

THE TREES AND SHRUBS OF THE HOLY LAND.¹

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“WHAT are the trees and shrubs truly characteristic of Palestine? From a cursory reading of the English Bible we should gather that the fir-tree (Isaiah lx, 13), the heath (Jer. xvii, 6), the mulberry (2 Sam. v, 24), the chestnut (Ezekiel xxxi, 1), etc., were all growing in Palestine in Old Testament times. We know it was not so; the translators, through want of knowledge of the forestry of Palestine, were often compelled to make guesses at the meaning of words. On the other hand, present day appearances might greatly deceive us regarding ancient trees and shrubs. The majority of the plants we see so familiarly around us are, on the other hand, comparatively recent introductions. The eucalyptus trees and the *locust* have been introduced from Australia, the American aloe and even the familiar prickly pear (cactus) come from America, the Persian lilac, and the Indian tobacco plant, both of which flourish almost like weeds, are comparatively new-comers. This might be said of a large proportion of the garden trees and shrubs now in Jerusalem. The mulberry, so plentiful in the Lebanon, probably was introduced along with the silk-worm. The apricot, which flourishes in such vast numbers around Damascus, was introduced from Eastern Asia, probably China, at the beginning of the Christian era. On the other hand, the olive and the vine, the quince and the apple, the almond, the pomegranate and the walnut, have been known in Palestine from the earliest times. Of timber trees, the cypress, the cedar, the pine, the oak, of which five species are recognised, the poplar, and the willow, are all natives of the land. The ‘ash’ of Isaiah xlv, 44, is almost certainly the pine; ‘gopher wood,’ of which the Ark was built, is by tradition the cypress, or it may as probably have been cedar.

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“The ‘chestnut’ (Ez. xxxi, 8) was certainly the plane, of which a magnificent ancient specimen may be seen in Damascus with a little room inside its hollow trunk. The ‘juniper tree’ under which Elijah lay (1 Kings xix, 5) in the wilderness, was certainly the familiar *rutum*, a kind of broom well known in the Jordan valley; it is even to-day burnt by the natives to produce charcoal (Ps. cii, 4). The ‘sycamore’ (sycamine) of Luke xvii, 6, and 1 Kings x, 27, was not the mulberry nor the maple-sycamore of Europe but the sycamore-fig, a splendid tree rather like a large fig but developing poor fruit, which is found in many parts of the land to-day. A fine specimen grows just below the pool of Siloam, and marks the spot where, by tradition, Isaiah was sawn asunder.

“The ‘husks which the swine did eat’ (Luke xv, 16) are very generally believed to be the pods of the *kharrub* or locust tree, which may be seen hawked about in the *Suk* this month.

“The ‘shittah tree’ of Isaiah xli, 19, and the ‘shittim wood’ of Ex. xxv, 10, was undoubtedly some kind of acacia growing in the wilderness. The word translated ‘bay tree’ in the Authorized Version of Psalm xxxvii, 35, probably does not mean any particular tree but, as is adopted in the Revised Version, ‘a green tree in its native soil.’

“What was the ‘hyssop’ of Ex. xii, 22, 1 Kings iv, 33, John xix, 29, has been a subject of endless debate. The familiar caper plant which we see around us everywhere growing out of the walls (1 Kings iv, 33) is very popularly supported, but tradition is more in favour of a species of marjoram, a herb of which six species are found in Palestine. The caper-berry is, however, without doubt referred to in Ecclesiastes xii, 5, where the expression translated in the Authorized Version ‘desire shall fail,’ is, in the Revised Version, translated ‘the caper-berry shall fail,’ *i.e.*, fail in its stimulating properties.”
