

Living stones

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THE FIRST of Jesus' wilderness temptations was to turn stones into bread (Mt. 4:3). We may imagine that, in the Lord's extreme hunger, the flat, eroded stones lying on the desert floor might have resembled the unleavened pitta or Arabic bread common in the Middle East.

A remarkable family of succulent plants from arid regions of Namibia and South Africa do bear a striking resemblance to stones. Named *Lithops*, meaning 'stone-like' in Greek, they are often known as 'pebble plants' or 'living stones'.¹ This is a very good description of these plants, which avoid being eaten by blending in with surrounding rocks. Individual *Lithops* plants consist of one or more pairs of bulbous, almost fused leaves opposite to each other, with hardly any stem. Flowers and new leaves emerge from the slit between the leaves. The leaves of *Lithops* are mostly buried below the surface of the soil, and are not green, as in most plants, but various shades

Lithops plants in flower.

Picture: Michael Wolf/Wikimedia Commons



Lithops plants at Birmingham Botanic Gardens.

Picture: David Burges

of cream, grey and brown, patterned with darker areas, dots and red lines. A partially or completely translucent top surface allows light to enter the interior of the leaves for photosynthesis. These remarkable markings on the top surface disguise the plant in its surroundings, until the spectacular white or yellow flowers appear, usually in the autumn. *Lithops* species have an amazing biological clock, and flower at the same time of year all over the world.

A great many such examples of camouflage and mimicry exist in nature, as part of the complex balance of nature, providing defensive mechanisms against predators. Biologists attribute such features to evolution, but invariably, as with *Lithops*, they display the signs of careful forethought, or intelligent design, which is the hallmark of the Creator.

1. See Wikipedia article 'Lithops' at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithops>.