

Babatha's contracts did not have wax seals, but were stitched into a tight roll. The first part of the scroll was left free as a kind of tab, on which there were the signatures of seven witnesses, each written beside one of the stitches. Individual features of Babatha's contracts were that they were written in Greek on papyrus and that the text was written down the length of the scroll.

#### Some modern aspects

Synagogues were an outgrowth of the temple, and have some features reminiscent of the temple. Alluding to the ark mentioned in Exodus 40:20,21, the synagogue scrolls are kept in a small

cupboard called an Ark (*Aron*), which is usually covered by an elaborately embroidered curtain, 'the veil'.

The scroll itself is covered or carried in a silk or linen mantle. 'Crowns' in the form of silver pomegranates are placed over the tops of the rollers. A group of such Torah crowns stands on the stone cenotaph in the so-called David's Tomb on the southwestern hill of Jerusalem. A silver 'breastplate' and small bells are sometimes draped on chains over the crowns and rollers. Pomegranates, bells and the breastplate are, of course, reminiscent of the regalia of the high priest, the tabernacle and the temple.

(To be continued)

## Gleanings from the Land

### Watermelons

As they journeyed through the hot dry wilderness, the children of Israel, according to Numbers 11:5, longed for some of the produce of Egypt, including melons. The Hebrew word *abattichim* (plural) occurs only here in Scripture and is usually regarded as referring to the watermelon.

In Britain today (and presumably in other Western nations too) various kinds of melons are available all the year round, and this sometimes includes watermelons, distinguishable by their dark green rind (or striped green and yellow in some cases) and red, juicy flesh. During the summer in Israel watermelons can be seen piled high on roadside stalls, and the juicy flesh is highly prized for the refreshment it provides in the baking heat. I still recall a self-service restaurant at Jericho where the Arab proprietor cut huge slices of watermelon with a large knife for our party of thirsty coach travellers.

In the 1920s Jewish settlers on the coastal plain began to develop improved strains of watermelon from a variety already being grown locally,

and (interestingly in view of Numbers 11:5) thought to be of Egyptian origin. Today many watermelons are grown in the Jordan valley and the Arava (the valley running from the Dead Sea down to the Gulf of Eilat) using irrigation. Far superior in flavour, however, are those grown in Galilee without the use of irrigation; they ripen slowly and absorb less water, resulting in a higher sugar content. Agricultural scientists in Israel are working on new varieties, including a smaller one, suitable for a small family.

### A sabbatical year

One of the provisions of the Law of Moses was that the land of Israel should have "a sabbath of rest" every seventh year, during which the land would not be cultivated, and even "That which groweth of its own accord" should not be harvested (Lev. 25:1-7). The Israelites had to rely on God to provide a harvest in the sixth year so bountiful that they would have enough provisions to last them until the harvest of the eighth year.

Such a year is today referred to as a *shmita* year, from the

Hebrew word for release (*shemittah* in *Young's Concordance*). This noun and the related verb occur several times in Deuteronomy 15 regarding the releasing of people from debts, which was also commanded for each seventh year. The current Jewish year, which began in September, is a *shmita* year.

*Neot Kedumim News*, the newsletter of the Biblical Landscape Reserve situated at Modi'in in Israel, says that the Reserve is observing the *shmita* year and will not therefore be carrying out the agricultural activities that are normally part of its work of demonstrating to visitors what the Land was like in Biblical times. The newsletter makes the point that this provision in the Law of Moses is the first known provision for the replenishment of the soil, allowing it to provide for the needs of subsequent generations. It also helps overcome one of the problems of irrigation, the gradual accumulation of sodium and calcium, which makes the soil very alkaline and affects fertility. One of the major causes of the decline of ancient Mesopotamia, home of Babylon and Assyria,

was that irrigation gradually made the soil infertile, this, incidentally, helping to bring about the desolation of Babylon foretold in Scripture.

As with all the Law of Moses, the sabbatical year provision was subject to much interpretation and amplification by the rabbis. This became irrelevant during the Jewish dispersion to other lands as the law was only applied by the rabbis to the Land of Israel itself and the few Jews who lived there down the ages were city dwellers. Now that the Jews are back in the Land, and cultivating it extensively, the *shmita* provisions are regarded as applying.

So does this mean that the Land of Israel will not be cultivated this year and we shall not be able to buy Israeli produce in the shops? By no means. In the fashion which is typical of Judaism, and was condemned by Jesus, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel ruled that Israeli farmers could get round the law by going through a form of selling their land to Gentiles just for the *shmita* year. The land then becomes technically non-Jewish land and therefore not subject to the law. Consequently the agricultural land of Israel is suffering from the same problems of overuse as does such land in other parts of the world, and we can only look to the Kingdom for the time when the wise provisions of God for the care of the land will be observed by all, and the prophecy of Amos will be fulfilled: "the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed" (9:13).

#### Rejoicing at the Feast of Tabernacles

The first month of the Jewish new year brings to an end the

cycle of feasts ordained under the Law of Moses. The cycle culminates in the Feast of Tabernacles, referred to by Jews as Sukkot, from the Hebrew word for 'booth' (*sukkah* in *Young's Concordance*), used in Leviticus 23:42,43 of the temporary structures that Israel were to dwell in at this time.

*Neot Kedumim News* (see above) points out that the Israelites were specifically commanded to rejoice during Sukkot (v. 40; Deut. 16:14,15), whereas there was no such command associated with Passover. In terms of the agricultural cycle of Israel, Passover was not a time of rejoicing but of apprehension, for it took place at a time when the growing crops could easily be destroyed by bad weather. In contrast, Sukkot marked the end of the harvest, when all was safely gathered in, and it was appropriate for the Israelites to have this week of rejoicing that the bountiful hand of God had once more provided abundantly for their needs during the coming months.

The Israelite cycle of feasts forms for us a parable of God's redemptive purpose, with Sukkot speaking of the blessings of the Kingdom, when the harvest of believers is gathered in and when the immortal saints will join together in praise and rejoicing at the wonderful salvation they have received. The fact that this feast is the only one with a command to rejoice has its significance for us, therefore, for there can be no lasting joy till that which it represents comes to pass.

#### Pomegranate facts

The pomegranate is not today an important food plant, yet it is one of the seven products of the Land spoken of in Deuter-

onomy 8:8, it was one of the three fruits brought back by the spies to show how productive the Land was (Num. 13:23), and the six references to it in the Song of Solomon indicate that it flourished all over the Land. Its bright red blossom must have been very noticeable in the spring. According to a recent article in the *Jerusalem Post* it was, however, an important plant in rabbinical times, when the Talmud was put together, and receives frequent mention therein.

Pomegranates were apparently grown all over the country, but the best grew in the valley bottoms. Various sorts were grown, some sweet to the taste and some bitter. We rarely seem to eat them today, though a childhood memory for me is of picking out the many juicy seeds of a pomegranate with a pin in order to eat them. The main centre of production today is California. What use the Israelites of old made of them we do not know, though one can imagine that pomegranate juice would be a very refreshing drink in hot weather.

The use of representations of the pomegranate on both the high priest's garments (see Exodus 28:33,34; 39:24-26) and in Solomon's temple (see 1 Kings 7:18,20,42; 2 Chronicles 3:16; 4:13; Jeremiah 52:22,23) leads us to look for a spiritual significance for this fruit, and the many seeds in one fruit make one think of the multitudinous seed of Abraham within the one seed, Christ. Jewish tradition says that a typical pomegranate has 613 seeds, the same number as the total number of commandments which they have identified as being contained in the Law of Moses.

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