

The Biblical Problem of Hyssop

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[p.218]

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 (*'ezōb*), Arabic (*zūfā*) and Greek (ὕσσωπος) names furnish no practical guide for the identification of the plant.

[p.219]

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,

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

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

though it is at least probable that the translators had in mind the aromatic plant used by the Hebrews for ceremonial purposes.

A. P. Stanley³ 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 Royle⁴ whom he quotes to the effect that both the 'aṣaf⁵ 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.,⁶ 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."⁷ This association of the stately and revered cedar with the humble hyssop may

[p.220]

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 Baldensperger⁸ 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

³ *Sinai and Palestine* (1863), pp. 22 f.

⁴ 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.

⁵ One of two Arabic names for the Caper plant.

⁶ This species is sometimes described as *Origanum Aegyptiacum* L.

⁷ 1 Kings iv. 33.

⁸ G. M. Crowfoot and L. Baldensperger, *From Cedar to Hyssop* (1932), pp. 71 ff.

Israelites, but the identification can be supported on other grounds and the Samaritan use goes far to make it certain.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.

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

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⁹ Op. cit., p. 72.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 72 f.