

What was Gopher Wood?

Make thee an ark of gopher^{H1613} wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch^{H3722} it within and without with pitch.^{H3724}

– Genesis 6:14, KJV with Strong’s numbers for Hebrew words.

The Mystery of Gopher Wood

Noah was instructed by God to build his Ark from “Gopher Wood.” Noah would have known what God meant, but the meaning of the word ‘GPR’ (English transliteration of the Hebrew, גֹּפֶר) was lost to antiquity, and the word only occurs once in the Bible (Genesis 6:14).

What “Gopher” wood is almost certainly NOT:

1. Gopher Wood is not “Squared Timbers” as translated in the Septuagint (LXX) during the 2nd or 3rd century B.C. The Hebrew words for square and timber are both completely different words from different roots. The translation, “Squared,” is assumed to be based on the context of building with wood, in this case, from “_____”-wood.
2. Gopher Wood is not wood from the Gopher Tree. Granted it is possible that a particular kind of tree was called a Gopher tree, but this is not a language-reasoned guess or otherwise substantiated by Scripture, rather, Gopher is a transliteration of the unknown word, GPR.
3. Gopher Wood is not Cyprus or Cedar wood. Modern translations almost always transliterate the word as Gopher Wood, with a note that it was probably a type of Cyprus or Cedar, or else, other modern versions actually translate GPR as Cypress or Cedar. Like Square, however, the Hebrew language has distinct words of unrelated roots for both Cypress (Tirzah, Strong’s 8645) and for Cedar (Erez, Strong’s 730).

Relating ‘GPR’ to ‘Pitch’

The Hebrew language words used in the verse (Genesis 6:14), have a relationship which seems obvious between Gopher and Pitch (tar, bitumen), the Hebrew word, gophriyth. Because few people learn the Hebrew language, I will show the words with comparisons to cypress, and cedar, and square.

Hebrew	Translation	Strong’s	Example Ref
גֹּפֶר	Gopher	H1613	Genesis 6:14
כֹּפֶר	Gophriyth = Pitch	H3722 / H3724	Genesis 6:14
תִּרְזָה	Tirzah = Cypress	H8640	Isaiah 44:14
אֶרֶז	Erez = Cedar	H730	Isaiah 44:14
רָבָא	Raba = Square	H7251 / H7253	1 Kings 7:5

We can tell from the chart, that Gopher and Gophrynth share some linguistic root, but look closely at the right-hand character on both, it is different, but close enough to be mistranslated by scribal error, so that in fact, it might be exactly the same word¹.

If we translate 'GPR' as 'pitched,' we get something like, "Make yourself an ark of pitched wood. Make rooms in the ark, and pitch it within and without with pitch."

This seems redundant, but the Hebrew language often uses redundancy such as 'speaking with my mouth' (Psalm 17:10, etc.), and the verse becomes a summary statement followed by more specific instructions. This is a theory, but one based on verse context AND language word roots.

The idea of lamination

We know from history that the Romans made a very strong resin from sap and charcoal², which lends to the idea that the wood of the ark was not only water-proofed, but glued together. This leads to translation notes which indicate the possibility that Gopher meant Laminated. While this possible application of pitch adds a possible functional specificity to GPR, and makes reasonable sense, it is a speculative consideration.

In conclusion

Honest translation efforts should consider the close similarity between Gopher and Gophrynth, and must consider the possibility of scribal error which could easily make it the same word, along with the immediate context of 'pitching' the ark inside and out. Gopher should be translated as 'pitched', and ideas of lamination should be regulated to the footnotes. Gopher should not be translated as cypress or cedar trees, and it is unnecessarily and unhelpful to simply transliterate GPR as Gopher.

¹ <https://christiananswers.net/g-eden/gopherwood.html> viewed 7/26/2022.

² https://www.barrysetterfield.org/Ark/The_Ark.html#ark viewed 11/26/2017. Article cited references "New Scientist" of March 6, 1993 under the title "The Glue Which Held the Roman Empire Together:"