

Gleanings from the Land

Tony Benson

Jonah's 'gourd' and the world oil problem

THERE HAS BEEN considerable emphasis in recent years on obtaining diesel oil from vegetation sources (bio-fuel) to run motor vehicles. There are two reasons for this. The first is the threat of diminishing supplies and sharply rising prices of oil from the ground, although the global recession has greatly reduced the immediate problem. The second is that, unlike fossil fuels from the ground, biofuel is a renewable resource and therefore considered to be more environmentally friendly as it reduces the net loss of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. There are two arguments against producing biofuel, however. The first is that it results in a reduction in the cultivation of food crops to feed the world's growing population, especially as the crops grown for oil are usually food crops, such as soya or corn (maize). The second is that it is not, due to the processes involved in producing usable fuel oil, as environmentally friendly as is claimed.

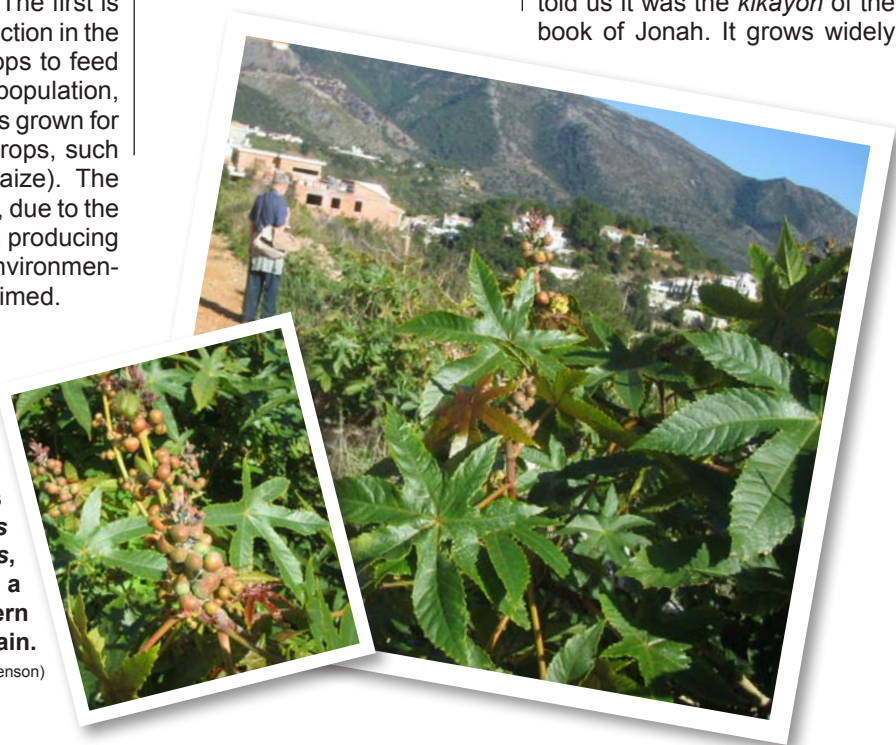
The nation of Israel, which has pioneered a number of different initiatives to provide alternatives to fossil fuels over recent years, is pioneering research into the production of biofuel with a view to overcoming the first of the two problems referred to above, and to some extent the second due to better yields. This involves research into the use of a plant familiar to Bible readers. In Jonah 4 we read that the prophet, angry with God at His decision to spare the Ninevites, sat outside the city waiting to see what would become of it. Then, "the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head" (v. 6).

Gourds are members of the cucurbit family, of which food

plants such as cucumbers, melons and squashes are part, and are characterised by their hard-shelled fruit. Most species come from the Americas, but there are one or two species found in Asia and Africa. The margin for "gourd" in this verse states, "or palmcrist, Heb. Kikayon", and most authorities (including Professor Michael Zohary, former Professor of Botany at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem), think this refers to the castor bean, *Ricinus communis*. This plant is referred to by the Hebrew word *kikayon* in Israel today. (I recall that, on a visit to the Hula nature reserve in northern Israel some years ago, we were looking at a luxuriously growing plant, and an elderly Israeli man came up to us and told us it was the *kikayon* of the book of Jonah. It grows widely

**Jonah's
'gourd', *Ricinus
communis*,
growing beside a
track in southern
Spain.**

(Pictures: Mary Benson)



across the Mediterranean world, and we saw it growing by a track in southern Spain recently.) The castor bean is a plant which grows very rapidly, but not as rapidly as described in Jonah 4, so it must have been a miracle that it sprang up so quickly, as is implied by the fact that it is said to have been prepared by God.

The castor bean is not a true bean, but a member of the spurge family (*Euphorbia*), and is already grown commercially, mainly in India and Brazil, for its oil, which is used widely in industry, especially in the USA. Some older readers may recall castor oil being used medicinally, as a rather drastic cure for constipation, but its use for this is not now recommended due to possible side effects.

The castor bean not only grows rapidly but is very rich in oil. It contains fifty-four per cent oil by weight, much higher than most other plants used to produce biofuels. The yield of oil per acre is, for example, three times that of soya. Israel's Volcani Centre, a research centre run by the Agriculture Ministry, is carrying out research into growing the castor bean, trying to select plants with the best yields, and which grow to a uniform height to make harvesting easier.

The castor bean is not the only plant being researched by Israeli scientists for its potential to provide biofuel. Even more significant is jatropha, a leafy green tree that grows widely in Africa, the seeds of which are very rich in oil. It grows profusely on poor soils, can resist long periods of drought, and continues producing seeds for thirty years. Research is being carried out by an Israeli company called Galten.

Most of the research being carried out by Israeli agricultural scientists is in fact being carried

out in partnership with various African countries, Ghana and Namibia in particular. There is clearly not enough spare agricultural land in Israel to grow these crops on a significant scale, but, being tropical plants, they will flourish in many parts of Africa, where there is plenty of land available that is not ideal for food crops.

The current decline in the price of oil is not expected to have a significant effect on the market for biofuels because many Western nations have introduced laws mandating a reduction in the use of fossil fuels. Using biofuel is one way of doing this, and the use of the castor bean and jatropha on poor land is better than growing food crops for this purpose on good land, as well as providing a better yield. As in other areas of research in alternatives to fossil fuels, Israeli scientists are leading the way in this.

Source: "Seeds of success: Israeli teams researching plants long thought worthless are poised to lead the next great energy wave", Sam Ser, *International Jerusalem Post*, 5-11 Dec. 2008.

The calendar problem

AS most of us will be aware, the State of Israel uses the traditional Jewish calendar, whereby the year begins in the autumn, whereas much of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, in which the year begins on 1 January. Moreover, dates do not match, since the Gregorian calendar has varying numbers of days in the month, and an extra day in February every four years to keep the calendar in line with the seasons, whereas the Jewish calendar has months which run from one new moon to another, with an extra month every three or four years to keep in line with

the seasons. Consequently a significant anniversary, like the date of Israel's independence, occurs on a different day from ours in Israel's calendar.

This is not all. The feasts of the Law of Moses are public holidays in Israel, and the weekly sabbath is kept, so that the week-end, when people are off work, consists of Friday afternoon and Saturday, with Sunday a normal working day. All this is despite the fact that the majority of Israeli Jews are not observant; and it is a remarkable thing that the founding fathers of the nation chose to identify themselves with the Divinely ordained calendar of the nation despite being mostly nonbelievers. It shows how keen they were to establish that Israel is a Jewish state and not just a nation like the others.

All this creates problems, however, in connecting with the outside world, especially for immigrants from Western nations. They find it difficult to adjust to the idea of having to work on a Sunday. They have to get used to the idea of their birthday not being on the day that they expect it to be; indeed, they do not know what their new birthday is supposed to be unless they consult their Israeli identity card. Their children, educated in Israel's schools, get used to the new system and expect their birthday to be celebrated on a different day from the one their parents think of as their birthday.

Some adjustment has, of course, to be made in business dealings with other countries; there would be no point in trying to contact an overseas customer on Sunday or Christmas Day. There is therefore a certain price to pay for Israel in preserving its Jewish identity.

We would, of course, expect Jews to want to avoid any

involvement in Christmas and Easter, as they are the main religious festivals of Christendom. Also, they have their own feasts at approximately those times: Hanukkah (celebrating the Maccabean overthrow of the Seleucids) in December and Passover in spring. However, Jewish abhorrence of 1 January as the New Year is less well known. In Israel 1 January is referred to as 'Sylvester', and any hotel allowing special celebrations at this time is liable to get into trouble with the rabbinic authorities.

But why Sylvester? Because Sylvester was a fourth-century anti-Semitic pope, bishop of Rome at the time of Constantine, who decided that 1 January was a good time to kill Jews. Other massacres of Jews have apparently occurred on this date; for example, on 1 January 1581 Pope Gregory XIII decreed the destruction of all Jewish sacred literature in Rome and instigated a massacre of the Jews there. So abhorrent is the date to Jews that, when they do use the Gregorian calendar for business purposes, they make no reference to 1 January as a public holiday on the Gregorian calendar, yet do so for other public holidays at Christmas and Easter.

Source: "Calendar concerns", Herb Keinon, *International Jerusalem Post*, 2-8 Jan. 2009.

Working for a living

THE Apostle Paul was a tent-maker by trade, as we are told in Acts 18:3. Despite his work as an apostle, he generally did not request, or even allow, those to whom he preached to support him, but maintained himself by work, and, as he said in Acts 20:34, worked also to provide for the needs of those who went about with him in



A Jerusalem synagogue of the Lubavitch movement, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect that runs many yeshivas.

the preaching. His motive for this, as stated in 1 Corinthians 9:12,18, was that he should not be accused of being 'in it for the money', to the detriment of the Truth.

Yet Paul was a Pharisee, a member of the religious élite in Jerusalem and probably a member of the Sanhedrin, for he said regarding his involvement in persecuting the Jerusalem believers, "when they were put to death, I gave my vote against them" (Acts 26:5,10, RV). Why then did he have a trade? Apparently it was the normal practice amongst Jews of those times for all sons to be taught a trade that they might be able to support themselves, and Paul would have been no exception. Though in the Gospels we meet with Pharisees who were wealthy, this appears to have been due to oppression of the poor, and the really rich class were the priestly families, the Sadducees, who made a lot of money by the practices roundly condemned by Jesus (Mt. 21:12,13).

According to Rabbi David Rosenfeld, commenting upon a portion of the Talmud (the

ancient rabbinical commentary on the Law):

"While in Temple times, scholars had either supported themselves, or been paid a pittance out of Temple funds, during the Yavne period [the period after A.D. 70 when Judaism was centred at the town of Yavne] a policy emerged of encouraging the community to regard the support of the sages as a religious-communal obligation. [Even so] many scholars still plied their crafts as cobblers, smiths, scribes etc., supporting themselves in their spare time. In principle the scholars accepted no remuneration for their communal activity, or for the instruction they gave, and certainly not for studying. The ideal was that a scholar 'should study for the sake of heaven' and live from his own toil".

This continued to be the practice down the ages; and, for example, the man recognised as the greatest of all medieval Jewish rabbis, Maimonides, was a notable physician. The Talmud contains many admonitions to work as

well as study, such as the following: "Good is Torah study together with worldly occupation, for the exertion of both makes one forget sin. All study without work will result in waste and will cause sinfulness". It advocates a balance between work and study in the adage, "Where there is no flour there is no Torah; where there is no Torah, there is no flour". The need to work is, of course, what the Apostle Paul taught. Writing to the Thessalonians about "busybodies" who did not do any work, he said, "if any would not work, neither should he eat" (2 Thess. 3:10,11).

The situation is very different, however, in modern Israel. Amongst the ultra-Orthodox community there (the haredim), young men are encouraged to devote themselves full time to study in institutions known as yeshivas. They are also encouraged to marry and have many children. As a result they are very poor. Their support has come from wealthy Orthodox Jews elsewhere in the world, especially the USA, encouraged by rabbinical assurances that if

they do this they will be blessed by God in their business dealings. Thus Rabbi Yaakov [Jacob] Segal, director-general of one haredi yeshiva system, quotes a leading Orthodox Jewish scholar as saying, "Anyone who gives generously to supporting the yeshiva world will not be hurt by the financial crisis". This attitude is that also of large evangelical churches in the USA, whose leaders likewise promise financial blessing to those who give generously. Yet the Bible makes no such assurances, and the Apostle Paul explicitly condemned false teachers who "suppose[ed] that godliness is a way of gain" (1 Tim. 6:5, RV).

However, this way of life is now under severe threat in Israel due to the world's financial problems. Despite the rabbinical assurances (worthless of course), many wealthy Jews have suffered heavy financial losses and are cutting back on their giving. The value of the dollar has slumped against the shekel, a currency that has remained quite strong, so donations are worth less. The enormous fraud

perpetuated by Bernard Madoff, who 'made off' with forty billion dollars of money invested with him, affected many Jews in particular, as Madoff is himself a Jew and it was only natural for his fellow Jews to invest with him, including Jewish charities, some of which have been bankrupted by the fraud. Many young haredim are going to be forced onto the labour market, unqualified for anything except menial work, because their Orthodox Jewish education has not fitted them for other work.

Rabbinical Judaism will, of course, have no place in the coming Kingdom. Instead all will be expected to work for their living, generally, it would seem, by agriculture practised in conditions far more conducive to its practice than those of today.

Source: "All pray and no work?— economic pressures are forcing ultra-Orthodox men to trade in the study hall for the workforce", Matthew Wagner; "Neither flour nor Torah—today's ultra-Orthodox leaders have overruled practically every giant of Torah knowledge who has ever lived", both in the *International Jerusalem Post*, 5-11 Dec. 2008.