



The Sinai Peninsula

4. The flora

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IT IS NOT possible to give a comprehensive survey of the flora of the Sinai Peninsula within the limited scope of this series of articles. Four species have been chosen that have particular interest, all being mentioned in the Bible.

The date palm

Date palms flourish in the oases of Sinai and its moister wadis. They are very striking and beautiful trees, with a single branchless upright trunk, growing up to one hundred feet high and crowned with a tuft of featherlike leaves about six to eight feet long. They live for about two centuries before falling, and are particularly productive for the seventy years after reaching the age of about thirty. A single tree bears between fifteen and twenty clusters of dates yearly, each weighing anywhere from fifteen to twenty pounds.

The fruit is not used only for human consumption, but poorer quality varieties may also be fed to camels, sheep and goats. The leaves are woven into mats and the date stones can be ground down and fed to camels. Apparently there are 360 uses to which the products of this tree may be put. Ostriches will eat date stones, which are then ground down in the gizzard to extract the digestible parts.

The Hebrew word for 'palm' is *tamar*, which comes from a root meaning 'to stand erect'. Three Old Testament women are given the name Tamar, implying beauty and elegance (Gen. 38:6; 2 Sam. 13:1; 14:27), and the word also occurs a number of times as a place name or part of one, for example in Ezekiel 47:19 and Genesis 14:7.

The only specific Biblical mention of palms in relation to Sinai is at Elim, where there were seventy palm trees and twelve springs of water (Num. 33:9). The name 'Elim' means 'strong trees'. It is a characteristic of this tree that it likes

to grow in moist ground, and so, if water is needed, it is likely to be found by digging down within the range of a date palm's roots. The wild palms of the desert are said to be shaggy rather than graceful and to have dwarf trunks.

The palm tree is used in Scripture to typify the righteous and upright person who is spiritually fruitful because his life is rooted in the Word of God: "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree . . . They shall still bring forth fruit in old age" (Ps. 92:12,14).

The broom

The flowering broom of the desert is spread throughout the Judean Wilderness and the Sinai Peninsula. It is a bushy shrub that may reach a height of seven to eight feet and has clusters of white to pale pink, pea-like flowers and small, very thin leaves. In the AV the Hebrew word *rothem* (*rethem*) is wrongly translated 'juniper'. It seems clear that the broom, *Retama raetam*, is intended, which the Arabs call *ratam*.

We read of Elijah, a day's journey south of Beersheba, lying down and sleeping under a "broom tree" (1 Kings 19:4,5, NKJV). Though not a tree in the sense in which we normally use the word, the larger bushes do provide a degree of shade from the sun, and shelter from the wind. As a last resort, their roots, which are bitter and nauseous, may be used for food by those driven into a desolate and waste wilderness (Job 30:3,4, NKJV).

The only other Scripture reference is to the charcoal made from the broom bush, which is considered to be the finest available. It burns with intense heat and so fetches the highest price in the markets. The psalmist speaks of the burning coals of broom charcoal as being the fittest punishment for those with lying lips and deceitful tongues: "What shall be given to you, or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? Sharp



A grove of date palms growing at Neot Kedumim, the Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel

arrows of the warrior with coals of the broom tree!" (120:3,4, NKJV).

The fifteenth station of Israel in the wilderness was named Rithmah (Septuagint, Rethma), probably from the abundance of the broom growing in the vicinity (Num. 33:18,19). This parallels examples in the UK, for example Birmingham, anciently called *Brummagem* and West *Bromwich* (Broomwich) because broom bushes were plentiful in those places.

The acacia

Several species of acacia occur in the desert wadis of Sinai. These are spreading thorny trees with mimosa-like blossoms that produce a very hard, close grained and dense orange-brown wood, which is not attacked by insects. The wood is also said to be "tough, smooth, without knots and extremely beautiful".¹ The Hebrew name for this tree is *shittah*, plural *shittim*, first mentioned in Exodus 25:5, a name said to be derived from a Hebrew root meaning 'to pierce' because of the tree's thorny nature. However, the Septuagint translates the term 'shittim wood' as 'incorrupt-

ible wood' because of its long-lasting nature. Acacia wood was extensively used by the Israelites in the construction of the tabernacle and its furniture. Two varieties of acacia (*A. seyal* and *A. tortilis*) would produce wood suitable for this purpose.*

According to Tristram,² *Acacia seyal* flourishes in the driest situations and is to be found scattered over the whole of the Sinaitic peninsula,

1. *Calmet's Dictionary of the Bible* by C. Taylor, p. 826, eighth edition, London, 1841.

* Classification of acacias has changed since Tristram travelled the land and wrote *The Natural History of the Bible*. According to Michael Zohary, former Professor of Botany at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in his book *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), there are five species of acacia found in Israel, including *A. tortilis* but not *A. seyal*. He says that the Common Acacia, *A. raddiana*, is the only species found in Sinai with wood suitable for construction. It is also the commonest. Perhaps this is the modern name for *A. seyal*.—*T.B.*

2. *The Natural History of the Bible*, pp. 391-2, SPCK, second edition, 1868.



Acacia trees growing in the Timna National Park in the Negev

particularly in the dry beds of extinct water-courses. Planks up to a width of four feet can be cut from this species of acacia. In addition, it is the source of gum arabic, which may ooze from the trunk or branches spontaneously in hot weather, but is normally obtained more directly by making incisions in the bark. The Bedouin use its bark for tanning yellow leather, and their camels are fed on its thorny foliage, whilst the gum arabic may be used for food in times of scarcity.

Considerable quantities of acacia wood have in the past been removed by the Bedouin and transported to Egypt for charcoal production, so that, in particular areas, hardly a single acacia may now be seen. The Bedouin tribes have destroyed much through carelessness, and have also failed to replant denuded areas.

The tamarisk

The tamarisk is a thorny tree of the desert wadis. It has brittle, feathery branches bearing minute scale-like leaves and small tassels of pink or white flowers. Abraham planted one at Beersheba (Gen. 21:33, NKJV).³ There are a number of species of tamarisk, most of which thrive best in very bar-

ren, sandy and salt situations. These trees can reach a size sufficient to afford dense shade.

In parts of Sinai during the month of June certain insects feeding on the tamarisk produce honeydew excretions which fall to the ground. The Bedouin collect these early in the morning when they are congealed, and boil and strain them through coarse cloth to use as a kind of honey. Though called *manni* by the Bedouin, it is in no way related to the manna that was miraculously provided by God for the Israelites during their wilderness journey, having, in most respects, very different properties.

As already mentioned in connection with the acacia, tamarisk groves have been destroyed to provide wood for firewood and charcoal manufacture. This denudation was particularly severe in the nineteenth century.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

3. The Hebrew *eshel*, translated 'grove' in the AV, is identified with the Arabic for tamarisk, *athal*. See *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 892.