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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE BIBLICAL PROBLEM OF HYSSOP

The hyssop is one of the more problematical species of herbs mentioned in the Bible. It has been the subject of considerable controversy on the part of botanists and Biblical scholars alike in days gone by,¹ and even at the present time its true identification is uncertain. The difficulties are not particularly mitigated by the fact that the incidence of hyssop in the Bible is such that it affords scant indication of its real nature, and the reasons which underlay its use in Hebrew ritual performance.

In four instances in the Bible it is associated with the sprinkling of blood:

- (a) In the Passover ritual as described in Exod. xii. 22, where the hyssop soaked in blood was used as an aspergillum to smear the lintel and side-posts of the door. Some authorities think that the plant used for this purpose was the *Sorghum vulgare* L., and this may be the same herb as that mentioned in 1 Kings iv. 33.
- (b) As part of the ritual for the ceremonial cleansing of the leper in Lev. xiv. 6, where the plant was to be dipped in the blood of a sacrificed bird, along with a living bird, cedar wood and scarlet wool.
- (c) In Lev. xiv. 49, where the same procedure was enjoined for the ceremonial purification of a house afflicted with what was apparently some fungous growth, possibly dry-rot, or mildew.
- (d) In Hebrews ix. 19, where the part played by hyssop in the sealing of the Covenant at Sinai is described.

Hyssop is also mentioned in Numbers xix. 6, 17, where the sin-offering required the priest to take hyssop, cedar wood and scarlet wool, and cast them into the middle of the burning of the heifer. For the purifying of unclean persons and things, a sprinkling with this aromatic powder or "ashes of the burning" was an essential performance, and this exhibits aspects which were at once symbolical and practical.

These and other references which occur in the Old Testament may not, of course, refer to the same species of hyssop, especially when it is remembered that Celsius devoted over forty pages of his *Herbal*² to a discussion of the different varieties and their relative claims and merits.

The Hebrew (*'ezôb*), Arabic (*zūfā*) and Greek (*ὑσσώπος*) names furnish no practical guide for the identification of the plant.

¹ H. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* (1952), p. 160; cf. I. Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* (1924-34), ii. pp. 84 ff.

² O. Celsius, *Hierobotanicon; sive De Plantis Sacrae Scripturae*, 2 vols. (1745-7).

The general idea held by the Greeks was some member of the Labiate group, such as thyme or sage, in employing the term. In the LXX it was the ordinary word for the equivalent Hebrew, though it is at least probable that the translators had in mind the aromatic plant used by the Hebrews for ceremonial purposes.

A. P. Stanley¹ thought with a number of early writers that the plant *Capparis spinosa* L., or Caper, was the herb in question, and in this he followed the conjectures of Royle² whom he quotes to the effect that both the 'aşaf³ and the "hyssop" of Scripture are found in Lower Egypt and in the deserts of Sinai. In addition, he spoke of the plant as growing in the most barren places, being found on rocks and terraces. He noted that a prominent feature of the plant was the mass of small, white flowers of pronounced fragrance produced in the Spring.

This identification was accepted by Tristram, but other authorities have maintained that the Biblical hyssop was one of the Labiate family, either thyme (*Thymus capitatus* L.), mint (*Mentha sativa* L.), or sage (*Salvia triloba* L.). Most modern botanists both in and out of Palestine, however, think that the hyssop of old is the *Origanum maru* L.,⁴ the little greyish-green marjoram plant or *za'tar* of Modern Palestine. This plant is bushy in appearance, and grows to about eighteen inches in height, with upright, slender stalks bearing a considerable number of leaves which surround prominent spikes of fragrant white flowers. This herb has been found in abundance in Palestine from early days, and the pungent aromatic flavour of the heads and leaves caused them to be used widely as a spice and condiment.

One argument in favour of identifying the hyssop of the Bible with *Origanum maru*, as against other larger reeds such as the sorghum species, is that the plant lore of King Solomon is said to have extended "from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall."⁵ This association of the stately and revered cedar with the humble hyssop may

¹ *Sinai and Palestine* (1863), pp. 22 f.

² J. F. Royle, "On the hyssop of Scripture," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vii (1846), pp. 193 ff.; cf. Royle's paper on the identification of the mustard tree and the Biblical hyssop, *ibid.*, viii (1846), pp. 113 ff.

³ One of two Arabic names for the Caper plant.

⁴ This species is sometimes described as *Origanum Aegyptiacum* L.

⁵ 1 Kings iv. 33.

not merely indicate the limits which the author set upon the botanical knowledge of Solomon, but also that he was cognisant of the fact that these two species represented the extremes of the vegetable kingdom as far as Palestinian flora was concerned, within which lay the remainder of the many plant species and genera. At all events, it seems probable that the hyssop, whether it was the marjoram or some other plant, enjoyed its ritual popularity because it was of sufficiently small proportions to admit of its being used in a bunch to form an aromatic aspergillum or sprinkler for the various ritual performances. Such a device would doubtless serve as a highly desirable accessory in the task of warding off or dispelling the inevitably unrecorded stench of the sacrificial offices.

Crowfoot and Baldensperger¹ identify the hyssop of the Bible with the modern Palestinian *za'tar*, and adduce as an argument to this end the fact that it is still employed by the Samaritans in their Passover ritual. They write:

These rigid conservatives may well be using the same plant they have used for the last 2,000 years or so: it does not follow, of course that their hyssop must be the hyssop of the Israelites, but the identification can be supported on other grounds and the Samaritan use goes far to make it certain.²

They go on to describe a visit to Mount Gerizim in April of 1930, when the Samaritan Passover was being celebrated:

It was with some difficulty that the ritual sprinkling of the blood was seen at all, as it was done very quietly, a little while after the Sacrifice was over, so as not to excite the attention of the crowd. Secretively and rapidly a priest passed around the festival encampment, dipping a little bunch of hyssop (*za'tar*) into a bowl of mingled blood and water, and touching the door post and lintels of the huts with it.³

On this occasion the *za'tar* was praised for its suitability as a ritual dispenser in the Passover ceremonies. But the plant had to be freshly gathered, for a bunch of the dried plant would not have had the same efficacy.

* * * * *

In later literature there does not appear to be any superstitious use of hyssop, in spite of its earlier ritual associations.

¹ G. M. Crowfoot and L. Baldensperger, *From Cedar to Hyssop* (1932), pp. 71 ff.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 72 f.

Many varieties of hyssop arose subsequently, and the name was used in a loose fashion to describe various aromatic labiates which had no conspicuous features by which one might differentiate between them. Dioscorides (fl. c. A.D. 50), a physician in the Imperial army of Nero, mentioned two varieties, one wild and the other cultivated, in his writings, but he did not describe either of them in detail.¹ From hints in other sections of his Herbal, however, it would appear that the best representative of its kind was to be found in Cilicia, and in this judgment Pliny concurred.² The white marjoram which still grows in that region is very similar to the *Origanum maru*, though it grows to a somewhat greater height, and exhibits a less distinct marking of the veins on the leaves.

The Talmud seemed to think that the hyssop of Scriptural usage was in fact marjoram, but the Mishnah cautioned against the inadvertent use of the wrong kind of hyssop, without, however, venturing to describe carefully the varieties in mind, on the assumption that the reader already knew the difference between them. The rule for hyssop usage amongst the Rabbis was that it should not be the Greek hyssop, nor stibium hyssop, nor Roman hyssop, nor wild hyssop, nor any kind of hyssop to which a special name is given.³

Whatever variety merited a special qualifying epithet was invalid; only the hyssop simply so called was the correct variety, a stipulation which does little or nothing to remove the confusion concerning the true nature of the herb. Maimonides thought that it was a marjoram, in fact, the *Origanum maru*, and explained that the hyssop used under the Mosaic legal enactments was clearly the *za'tar* which people of his time and later used as food.⁴

From this discussion one fact emerges. The hyssop of Scripture is not the modern *Hyssopus officinalis*, which is not native to Palestine. There are many plant species of the *Thymus* and *Origanum* genera to be found in various localities in and around

¹ Dioscorides seems to have had in mind the *Satureja graeca* L., and the *S. juliana* L., but neither of these appeals to botanists as the plant mentioned in Scripture. Though Theophrastus (372-285 B.C.) made a list of some five hundred plants in his Herbal, the hyssop was not included amongst them.

² *Nat. Hist.*, xxv. 87.

³ Mishnah, *Negain*, xiv. 6; cf. *Parah*, xi. 7.

⁴ *Neg.* xiv. 6.

Palestine,¹ and it is probable that all of them would be designated by the simple term "hyssop" from time to time.²

The hyssop of the ancients was held to be of considerable medicinal value. It seems to have been a favourite condiment for flavouring and spicing food, and was probably used in this way by the ancient Israelites. The plant was dried, and the leaves were reduced to a fine powder which was then dusted on to the food. The pungent aromatic nature of the herb exercised a carminative and rubefacient effect on the digestive organs, as well as constituting an effective purgative. It is very doubtful if the hyssop was ever administered medicinally as an infusion, and the reference in Psalm li. 7 is probably an allusion to the ritual purification detailed in Leviticus, in which the hyssop played a prominent part, rather than to actual physical purging.

Nevertheless, hyssop was held in regard in antiquity as a plant with valuable cleansing and astringent properties, and this fact is mentioned by Pliny,³ who noted that it was used principally as a dusting powder for cutaneous eruptions and disorders. The same writer records another ancient belief, which appears to have been rooted in magic and pagan superstition, that wild hyssop was efficacious in the prevention and cure of bites and stings from venomous animals and reptiles.⁴ This idea has survived to modern times in the East, and in Palestinian folk-lore there is still to be found the superstition that immunity to the poison of serpent-bites can be obtained through eating, on an empty stomach, the dried pulverized leaves of the *za'tar* over a period of forty days.

According to John xix. 29, a sponge filled with vinegar, or wine in an advanced state of fermentation, was put along with hyssop to the mouth of Christ, to revive Him as He hung dying on the Cross. This has been held to mean that small quantities of dried hyssop were placed on a sponge (cf. Matt. xxvii. 49;

¹ Crowfoot and Baldensperger, *op. cit.*, p. 76, list seven of the latter species known to them as growing in Palestine alone.

² H. N. Moldenke, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

³ *Nat. Hist.*, xx. 15. When the systematic chemotherapeutic agent penicillin (*Penicillium notatum*) was discovered by Sir Alexander Fleming, it was claimed by some that a reference to it was already in existence in Psalm li. 7, since a Scandinavian scientist, Dr. Westling, had announced that *Penicillium notatum* was the brushlike mould on the top of decaying hyssop. Westling, however, was speaking of the northern European marjoram, and it is doubtful if this can be at all identified with the Biblical hyssop.

⁴ *Nat. Hist.*, xxv, 87.

Mark xv. 36; Luke xxiii. 37), along with vinegar, and lifted to the Cross by means of a stick or reed (κάλαμος), in the usual manner. The Roman soldiers may have thought that the aromatic scent of the herb, coupled with the sour taste of the vinegar, would act as a stimulant.

In the cursive manuscript 476 (eleventh century A.D.), a corruption of the text of John xix. 29 to ὑσσῶ περιθέντες laid stress on the ὑσσοῦς or *pilum*, the javelin or short spear which formed a regular part of the equipment of the Roman infantryman (cf. xix. 34), two of which were always carried with full uniform. A personal reminiscence is evidently intended for us by the Evangelist, the observer noting that the sponge which contained the hyssop was attached to the javelin of the soldier, and in that manner it was offered to Christ.¹

G. E. Post² thinks that the nature of the hyssop mentioned in the Gospel overthrows its identification by Royle with the Caper plant, since ὑσσωπος would not have been written down had the equally familiar κάππαρις been intended by the author to be understood instead. The Capparis spinosa has slender prickly branches, with large flowers and stiff leaves, and as a whole is unsuitable for being assembled into bunches. It is possible that the κάλαμος mentioned by St. John is a species of the Sorghum reed (*Holcus sorghum* L., *Holcus durra* L., or *Sorghum vulgare* L.), which not infrequently grows to a height of five feet. The true Sorghum, which is sometimes known as *Andropogon sorghum* L., is thought to have been cultivated in Egypt as far back as the pre-dynastic period, and may have actually been used to celebrate the first Passover, immediately prior to the Exodus. The common variety which is found in Palestine today, and also in Egypt (dhura, Indian millet, Jerusalem corn), is a grass, similar in appearance to maize, and whilst it can mature without the benefit of a substantial rainfall, its growth can be fostered by irrigation to the point where the plant attains a height of sixteen to twenty feet. It is not possible to say, however, whether or not this plant grew in the environs of Jerusalem in the time of Christ.

It seems difficult to resist the conclusion that the *za'tar* of the Holy Land is in fact the hyssop used in the Old Testament.

¹ Cf. J. H. Bernard, *St. John* (I.C.C.), ii, p. 640.

Hastings' *Dict. Bibl.* ii, p. 442.

The vague designation of the plant, as compared with more modern exactitude of description, is a difficulty in the way of accurate identification, and it is very improbable that we shall ever know the true nature of this important Biblical plant.

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