

CYPRUS SCENES

The carob tree



Pictures: Tony and Mary Benson

Along the main road linking the main city of Paphos with the harbour area there can be seen some old warehouses, now converted for use by various small businesses. They date back to the time when the pods of the carob tree were important commercially, and were built as warehouses to store the produce. The carob is a small tree in the legume (pea and bean) family and grows widely in the Mediterranean area. We saw various examples in Cyprus. Pictured are a fine example of the tree standing on its own and some pods lying on the ground. It is an evergreen tree, with small greenish flowers which appear in the autumn, and pods which are not generally ripe till the following summer.

There are no references to the carob in the Old Testament, although it is referred to often in post-Biblical Jewish writings under the Hebrew name *haruv*, a word also used by the Arabs to describe the plant. The Arabs made a syrup out of it, and on Malta, which was ruled by the Arabs for many years during the early Middle Ages, this syrup is sold today as *harrub*, a clear reflection of the Arab name. There are claims that it is beneficial for asthma sufferers, and there has been a growing interest in the carob in recent years as a health food.

There is one almost certain reference to the carob in the New Testament and one possible reference. In Luke 15 we read that the prodigal son was so hungry that "he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat" (v. 16), and these "husks" are generally thought to refer to the pods of the carob tree, which were widely used for animal feed. They are nutritious, so the prodigal son was not quite so badly off as the word 'husk' suggests. The possible reference is to the "locusts" eaten by John the Baptist (Mt. 3:4), which, it has been argued, were carob pods, a belief reflected in an alternative name for the tree, St John's bread, and a more commonly used name, locust bean; but it seems more likely that it was the insect, which is apparently good to eat.—*Tony Benson*