:14, English Versions of the Bible “bramble,” the King James Version margin “thistle,” the Revised Version margin “thorn”; Ps 58:9, English Versions of the Bible “thorns”): Probably the buckthorn (*Rhamnus Palestina* Post). Atad occurs as a proper name in Gen 50:10, 11.

(2) בְּרִקְנִים, *barqānīm* (Jdg 8:7, 16, English Versions of the Bible “briers”): Some thorny plant. The Egyptian-Arabic bargan is, according to Moore (Commentary on Judges), the same as *Centaurea scoparius* (Natural Order, Compositae), a common Palestinian thistle.

(3) דַּרְדָּר, *dardar* (Gen 3:18; Hos 10:8, English Versions of the Bible “thistle”; Septuagint τριβόλος, *tríbolos*): In Arabic, shauket ed-dardar is a general name for the thistles known as Centaureae or star-thistles (Natural Order, Compositae), of which Palestine produces nearly 50 species. The purple-flowered *C. calcitrapa* and the yellow *C. verutum* are among the commonest and most striking.

(4) הֶדְדֵק, *hedhek* (Prov 15:19, English Versions of the Bible “thorns”; Septuagint ἄκανθα, *ákantha*; Mic 7:4, English Versions of the Bible “brier”): From former passages this should be some thorny plant suitable for making a hedge (compare Arabic ḥadaḳ, “to enclose,” “wall in”). Lane states that Arabic ḥadaḳ is *Solanum sanctum*. Post suggests the oleaster, *Eleagnus hortensis*.

(5) חֹהַה, *hōah*; Septuagint κνίδη, *knídē*, and ἄκανθα, *ákantha* (2 Ki 14:9; Job 31:40, English Versions of the Bible, “thistle,” margin “thorn”; 2 Ch 25:18, English Versions of the Bible “thistle,” the King James Version margin “furze bush,” the Revised Version margin “thorn”; Hos 9:6; Song 2:2, English Versions of the Bible “thorns”; Isa 34:13 the King James Version “brambles” the Revised Version (British and American) “thistles”; Prov 26:9, English Versions of the Bible “a thorn”; 1 Sam 13:6, “thickets”; חֹוֹהִים, *hōwāhīm*, is, however, according to Driver and others a corruption for חֹוֹרִים, *hōrīm*, “holes”; Job 41:2, the King James Version “thorn” the Revised Version (British and American) “hook”; 2 Ch 33:11, the King James Version “thorns,” the Revised Version (British and American) “in chains,” margin “with hooks”): Clearly *hōah* stands for some plant with very strong thorns, but it is quite impossible to say what species is intended; indeed, probably the word was used in a general way. See HOOK.

- (6) מְסֻכָּה, *mešūkhāh*, occurs only in Mic 7:4, where it means a “thorn hedge.”
- (7) נֶעְצְרוֹן, *na’ācūc* (Isa 7:19, the King James Version “thorns,” the Revised Version (British and American) “thorn hedges”; Isa 55:13, English Versions of the Bible “thorn”): The word is derived from the root נָצַח, *nā’ac*, “to prick,” or “pierce,” and probably applies to any prickly plant. The Septuagint translation has στοιβή, *stoibb* (Isa 55:13), suggesting the thorny burnet, *Poterium spinosum*, so common in Palestine (see BOTANY). Post says, “It may be one of the thorny acacias” (HDB, IV, 752).
- (8) סִירִים, *šīrīm* (Eccl 7:6, “the crackling of thorns (šīrīm) under a pot” (šīr); Isa 34:13, “Thorns shall come up in its palaces”; Hos 2:6, “I will hedge up thy way with thorns”; Nah 1:10, “Entangled like thorns (King James Version “folden together as thorns”)...they are consumed utterly as dry stubble”): The thorny burner, *Poterium spinosum*, is today so extensively used for burning in ovens and lime-kilns in Palestine that it is tempting to suppose this is the plant especially indicated here. In Am 4:2 סִירוֹת, *šīrōth*, is translated “fish-hooks.” See HOOK.
- (9) סִלּוֹן, *šillōn* (Ezek 28:24, English Versions of the Bible, “brier”); סִלּוֹנִים, *šallōnīm* (Ezek 2:6, English Versions of the Bible, “thorns”): Arabic, *sallu* = “thorn.”
- (10) סָרָבִים, *šārābhīm* (Ezek 2:6, English Versions of the Bible, “briers;” the King James Version margin “rebels”): The translation as a plant name is very doubtful.
- (11) שִׁרְפָד, *širpād* (Isa 55:13, “Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle-tree”): The Septuagint has κόνουζα, *kónuza*, which is (Post) the elecampane, *Inula viscosa* (Natural Order Compositae), a plant 2 or 3 ft. high, growing on the bare hillsides of Palestine, not infrequently in close association with the myrtle.
- (12) צִנְנִים, *cinnīm* (Job 5:5; Prov 22:5, English Versions of the Bible, “thorns”); צִנְנִיִּם, *cenīnīm* (Nu 33:55; Josh 23:13, English Versions of the Bible, “thorns”): The words apparently have a very general meaning.
- (13) קֹזִן, *kōc*; the Septuagint ἄκανθα, *ákantha*: A general name for thorny and prickly plants, the commonest in the Old Testament (Gen 3:18; Ex 22:6; Jdg 8:7, 16; 2 Sam 23:6; Ps 118:12; Isa 32:13; 33:12; Jer 4:3; 12:13; Ezek 28:24; Hos 10:8).
- (14) קִמּוֹשׁ, *kimmōsh* (Prov 24:31, “thorns”; Isa 34:13; Hos 9:6, “nettles”). See NETTLES.
- (15) שִׁכִּים, *sikkīm*, plural of שֵׁךְ, *sēkh*, same as Arabic *shauk*, “a thorn” (Nu 33:55, “pricks”).
- (16) שַׁיִת, *shayith*: A word peculiar to Isa (5:6; 7:23 ff; 9:18; 10:17; 27:4) and always associated with *shāmīr* (See (17)), always translated “thorns.”
- (17) שַׁמִּיר, *shāmīr*: References as above (16), and in Isa 32:13, where it is with *kōc* (see (13)) always translated briers.” The Arabic samur is the thorny acacia *A. seyyal* and *A. tortilis* (Post).
- (18) ἄκανθος, *ákanthos*: The equivalent of *kōc* (see (13)) (Mt 7:16; 13:7, 22; 27:29, etc.). Always translated “thorns.”
- (19) ῥάμνος, *rhámnos* (Baruch 6:71, “white thorn”): The *Rhamnus Palaestina*.
- (20) σκόλοψ, *skólops* (2 Cor 12:7, English Versions of the Bible “thorn,” margin “stake”). See THORN IN THE FLESH.
- (21) τρίβολος, *tríbolos* (Mt 7:16, “thistle”; Heb 6:8, the King James Version “briers” the Revised Version (British and American) “thistles”).

The extraordinary plentifulness of various prickly plants in Palestine—in its present condition—is evident to any traveller during the summer months. Many of the trees and

shrubs are thorny and the ground is everywhere covered thick with thistles, many of which are very handsome and some of which attain a height of 6 or 8 ft. Before the peasant can plough, he must clear these away by burning (compare Isa 10:17). The early autumn winds often drive before them in revolving mass some of the star-thistles—a sight so characteristic that it may be the “thistle down” (the King James Version margin, the Revised Version (British and American) “whirling dust”) of Isa 17:13. Thorns and thistles are described (Gen 3:18) as God’s curse on the ground for sin. The Talmud suggests that these must be edible and are therefore artichokes. The removal of them and the replacement by more useful plants is a sign of God’s blessing (Isa 55:13; Ezek 28:24).

Gen 3:18 uses the words קוץ, *kōc* and דַּרְדָּר, *dardar* for “thorns” and “thistles.” Midrāsh Rabbā’ to Genesis (Midr. Gen. Rabbā’ 20 10) says that קוץ, *kōc* (“thorn”) is the same as עֲכָבִית, *‘akkābhīth*), which means an edible thistle (compare Levy, Dictionary, 645), and that דַּרְדָּר, *dardar*, “thistle”) is the same as קִינְרָס, *qinraṣ*; Greek κυνάρα, *kunára*, “artichoke”) (compare Levy, Dictionary, 298). “But,” adds the Midrash, “some reverse it, and say that דַּרְדָּר, *dardar*) is עֲכָבִית, *‘akkābhīth*) and that קוץ, *kōc*) is קִינְרָס, *qinraṣ*.)”

The neglected vineyard of the sluggard “was all grown over with thorns the face thereof was covered with nettles” (Prov 24:31), and in God’s symbolic vineyard “there shall come up briars and thorns” (Isa 5:6); “They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns; they have put themselves to pain, and profit nothing” (Jer 12:13).

Jotham compares the usurper Abimelech to a bramble (*Rhamnus Palaestina*) (Jdg 9:14 f), and Jehoash king of Israel, taunted Amaziah, king of Judah, by comparing him slightly to a thistle (margin “thorn”), readily trodden down by a wild beast (2 Ki 14:9).

Nevertheless, thorns and thistles have their uses. On them the goats and camels browse; scarcely any thorns seem to be too sharp for their hardened palates. The thorny burner (*Poterium spinosum*), Arabic ballan, which covers countless acres of bare hillside, is used all over Palestine for ovens (Eccl 7:6) and lime-kilns. Before kindling one of these latter the fellahin gather enormous piles of this plant—carried on their heads in masses much larger than the bearers—around the kiln mouth.

Thorny hedges around dwellings and fields are very common. The most characteristic plant for the purpose today is the “prickly pear” (*Opuntia ficus Indica*), but this is a comparatively late introduction. Hedges of brambles, oleasters, etc., are common, especially where there is some water. In the Jordan valley masses of broken branches of the *Zizyphus* and other thorny trees are piled in a circle round tents or cultivated fields or flocks as a protection against man and beast (Prov 15:19; Mic 7:4, etc.).

The Saviour’s “crown of thorns” (Mt 27:29) was according to Palestinian tradition constructed from the twisted branches of a species of *Rhamnaceae* either the *Zizyphus lotus* or the *Z. spina*.

E. W. G. Masterman, *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*.