

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

Fred H. Wight

Copyright @ 1953

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE -

Olive and Fig Tree Culture

THE OLIVE TREE

ABUNDANCE OF OLIVE TREES IN BIBLE LANDS. For centuries the olive tree has been growing in lands bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, but its growth in Palestine has been quite abundant. Moses told Israel that Canaan was "**a land of oil olive**" (Deuteronomy 8:8). He also told them that they would acquire olive trees which they had not planted (Deuteronomy 6:11). From that day down to the present day, the growth of the olive tree, and the use of its products, have played an important part in the history of the land.

Characteristics of the olive tree. The young olive tree only bears olives after seven years of growth, and it is about fourteen years before the crop reaches its maturity. Because of the injurious method of harvesting the olives by using sticks to knock off the fruit, the trees only bear a full crop every other year. Some twenty gallons of oil are often derived from the olives of one tree. The berries are harvested in the month of October.¹

After the olive tree reaches its maturity, its fruitfulness lasts for many years. Its longevity is one of the remarkable characteristics of the tree. It lives and bears fruit for centuries. The old Olive tree is often seen to have several thrifty young shoots springing up all around it from its roots. It was this picture that the Psalmist had in mind when he wrote: "**Thy children like olive plants round about thy table**" (Psalm 128:3).

The olive tree thrives in Palestinian soil which has so many rocks in it. Thomson says of it: "It insinuates its roots into the crevices of this flinty marl, and draws from thence its stores of oil."²

Doubtless it is to this that the song of Moses alludes: "**He made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock**" (Deuteronomy 32:13).

To the Occidental, the olive tree with its dull grayish color of foliage, does not seem to be a particularly beautiful tree, but the Oriental sees in it many charms.³

Writers of Scripture often speak of the beauty and attractiveness of the olive. Concerning Israel, the prophet Jeremiah said: "**the Lord called thy name, A green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit**" (Jeremiah 11:16). The prophet Hosea said, "**His beauty shall be as the olive tree**" (Hosea 14:6). And David asserted concerning himself: "**I am like a green olive tree in the house of God**" (Psalm 52:8).

Olive trees have a remarkable number of blossoms, many of which fall without ever maturing into fruit. Sometimes the breeze blows upon the tree and the falling blossoms look like a shower of snowflakes.⁴

The Book of Job makes a comparison to this characteristic of the olive blossoms: "**And shall cast off his flower as the olive**" (Job 15:33).

Grafting of the olive tree. In the western part of Asia the olive tree often grows wild, and so when the trees are cultivated they must be grafted. A graft of a cultivated olive tree is inserted into the stem of the wild olive tree, and then the wild olive tree is cut down close to the ground, and the part below becomes root and feeder for the inserted shoot.⁵

This is the customary process of grafting. But the Apostle Paul, for sake of argument, speaks of grafting contrary to the natural process. He tells of GOD grafting the wild olive of the Gentiles on the good stock of the Jewish nation, which is a reversal of custom (Romans 11:24).

Harvesting the olive crop. The Arabs harvest their crop of olives in the Holy Land by beating the trees with sticks in order to knock off the fruit. Instead of hand picking them, they beat the limbs and thus cause the fruit to fall. The tender shoots that would ordinarily bear fruit the following year are thus apt to be damaged, so as to interfere greatly with the next year's crop. This is no doubt the reason for the trees yielding a good crop only every other year. The reason why this method is used is because their forefathers have always done it this way, and they don't believe in change of customs.⁶

As a matter of fact, Moses indicates that the same method was used by Israel when he gave the law concerning leaving some of the olive berries for the poor: "**When thou beatest thine olive tree thou shalt not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, or the fatherless, and for the widow**" (Deuteronomy 24:20).

Isaiah also speaks of the obtaining of berries left by the olive harvesters: "**Yet gleaning grapes shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof**" (Isaiah 17:6).

Use of olives for eating. The natives of Bible lands have made large use of a form of dried olives. The pickled olive berry so much used in the Occident, is gradually being introduced by the returning Jews. It has been said that bread and olives are used in Syria today, much like porridge and milk are used in Scotland.⁷

The workingman of the East usually has some olives in his bag when he leaves home for his daily work.

The process of making olive oil. Olive mills are used for making oil. There have been many of these instruments for the manufacture of oil located in Palestine.

Oil-presses comprised, in addition to the vat, an upright stone with a large hole in it. In this hole a beam was inserted. This beam rested on the olives which were to be pressed, extending far

beyond the receptacle containing the olives, and weights were hung on the end farthest from the stone.⁸

The Garden of Gethsemane was in reality an olive orchard, and the word, "*Gethsemane*," means "Oil-Press." Another Bible-time way of making oil was to tread the olive berries with the feet. This primitive method was mentioned by the prophet Micah: "**Thou shalt tread the olives, but thou shalt not anoint thee with oil**" (Micah 6:15).

The wide use of olive oil in Bible lands. Olive oil was considered to be one of the great sources of wealth in the days of King Solomon (cf. I Kings 5:11; II Chronicles 2:10). Solomon gave to Hiram each year in return for services rendered by his men, among other things, twenty thousand baths of oil, one bath being about seven and one-half gallons.⁹

The prophets Ezekiel and Hosea make mention of the exporting of oil to other lands (Ezekiel 27:17; Hosea 12:1). Oil has been used for a great variety of purposes in the Orient. It largely took the place of butter in eating, and for cooking purposes it was used in place of animal fat.

Ezekiel mentions three important items of diet of which oil is one, and flour and honey are the other two (Ezekiel 16:13). And olive oil was used almost exclusively for light in lamps. The most famous example of this is "**the ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom**" (Matthew 25:1). Also oil is used today in Bible lands in the manufacture of soap, and it is quite likely that it was so used in Bible days. And oil was often used for anointing the body.

Naomi told Ruth, "**Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the floor**" (Ruth 3:3).

Then oil was many times used in various religious ceremonies. It formed a part of the meal offering (Leviticus 2:1). The prophet was anointed with oil when he took over his duties (I Kings 19:16). The priest was also anointed with oil when he took over his duties (Leviticus 8:12). And the king was anointed either by a prophet or by the priest (I Samuel 16:13; I Kings 1:34).

In New Testament times the sick were anointed for the healing of their bodies (Mark 6:13; James 5:14).

The use of olive wood. Wood from the olive tree is often used in the East. It is close-grained and has a yellow tint. The Oriental carpenter is fond of using it. It is especially utilized in the construction of cabinets. King Solomon had the cherubim of the temple, and the inner and outer doors and posts of the sanctuary, all made of olive wood¹⁰ (I Kings 6:23, 31, 33).

The symbolic use of the olive. The olive tree has been thought of as a symbol of peace, ever since the dove sent out by Noah from the ark came back, and "**Lo, in her mouth an olive leaf plucked off**" (Genesis 8:11). Throughout the Bible, oil is often used symbolically of the HOLY SPIRIT. And when the Apostle John speaks of the "**anointing which ye have received**" (I John 2:27), he means by it the enduement with power of the HOLY SPIRIT. Also oil was considered a symbol of abundance (Deuteronomy 8:8), and a lack of it was a symbol of want (Joel 1:10).

THE FIG TREE

Three crops of figs in Palestine. The early figs, not very many in number, but large in size, are ripe a month before the main crop; the summer or main crop is used in August and September; and the winter figs remain on the trees until late in the fall of the year. Mention is made in Scripture of the firstripe figs as being desirable (Hosea 9:10), and the ease with which they are secured when the tree is shaken (Nahum 3:12). The summer crop that is not eaten as fresh fruit is dried on the housetops, and then used in the winter months.¹¹

The fig tree a sign of the season. The fig tree shows sign of foliage later than some of the other fruit trees of Palestine. The unfolding of the fig leaves and the deepening of their color is thought of as a sign that summertime is at hand.¹²

JESUS made reference to this idea: "**Now learn a parable of the fig tree; when his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh**" (Matthew 24:32; Mark 13:28). The lover in the Song of Solomon indicated that winter was past and summer was at hand because "**The fig tree putteth forth her green figs**" (Song of Solomon 2:11-13).

CHRIST and the fig tree. In order to understand why CHRIST cursed the fig tree one day, it is necessary to know the custom of the fig tree's growth of leaves and fruit. The normal habit of the fig trees is that fruit begins to form on the tree as soon as leaves appear. Leaves and fruit also disappear together. But it was said of this fig tree which JESUS and his disciples saw on the Mount of Olives, "**for the time of figs was not yet**" (Mark 11:13).

Actually this was no excuse for this fig tree, because if it was not the time for figs, it was also not the time for leaves to appear. By a show of leaves, it was like many people, pretending to have fruit which was not there. It was like the Pharisees who professed to be very religious, but whose lives were fruitless. Therefore CHRIST cursed this tree as an object lesson to all not to be hypocritical.¹³

JESUS also gave us the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree.

"A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down" (Luke 13:6-9).

Here was a fig tree that failed for three years to bear fruit, when its owner had a right to expect a crop. The gardener suggested patience with the tree, and proposed additional cultivation and fertilization for it, giving it another chance to bear figs. It will be noted that this fig tree had been planted in the midst of a vineyard. This is often done in Palestine.

Use of figs in the Old Testament. Figs were often used in the history of Israel, especially dried figs. Abigail took two hundred cakes of figs to David (I Samuel 25:18). A cake of figs was given the Egyptian to revive him (I Samuel 30:12). And cakes of figs were brought to David at Hebron

at a time of great rejoicing (I Chronicles 12:40). When King Hezekiah was sick, Isaiah told him to put a lump of figs on his boil, and the LORD healed him (II Kings 20:7). Jeremiah refers to the characteristic of figs, that some of them can be very good, and then again, they can be very bad (Jeremiah 24:1, 2).

Sitting under one's own fig tree. Several times the Old Testament makes use of this expression with the addition of the vine. It is used in various ways. In the prosperous reign of King Solomon it was said, "**And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all the days of Solomon**" (I Kings 4:25). This was another way of saying that there was prosperity and peace in the land, that every family enjoyed the possession of his father's inheritance, which was symbolized by the fruits of the vine and fig tree belonging to each home.

The prophet Micah used the expression to picture the universal peace and prosperity which would characterize the coming Golden Age: "**Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid**" (Micah 4:3, 4). It is a picture of enjoying the blessings of peace.

1. George M. Mackie. *Bible Manners and Customs*. p. 49.
2. W. M. Thomson. *The Land and the Book*, Vol. III. p. 34.
3. E. P. Barrows. *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 356.
4. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, pp. 148. 149.
5. Mackie, op. cit., p. 50.
6. John D. Whiting, "Village Life in the Holy Land," *The National Geographic Magazine*. March. 1914. p. 291.
7. Mackie. op. cit., p. 50.
8. George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*. p. 137.
9. Barrows.op. cit., p. 357.
10. Loc. cit.
11. Mackie, op. cit., p. 51.
12. Loc. cit.
13. Ibid.. pp. 52-53.

~ end of chapter 21 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
