

chapters are unbalanced in terms of length and depth of information and they are sometimes not very closely or logically linked. This is especially true for chapters four to seven. Nevertheless, the book is valuable for its systematic summary and theoretical analysis of the accumulated information on Chinese resource plants. As well, it makes a significant contribution to practical guidance in research and the exploitation of resource plants for scientists both in China and in other countries. The book is suitable for professionals who engage in

botany or relevant sciences and for other persons who are interested in these fields.

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Figs, Dates, Laurel, and Myrrh: Plants of the Bible and the Quran

By Lytton John Musselman. 2008. Timber Press, 133 SW 2nd Avenue, Suite 450, Portland, Oregon 97204 USA. 314 pages, 21.28 USD.

As a child, I always thought that the mustard plants to which the biblical authors referred must have been a Middle Eastern plant different from the mustard which grows in this country. After all, the mustard in this country is not the smallest of all seeds, it is a smallish seed, an oil seed which can be ground up and mixed to produce the sweet mustard of hot dogs and a common condiment. If it were the smallest of all seeds, I never saw it. If it could grow into the tallest of shrubs where birds could come and nest in its branches, it had to be different from the yellow rocket mustard of eastern Ontario. There was no support for a bird's nest here, simply a weed found in the garden. So when Musselman's book arrived on my desk, mustard was one of the first plants I looked up, and I was surprised to find, after all these years, that the mustard of the Bible was not much different from the mustard of Ontario, not larger, not with a smaller seed, but a biblical plant to which Jesus made reference as a point of faith, not a wonder plant. Of course, the image Jesus used was to make a point about the wonderful action of God, far more than we could imagine and where the normal could become amazing. The usual could become wonderful.

In this book, 81 different plants are taken from all parts of the Bible and identified by a botanist who loves plants, loves the Bible, and loves the Middle East. Familiar plants like the grape, apple, thistle, wheat, and olive and many trees, vegetables, flowers, and spices are enumerated and described in detail. Sometimes different species and often different genera are substituted for the names the Bible translation uses to refer to the common fruits which we know. Some other plants like nard, wormwood, myrrh, and gall are exciting to consider. These are the biblical images which are associated with different stories in the Old and New testaments and become old friends to scripture readers with images of the Magi, the "holy waste" of people's reverence for Jesus, and some kind of bitter product which can be the fruits of souls destroyed by sin and death.

Interesting ideas borne of botanical studies are interjected into the text when the real fruit has no Middle Eastern presence in antiquity. The classic image of the apple is critiqued with reference to the Garden of Eden, where the fruit is not named but has been accepted as the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Our translations of the books of Joel and Proverbs contain the word "apple" but other fragrant and sweet fruits like the apricot may be a better translation of the Hebrew word used in the text. Musselman mentions these differences and refers to historical works which trace the development of the myth.

Some plants have no clear identity in modern botany. Gall, the ingredient in the bitter mixture which was offered to Jesus to drink on the cross, is one such reference which may have a lot of candidates but no clear definition. It could be the bodily fluid. It could be a poison. It could be one of a number of weeds like poison hemlock, wild carrot, or even poppy. All are bitter to grazing animals, but the Greek word in the text is properly translated as "bitterness" rather than any one plant.

Reading the scriptures and then referring to the descriptions in Musselman's text was a pleasant and thoughtful exercise which deepened my understanding of the text which I was reading as well as the botany of the Middle East. I worked my way through the book for many thoughtful hours considering myths and icons and now comparing botany to biblical images. Many of us read the scriptures considering the lilies of the field in a metaphorical sense when they were presented to us. Seldom do we consider them as botanists, and as I read this book I was forced to consider the real plants instead of simply the metaphor. I found that changing my perspective of reading the Bible enriched the images which, as a believer, I have considered so long and so often in the scriptures.

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