

said: “the good seed are the children of the kingdom . . . the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels” (13:38,39).

On the other hand, those liable to the judgement of the seventh vial are described as ripe grapes ready for a winepress called “the great winepress of the wrath of God” (Rev. 14:19). The difference in the concluding statements of these two judgements is quite marked. There is no mention of the wrath of God associated with the

judgement of verses 14-16, which has to do with the household of faith.

The return of the Lord Jesus under the sixth vial and the subsequent judgement of the household of faith is not, from the Divine point of view, very far away. But from a human viewpoint the time of waiting may seem long. It is certain that we shall need patience, and we ought to do what Jesus has said in this connection: “Occupy till I come” (Lk. 19:13).

(Concluded)

## The Sinai Peninsula

### 8. Snakes and scorpions

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**W**E CONCLUDE OUR look at the fauna of Sinai by considering reptiles and scorpions and then drawing some lessons from the characteristics of the various clean and unclean beasts under the Law of Moses.

#### Snakes

There are a number of desert lizards and snakes that inhabit the region of Sinai. God sent fiery serpents to punish the Israelites in the wilderness, before they arrived at Oboth, as they travelled around the land of Edom (Num. 21:4-10). This would have been in the region of the Arabah. The Hebrew word translated “fiery serpent” is *saraph*, meaning ‘fiery or burning one’, a name given because of the burning sensation of their deadly bite. The particular species of snake cannot be identified.

The same word is used in Moses’ description of the dangers encountered as God led the Israelites through “that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought” (Deut. 8:15). Also, as we have already noticed when considering ‘the road to Shur’,<sup>1</sup> the journey from the Holy Land to Egypt led the ambassadors of Judah in the days of Hezekiah through the land of “the viper and fiery flying serpent” (Isa. 30:6). The description “flying serpent” probably implies a snake that darts and strikes with great rapidity, such as the sand serpents of the desert.

An example of this type of snake is the *Cerastes*, or horned snake, that lies in ambush, coiled up

in a small depression in the sand, and strikes out at any passing animal that is within reach. This particular species is sandy-coloured, with pale brown irregular spots, and is quite small, being about eighteen inches long. This is probably the snake referred to in Jacob’s blessing on Dan: “Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder [*shephiphon*, the snapping snake] in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward” (Gen. 49:17).

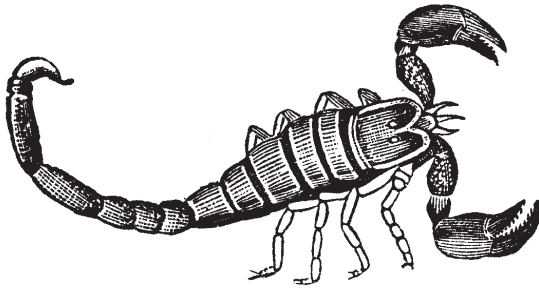
#### Scorpions

In Deuteronomy 8:15 Moses also mentions scorpions as being one of the unpleasant things with which the Israelites had to contend as they travelled through “that great and terrible wilderness”. Certainly scorpions are reasonably abundant in the Sinai Peninsula, and at least five distinct species have been found there. The largest of the ten species occurring in the Holy Land is black and grows to a length of six inches.

The plural form of the Hebrew name for scorpion, *’aqrab*, is found in the place-name “ascent of Akrabbim”, meaning ‘the ascent of the scorpions’, presumably taking its name from the abundance of these creatures in that area. This ascent or route was part of the southern border of the land of Canaan and also marked the border between the Arabah and the hill country of Judah (Num. 34:4; Josh. 15:3, “Maaleh-acrabbim”; Judg. 1:36, “going up to Akrabbim”).

1. [Aug. 2003, p. 313.](#)

Scorpions have eight legs and so belong to the spider family. In the daytime they hide under stones and logs, or in holes that they dig in the sand, but come out to feed at night. Their prey consists almost entirely of insects and spiders, which they tear to pieces or crush with their large claws to extract the body juices. They do not lay eggs, but give birth to their young over a period of several weeks. The young are then carried on the back of the female until they are able to fend for themselves. They leave their mother and become independent after their first moult.



Scorpion

Some scorpion species are very dangerous, and in certain parts of the world they kill more people than snakes do. However, those in Sinai and the Holy Land only occasionally cause death, but they do have an extremely painful sting. These facts fit well the symbology of the fifth trumpet in the Apocalypse, which refers to the uprising of Mahomet and the Saracen attacks against the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire: "And they were not given authority to kill them, but to torment them for five months. Their torment was like the torment of a scorpion [Gk. *skorprios*] when it strikes a man" (Rev. 9:5, NKJV).

The ancient military ballistas or catapults were called 'scorpions' because of the similarity of their action when compared with the way a scorpion curls its tail up and over its head to strike with its sting. These catapults were used to hurl stones or 'Greek fire'. The Arabian or Saracen cavalry may have used a portable type. If this is so, the description in Revelation 9 is particularly apt: "They had tails like scorpions, and there were stings in their tails. Their power was to hurt men five months" (v. 10, NKJV). In addition, the Saracens' cavalry tactics were those of sudden strikes like a scorpion.

The term 'scorpion' is used figuratively of a scourge with iron points, or a knotted whip. It is

thought that Rehoboam was referring to this kind of scourge when he said that he would treat the people of Israel more severely than his father Solomon did, by chastising them with scorpions instead of with whips (1 Kgs. 12:11).

Another figurative use is when the wicked men who rebelled against the preaching of Ezekiel and threatened him verbally, hitting out at him with biting retorts, are referred to as scorpions: "And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you dwell among scorpions" (Ezek. 2:6, NKJV). An alternative suggestion is that this passage does not refer to the creature but to a bush called *spina scorpionis*, which has venomous thorns on its stems.

Similarly, the words of Jesus in Luke 10:19 are best understood figuratively, though a number of commentators do take them literally: "Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you" (NKJV). The mention of the power of the enemy implies that the serpents and scorpions referred to by Jesus are the human manifestations of the power of sin who oppose the Truth (compare Genesis 3:15). They are the kind of people who elsewhere are described by Jesus as "serpents" and a "generation of vipers" (Mt. 12:34; 23:33). The Apostle Paul when writing to the Roman believers uses a similar figure: "the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly" (16:20, NKJV).

#### Clean and unclean animals

Having reviewed a selection of animals that may inhabit or visit the Sinai Peninsula, it is useful to consider briefly the spiritual lessons behind the regulations regarding clean and unclean animals set out in the Law of Moses. With mammals the two important criteria for clean animals were being cloven footed and ruminant. In the case of birds, the examples given suggest that their feeding habits were crucial, birds of prey and carrion eaters being unclean.

Being allowed to feed on clean animals should have taught the Israelites a number of important principles about the way of life that pleases God. What are the lessons for us?

- We need to feed on clean spiritual food, the Word of God, on a daily basis, and to meditate on it, 'chewing the cud' at every opportunity.

- We should not be cruel and greedy, preying upon those who are at a disadvantage and weaker than ourselves.
- We should avoid feeding our minds on the spiritual garbage that the world provides for its amusement and entertainment.
- We must 'part the hoof' and learn to discriminate between right and wrong in our actions.
- We must be 'cloven footed' so as to be sure-footed in our spiritual walk and not stumble at the many difficulties (spiritual rocks) that so frequently obstruct our path to the Kingdom.

(To be concluded)

## Gleanings from the Land

### Olive oil

No one who reads the Bible consistently can fail to be aware of the significance of olive oil in ancient Israel. It was the main source of fat in people's diets, it was the oil used in lamps to light the hours of darkness, and it was used for cosmetic purposes. Today, olive trees are widely found over the hills of Israel, and would surely have been even more common in Old Testament times. Its widespread importance led to it being the basis for much figurative language in the Bible.

The Israeli magazine *Eretz* published an article about the present-day importance of olives in Israel, entitling it, "A land flowing with olive oil" (Dec. 2002/Jan. 2003), the title being, of course, an adaptation of the well-known and several times repeated description of Israel as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8). World consumption of olive oil doubled in the last decade of the twentieth century, no doubt because olive oil is high in unsaturated fats and therefore healthy. Demand for olive oil is rising, and growers are seeking to increase their yields.

The place to which olive growers go for advice about growing olives is the land of Israel, specifically to the Institute of Horticulture of the Volcani



Olive trees in the Kidron Valley

Research Centre, situated south of Tel Aviv. Here works the world's foremost expert on the olive, Professor Simon Lavee, who has been carrying out research on olive growing for many years, combining it with being a professor in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Faculty of Agriculture.

There are no fewer than 600 million olive trees in the world today, producing two million tons of olive oil each year. Many growers have succeeded in significantly increasing their yields, most of all Israeli growers. At one time olive growing in Israel was limited to the Arabs, and there are still many olive trees today cultivated by Arab villagers. In more recent years, however, Israeli farmers have begun

to cultivate the olive, and, doing so on a more scientific basis, have succeeded in raising the average yield from 200 kilograms of olives per annum from a half-acre orchard to 1,500 kilograms and even more. They have been able to do so as a result of the researches of Professor Lavee, which he has been carrying out for about fifty years, despite an initial lack of enthusiasm from the Israeli agricultural research authorities.

The olives which grow on Israel's hillsides, and which have been farmed by the Arabs for many hundreds of years, are suited to growth on rocky hillsides and in the typical conditions of Israel's climate—cool, usually wet, winters and hot dry summers. They were not suited