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Bridges for Peace

Israel Teaching Letter

Vol. # 770402

April, 2002

THE SEVEN SPECIES

“For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you shall eat food without scarcity, in which you shall not lack anything” (Deut. 8:7-9).

Moses’ description of the rich produce of Canaan has long represented the fruitfulness of the land, which God was giving to the Israelite nation. The produce mentioned became known as The Seven Species, within Judaism, and the motifs can be seen gracing art and architecture in Israel from ancient times to the present day.



Often listed in abbreviated form as “the grain, the new wine, and the oil” (Deut. 7:13, 11:14, 12:17), these items formed the mainstay of sustenance for an agricultural society. Bread was the staff of life; oil gave a feeling of satiety, light, and medicine; and wine brought joy. Pomegranates produced a refreshing juice. Figs and date honey provided sweetness to one’s diet, a delicacy in a land whose seasonings were otherwise salty, spicy, or sour.

(The “honey” of the Seven Species has long been considered to be date honey [Jerusalem Talmud, Bikkurim 1:3], as it

The seven varieties: wheat, barley, vines, figs, pomegranates, olives, and honey.



coincides with the agricultural sequence of maturation describing the other six Species.)

The Seven Species, being well adapted to Israel's topography, seasons and climate, continue to thrive in the land, and are of particular interest to observant tourists who can readily identify these biblical plants growing throughout Israel. The stately date palm, deeply-lobed broad leaves of the fig tree, and glossy green leaves and red blossoms of the small pomegranate trees are a delight to the eye, and add color and variety to the biblical landscape. Gray-green olive trees grace terraced slopes, providing food, oil, shade for man and animal, and wood for carving attractive Holy Land mementos. Grains are still grown, and grapevines adorn trellises and fields. We made a point to plant these Seven Species on the grounds of the Bridges for Peace International Headquarters, providing an oasis of beauty fulfilling Deut. 8:7-9.

Truly, the Seven Species are beautiful, useful, and nourishing. But many other plants are also characteristic of Israel – the almond and carob trees, spring's crimson anemones, and winter's lovely cyclamen, which grows wild in rocky clefts. Why did God specify the Seven Species to typify the fruitfulness of the land He was giving to the Israelites?

The answer lies, not in an arbitrary choice of favored plants, but in an intricate weather sequence well understood by Israel's early agricultural community. This pattern of wind and weather is woven throughout Scripture.



THE BELOVED'S GARDEN

In the Song of Solomon, chapter 4, Solomon describes at length the beauty of his beloved – her attributes, her physical charms, her sweet and thoughtful words. He compares her to a walled garden, planted with every kind of delectable and fragrant fruit. Jerusalem today is filled with such secluded high-walled gardens, and it is always a treat to catch a glimpse of a shaded and flower-filled garden through a briefly opened gate.

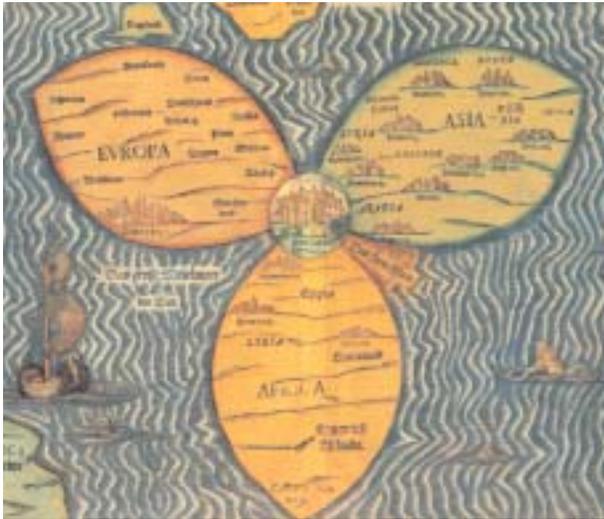
Solomon's Bride did not deny her Lover's lavish compliments or discourage his affectionate admiration. Instead, with maidenly modesty and ardent love she replied, *"Awake, O north wind, and come, wind of the south; Make my garden breathe out fragrance, Let its spices be wafted abroad. May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits!"* (Song of Sol. 4:16).

A clear understanding of seasonal and directional winds is here implied. Different winds are required to produce the full fruitfulness of a planted garden. The north wind brings rain and dew, while the south wind brings the warmth that ripens the fruit. All other elements might be



in their proper order and place – rich soil, healthy plants, high walls to keep out predators – but without these winds, the garden will fail.

“AWAKE, O NORTH WIND”



Israel is a land placed “*at the center (literally “navel”) of the earth*” (Eze. 38:12). Her climatic systems are influenced by Europe, Africa, and Asia. Complex weather patterns create a yearly cycle composed of a cold rainy season extending from November to April, and a hot dry season from May to October.

As the seasons change, so do the winds. These winds are directly related to the moisture, or lack thereof, that falls on Israel. Proverbs 25:23 says, “*The north wind brings forth rain.*”

As moisture-laden clouds sweep down from the north and northwest, welcome rains fall across Israel’s narrow land. They fill the Sea of Galilee and mountain aquifers, the springs and pools, providing water to man, wild and domesticated animals, and an

immense variety of birds. Showers of promise come in the autumn, and the last showers of blessing come in late spring (the “*early and latter rains*” of Jer. 5:24). These rains play an integral part in Israel’s agricultural cycle. After the long dry summer, the fall rains cause seeds to germinate, before the heavier winter rains. Grass blankets the land with a welcome cloak of green. Plants grow slowly during the cool wet winter.

Late winter/early spring rains, with thunder, lightning, and strong northerly winds, cause a sustained period of growth particularly of grain crops, when the barley and wheat fill their heads with starch. These downpours of rain brought by the north winds must fall within a critical few months – after the grain has formed its head, but not so late that their swelling heads are beaten down by the heavy rains and the harvest spoiled. We see an example of this after Israel demanded that God provide them with a King, like all the other nations. This displeased God and in I Samuel 12:17-19, we find Samuel praying to the Lord, “*and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. And all the people said to Samuel, ‘Pray for us your servants to the Lord your God, to save us from death...’*” They knew the heavy rain and wind associated with thunderstorms would ruin the wheat and barley harvest that was ready, as the grain would be beaten into the earth and rot in the field from moisture and the high heat in the late Spring.

“COME, WIND OF THE SOUTH”

Spring passes very quickly in Israel. In the space of a few days winter’s heavy rains subside, the skies clear, and a hot south wind sweeps across the land. Luke 12:55 says, “*And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, ‘It will be a hot day,’ and it turns out that way.*”

How do you “see” the wind blow? In the Mideast, the south wind, so characteristic of hot dry weather, is often laden with dust. It is not uncommon to see dust-laden yellow clouds wafting across the sky, casting a dark and eerie shadow over the land. Occasionally the clouds drop to ground level, causing a dust storm that blankets everything with a film of dust, inside and outside. Strong winds drive grit and sand through every crack, and sting one’s skin and eyes. Such dust storms make driving hazardous. They cause suffering for man and animals, and distress for housewives.

In Hebrew, these hot winds are called a “sharav,” in Arabic, a “hamsin.” Quickly they scorch the green grass and plants, leaving the ground brown and dry for the coming months of summer. Yet these hot southerly winds are essential for the proper pollination of fruit-bear-

ing trees and grapevines. The olive tree, like the pomegranate, male date trees, and grapevines, need an extended period of hot dry days to complete pollination in order to produce an abundant yield for the fall harvest.

The delicate balance of moist north winds and dry south winds was well understood by the Israelites of Bible times. An early dry south wind would prevent the heads of barley and wheat from filling, causing crop failure and potential starvation. On the other hand, a late north wind bringing rain after the olive trees began to blossom would wash away the pollen and drastically reduce the olive crop.

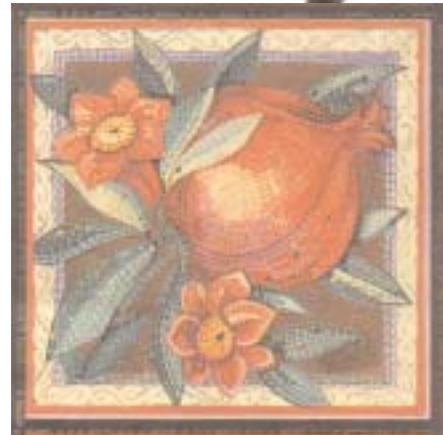
SEVEN OPPORTUNITIES TO TRUST GOD

As we look at the effects of the rain-laden north winds and hot dry south winds on the agricultural cycle of Israel, it is apparent that these winds have a profound impact, particularly on the Seven Species. This is confirmed when we realize that in the weeks between Passover and Shavuot (Pentecost), all Seven Species experience a period of sustained and critical growth. The first figs begin to form, the heads of barley and wheat fill, and the flowers of date, pomegranate, olive, and grape are pollinated and set their fruit. All this occurs in the period of Israel's most turbulent and unpredictable weather, which can enhance or ruin the upcoming year's crops.

In Egypt, the Israelites did not need to depend on the rains, for the yearly rise of the Nile River provided waters for irrigating crops. But in this new land, in Canaan, winds were essential to agricultural life, for they brought the rain. Moses had warned the people, *"For the land, into which you are entering to possess it, is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you used to sow your seed and water it with your foot like a vegetable garden. But the land into which you are about to cross to possess it, a land of hills and valleys, drinks water from the rain of heaven...and it shall come about, if you listen obediently to My commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, that He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early and late rain, that you may gather in your grain and your new wine and your oil"* (Deut. 11:10-11,14-15). The refer-

ence to watering their garden with their foot, has to do with the method of watering along the banks of the Nile River. The abundant water that flows is channeled into the various garden plots through channels that allowed in or kept out the water by means of wooden doors that you open and close with your foot. This method is still used today in Egypt.

Listening to Moses, the Israelites understood that agricultural practices would be different in the Promised Land. Yet in their hearts, were they longing for a life when they could harvest plenty of food without worrying about sufficient rainfall? Were they hopeful that the land held fruits and vegetation, which did not require rainfall at specific times? After all, it





was the land of milk and honey (Ex. 15:5; Eze. 20:6). But such was not the case for the abundance would not come easily.

When God introduced the land of Canaan and its fruits to the people of Israel, because of our unfamiliarity with Israel's climatic patterns and their effect on agriculture, we have understood the Deuteronomy 11 passage to say, "I am giving you a wonderful land filled with a variety of fruits for your every need. Go in and enjoy it." In actuality, what He was saying was, "I am giving you a land producing grains, trees and plants that require rains at the proper time, and in the right amount, or they will fail to produce. It is a land watered, not by irrigation channels as you knew in Egypt, but by the rains of heaven, by the rains I give. Your very survival in this land depends upon Me alone."

God's words must have struck fear in the hearts of the Israelites. The God of the Universe was challenging His people to a level of dependence on Him beyond anything they had ever experienced. The Seven Species were not just a nice list of good foods He would give them, but a clarion call to rely on Him for their very suste-

nance. Year in, year out, God was giving them seven opportunities to trust Him.

Would they obey Him, trusting Him to provide the north and south winds in their proper time? Or would they turn aside to the Canaanite storm god, Ba'al, or the fertility goddess, Astarte, rather than trust God for the necessary winds and rain in due season? Sadly, sometimes the Israelites failed to trust God. But always there were those who remained faithful to God, who accepted the challenge of the Seven Species, obeyed the Lord, and trusted Him to provide for them.

MAN'S BEST IS NOT GOD'S BEST

It is interesting to note that 400 years earlier, when Jacob sent "*choice products*" of the land as a gift to the governor of Egypt (Gen. 43:11), he sent almost none of the Seven Species. Their fruitfulness depended on timely rainfall, and the land of Canaan was suffering severe drought and crop failure on every hand. The presents Jacob sent were almonds and pistachios, which bloomed very early in the season and required little rainfall, and resins of various trees and shrubs. Jacob's desperate gifts were those of a land stripped of every domesticated crop, forced to give what little grew of itself.

"Honey" is the only item of the Seven Species which Jacob gave. Biblical scholars believe the honey Jacob gave may have been bee honey, made from wildflowers which bloom during drought years, or perhaps hoarded date honey from past harvests.

Jacob gave the best produce he had. But God has a different understanding of "best." His definition of the "best" is one that is produced, not by security and natural results, but by having faith to trust Him and also by obeying Him.

FRUITFULNESS IN TEMPESTUOUS TIMES

Often, we feel that if circumstances were easier, we could be more fruitful for the Lord's work. We say, "If I had more time, or more money – if the storms of life would subside – if this dry spell of uselessness would end – I could be more effective for God." But fruitfulness for God does not come when life is easy, when we can serve Him in our own strength and resources. Like the Seven Species, our sweetest fruit is born during the tempestuous storms of life.

Different winds are necessary to bring forth different fruit. We need the hot dry winds and long days of quiet unnoticed growth, patiently preparing for the harvest. We need the strong north winds that bring driving rains, that our roots might grow deep and our lives grow rich and full of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Gal. 5:22 states *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"*.

Paul prayed for the Colossians, desiring that they would *"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God"* (Col. 1:10). James said, *"Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand"* (Jas. 5:7-8). Our lives are not about getting problems solved so we will have time or energy or finances to serve the Lord. Life is about seeing each challenge, problem, and trial as an opportunity to trust God now, and, like the Israelites whose survival was dependent upon the Seven Species, bear fruit because of our trust in Him.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was faithful to sustain the Israelites when He brought them into the Promised Land. The Seven Species provided yearly opportunities for them to trust God, and He did not fail them. In our lifetime, God has brought the Jewish people into the Land again. Daily He is fulfilling His promises to restore His people to the Land, and the Land to His people.

During these tempestuous times, as we trust Him, we will see His faithfulness to us as well. God is the Lord of the north winds and the south winds, the storms and sunny days. Let us invite His winds to blow through our lives, that we might bear all the fruit of the Spirit for Him.

Shalom from Jerusalem,
Martha Lou Farmer
BFP Publications Department - Jerusalem

Sources:

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Love
Joy
Peace
Patience
Kindness
Goodness
Faithfulness
Gentleness
Self-control

Many pastors, Bible teachers and even lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding, YES! That is why I am sending out this *Israel Teaching Letter*. It is my hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. *"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem"* (Isa. 2:3).