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Joseph Mallord William Turner
The Cedars of Lebanon, 1832-1834

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JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER
(London 1775 – 1851)

THE CEDARS OF LEBANON, 1832-1834

Pencil and watercolour with scraping-out
13 x 20.3 cm (5 1/4 x 8 in.)

Provenance

Coll. James Wadmore (1782 - 1853);
His sale at Christie's, 5 June 1863 (lot 101, as *Lebanon in Thunderstorm*), bought by Wallis;
Collection of Myles Kennedy;
His sale at Christie's, 16 March 1889 (lot 49);
Collection of Arthur Samuel;¹
Collection of Richard Nathanson, London, by 1979;
Sotheby's, London, 19 March 1981 (lot 181);
Christie's, London, 27 November 2002 (lot 7);
Private collection.

Literature

A. Wilton, *The Life and work of J.M.W. Turner*, Fribourg and London, 1979, p. 450, no. 1263.

Exhibitions

London, Leighton House, *Romantic Lebanon: The European View 1700-1900*, 1986, no. 72, illustrated in colour, p. 29, as *The Cedars of Lebanon*.

London, Royal Academy, *Turner: The Great Watercolours*, 2000 - 01, no. 83, illustrated in colour.

¹ Probably Arthur Samuel Peake (1865–1929), an English biblical scholar, born at Leek, Staffordshire, and educated at St John's College, Oxford. He was the first holder of the Rylands Chair of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the University of Manchester, from its establishment as an independent institution in 1904.

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Executed by J.M.W Turner (1775-1851) circa 1832–1834 in pencil and watercolour with scraping-out, *The Cedars of Lebanon* presents a group of cedar trees shown bending under the force of an encroaching storm, with dawn light emerging from behind the viewer to illuminate the scene. A figure in the foreground, next to his travel companions, raises his arms toward the towering trunks, emphasising the contrast between human fragility and nature's power. While this jewel-like watercolour was never engraved, it appears to have been conceived for Edward and William Finden's *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible* (1836), a series to which Joseph Mallord William Turner contributed at least twenty-six topographical designs (Wilton, *op. cit.*, nos. 1236-61), alongside Clarkson Stanfield, Augustus Wall Callcott, and James Duffield Harding, all of whom frequently relied on the first-hand graphic material produced by Sir Charles Barry in the Holy Land.² Several of the original drawings by Barry are now at the Royal Institute of British Architects.

From the outset, the publication clarifies its guiding purpose by noting that, "While other works of comparatively small value have employed the pencils of the finest artists, and have received every sort of embellishment, little, comparatively has been done towards illustrating the most important of all books - the Holy Scriptures. To supply this deficiency is the design of the present collection of Landscape Illustrations, in which are exhibited nearly one hundred of the most remarkable places mentioned in the Bible, as they actually exist, and very few of which have hitherto been delineated". The illustrations were accompanied by descriptive texts by the Reverend T.H. Horne of St. John's College, Cambridge. Together with *Assos*, c. 1835 (Fig. 1), the present watercolour is one of two further works associated with the series on account of their subject and format.³

Circumstances suggest *The Cedars of Lebanon* was omitted from the published engravings in part because Harding had already produced two representations of this same subject.⁴ Early documentation identifies the composition as *Lebanon in Thunderstorm*, associating it with the historical mountain range of Lebanon rather than the modern-day nation. Eric Shanes has observed that the distant harbour indicated on the horizon could be Tyre, which occupies a long isthmus and does not otherwise appear in the *Finden* collection. Another related work by Turner, *Mount Lebanon and the Convent of St Antonio*, based on a sketch by Barry and now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, was indeed selected for engraving (Fig. 2). Turner's detailed maritime view of *Lebanon from Tripoli* was also engraved for the series (Fig. 3), though the original watercolour is currently untraced.

Turner's artistic choice to depict trees bowed by turbulent weather and an isolated, supplicant figure, resonates with the imagery of Psalm 29, where "*the voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars of Lebanon*"; and "*the voice of the Lord... discovereth the forests*". The theme of divine agency over natural forces aligns with the broader

² L. Herrmann, *Turner Prints: The Engraved Works of J.M.W. Turner*, London, 1990, pp. 209–12.

³ A. Wilton, *The Life and work of J.M.W. Turner*, Fribourg and London, 1979, nos. 1262 and 1263.

⁴ E. Shanes, in *Turner: The Great Watercolours* (exhibition catalogue), Royal Academy, London, 2000–01, p. 192.

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objectives of the *Landscape Illustrations to the Bible*, and John Ruskin's assessment of Turner's watercolours for that series as "unrivalled examples of his richest executive power on a small scale" reflects the crisp execution, controlled washes, and skilful scratching out evident here, bestowing a palpable energy on the drawing.⁵ Other watercolours by Turner in this series are in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the Lusail Museum, Doha, the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Fig. 4), The Museum and Art Gallery, Blackburn, the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

The Cedars of Lebanon was formerly owned by James Wadmore (1782–1853), a distinguished connoisseur who assembled an extensive collection encompassing both Old Masters and leading contemporary British artists, among them Turner, David Wilkie, and Thomas Webster. Included in his holdings was a *St. John in the Wilderness* then attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, as well as a noteworthy group of English watercolours, manuscripts, and prints. His collection - comprising 186 pictures, of which 75 were Old Masters - was auctioned at Christie's on 5 and 6 May 1854. After Wadmore, Turner's watercolour entered the collections of Myles Kennedy, Arthur Samuel, and Richard Nathanson. It was exhibited in 1986 at Leighton House in the exhibition *Romantic Lebanon: The European View 1700-1900* (no. 72) and later at the Royal Academy's 2000–2001 exhibition *Turner: The Great Watercolours* (no. 83). There is also a suggestion that the watercolour may once have belonged to Benjamin Godfrey Windus (1790–1867), an enthusiastic Turner collector whose holdings included numerous works intended for the *Finden* publication, though no concrete proof has so far emerged to confirm this provenance.⁶ Additionally, Edward Yardley clarified 5 June 1863 as the correct date of the Wadmore sale, resolving earlier uncertainties regarding the work's initial dispersal.⁷

Turner was born in Covent Garden in 1775 to William Turner, a barber and wigmaker, and Mary Marshall, and he was admitted to the Royal Academy Schools at the age of fourteen, where his precocious aptitude for both oil painting and watercolour rapidly became evident. Throughout his career, Turner drew sustained inspiration from the Bible, beginning in 1800 with his grand oil painting *The Fifth Plague of Egypt*, which incorporated a quotation from the Book of Exodus. The following year saw the production of *The Army of the Medes Destroyed in the Desert by a Whirlwind*, referencing a passage from the Book of Jeremiah, followed in 1802 by *The Tenth Plague of Egypt*, again rooted in the Exodus narrative. In the 1830s, he returned to scriptural material with works such as *Pilate Washing his Hands* (1830), *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace* (1832), and *Christ Driving the*

⁵ J. Ruskin, in E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *Works of John Ruskin*, XVIII, London, 1903–12, p. 447.

⁶ "Twenty very beautiful drawings made for Finden's *Landscape Illustrations to the Bible* - an interesting series". See W. Robinson, *The History and Antiquities of the Parish of Tottenham in the County of Middlesex*, 1840, vol. 1, pp. 89–90; E. Shanes, 'Picture Notes: John Scarlett Davis: *The Library at Tottenham, the Seat of B.G. Windus, Esq...*', *Turner Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, Winter 1984, p. 57; and S. Whittingham, 'The Turner Collector: Benjamin Godfrey Windus 1790–1867', *Turner Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, Winter 1987, p. 34.

⁷ Edward Yardley, 'The Turner Collector: the Birket Foster Collection of Turner Watercolours', *Turner Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, Summer 1988, pp. 43, 44 no. 4.

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Traders from the Temple. His engagement with biblical themes continued well into the 1840s, exemplified by *Dawn of Christianity - Flight into Egypt* (1841) and *The Angel Standing in the Sun* (1846).

By the early 1830s, his practice had reached a period of particular refinement, characterised by a heightened concern with atmospheric drama and a nuanced approach to colour, often rendered through delicate washes. This phase coincided with his active participation in publishing ventures, as well as with continued travel on the Continent, where the study of French, Swiss, and Italian landscapes further shaped his visual vocabulary. At the time, Turner was applying his well-established command of watercolour to subjects carrying scriptural or poetic associations, a thematic strand that would remain a defining feature of his legacy until his death in 1851. The *Cedars of Lebanon*, a watercolour of exquisite depth and quality, exemplifies this key strand of Turner's mature landscape production, encapsulating the balance he achieved between narrative content and observational acuity.



Fig. 1 J.M.W. Turner, *Assos*, c. 1835. Watercolour over graphite with pen and brown ink, 13.3 x 20.2 cm. Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery.

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Fig. 2 J.M.W. Turner, *Mount Lebanon and the Convent of St Antonio*, 1832-34. Watercolour over graphite with pen and brown ink, 14.6 x 20 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.



Fig. 3 Edward Francis Finden (after J.M.W. Turner), *Lebanon from Tripoli*, 1836. Line engraving, 9.6 x 14.1 cm. London, Tate Britain.

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Fig. 4 J.M.W. Turner, *Babylon*, 1832-34. Watercolour over graphite with pen and brown ink, 14.1 x 20.6 cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

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