

Dove's dung

Peter Cox

THERE ARE many opinions as to what is meant by the term “fourth part of a cab of dove’s dung” in 2 Kings 6:25. A fourth part of a cab is approximately a pint, or less than half a litre. That is the simple part. What is really a problem is just what is meant by the term “dove’s dung”. Many of the modern translations suggest it was some sort of herb, for example, “seed pods” (NIV), “wild onions” (Jerusalem Bible) and “locust

beans” (REB) Other modern suggestions include “chick peas”, or the bulbs of a plant commonly named the Star of Bethlehem.

The word used in most Hebrew Bibles is **חֲרִי יוֹנִיָּם**, *chari-yonim*. However, *Young’s Concordance* has a slightly different word, *dibyoniim*, which appears in some versions. Gesenius in his *Hebrew Lexicon* informs us that *dibyoniim* is a softer expression of *chari-yonim*. This latter form of the word literally means ‘the flux of doves’, whilst the former word means ‘excrement of doves’.

Gesenius tells us the term “may be taken literally; since it is not incredible that persons oppressed by severe famine should eat even the excrements of animals”, and he quotes some writers, such as Celsii Hierobot and Rosenmüller, who allow for this. Gesenius also quotes some who believe it was a vegetable, as the Arabs called the herb *kali*, ‘sparrows’ dung’. He agrees with Celsius that the often-quoted Bochart was wrong to state that dove’s dung was chick peas or vetches.

The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament was a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, carried out in the third century B.C. during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus, and it was carried out by seventy-two Jewish scholars under the high priest. This version of the Bible also translates the words in question as “dove’s dung”: *κοπρου* (*koprou*), which according to *Liddell & Scott’s Lexicon* means ‘dung, excrement’, and *περιστερων* (*peristerōn*), which means ‘dove’. Surely if a plant or herb was being referred to, the translators would have used the Greek name for it, for, as the saying goes, “the Greeks have a word for it”.

Murray’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary (1909) has an interesting article on dove’s dung. After also showing Bochart to be in error, Murray quotes H. C. Batterbury: “Dove’s dung was of great value in the East, as a manure for quickening the growth of esculent plants, particularly melons”. Also, the article shows that there were other uses for dove’s dung, such as for fuel and in the leather tanning trade. Many other earlier commentators also follow these opinions.

From the above evidence, it would seem best to take the term “dove’s dung” literally, and that possibly it was used as a manure.



Above: Pods of the carob or locust bean tree.

Below: Star of Bethlehem.



Pictures: Tony Benson