

# Corn, Wine, Oil, and Ancient Israel

Since I was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason seven and a half years ago, I have never ceased to be amazed at Masonry's ability to appear at unexpected times (especially in Church), or in the most unexpected places. I was blessed this year to take a tour of Israel. At the very first activity on our tour immediately following our arrival at the Tel Aviv Airport, I was treated to a lecture on corn, wine, and oil.

We were taken via our tour bus from the airport to sort of national park called Ne'ot Kedumim—the Biblical Land Preserve, located between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Here they endeavor “to re-create the physical setting of the Bible in all its depth and detail. . . .” In their own words from their website “The Bible conveys its ideas not in abstract terms, but through a clear and vivid record of long human interaction with the land of Israel. Neot Kedumim draws on a variety of disciplines—such as Bible scholarship, botany, zoology, geography, history, and archaeology—to bring the Bible and its commentaries to life. Neot Kedumim has constructed a network of natural and agricultural landscapes bearing names that indicate their textual source:

- the Forest of Milk and Honey
- the Dale of the Song of Songs
- Isaiah's Vineyard
- the Fields of the Seven Varieties
- and many more.

“Thousands of tons of soil were trucked in and spread on the eroded hillsides, reservoirs were dug to catch runoff rainwater, and ancient terraces were restored. Habitats were created for such varied species as cedars from the snow-covered mountains of Lebanon and date palms from Sinai desert oases.”

“Hundreds of varieties of biblical and talmudic plants; wild and domesticated animals; ancient and reconstructed olive and wine presses, threshing floors, cisterns, and ritual baths bring to life the literal roots of the biblical tradition in the soil of the land of Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

We were given a tour of this park by a lady who is sort of a park ranger and interpreter, and were shown various plants, agricultural fields, and animals. She explained how each of these were mentioned in or were a part of the Bible. Early on, she explained to us about Corn, Wine, and Oil.

“I will respond, declares the Lord. I will respond to the heavens, and they will respond to the earth, and the earth shall respond with grain, with wine, and with oil” (Hosea 2:23-24).

As the virtual tour from Ne'ot Kedumim's website states, “It is this trio (grain, wine, and oil) that, throughout the Bible, represents the divine response, through the heavens, to the earth, and, through the earth, to human needs. God speaks to people through the seasonal rain from the heavens, vital for these three crops: ‘If you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late, and you shall gather in your grain and your wine and your oil.’ (Deuteronomy 11:13 - 14) With the “rain in season,” grain (wheat), wine (grapes) & oil (olives)

flourish in Israel's dry, rocky soil. Wheat, grapes, and olives became the staple products of ancient Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Deuteronomy, Chapter 7, Verses 12 and 13 state "And because you hearken to these ordinances, and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love which he swore to your fathers to keep; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will also bless the fruit of your body and the fruit of your ground, *your grain and your wine and your oil*, the increase of your cattle and the young of your flock, in the land which he swore to your fathers to give you.

Corn, of course, is used in the British sense of that word to mean wheat, and not maize, which is what we Americans usually mean when we use the word, "corn." The Talmud lists 11 tasks associated with growing and harvesting wheat, "to bring forth bread from the earth." These are "plow, sow, reap, bind the sheaves, thresh, winnow, sieve, grind the grain, sift the flour, knead, bake."

It is no coincidence that grain is first in the list of grain, wine, and oil. Wheat was the queen of the crops. The ancient Israelite got 50 percent of his calories from wheat, mostly in the form of bread. *Lehem*, bread in Hebrew, is also the generic word for food. Bread is still the central food in Jewish religious life. Blessing the bread blesses the entire meal, and eating bread requires the ritual hand-washing before and the grace after.<sup>3</sup>

But wheat—life—is highly dependent on the "rain in season, the early rain and the late"—the first rains for the seed to germinate, the last for the kernels to ripen and fill with starch. If the farmer's prayers have been answered—if the rains come on time ...then "those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (Psalm 126:5).<sup>4</sup>

Wine, it turns out, was essential to a person's fluid intake in ancient Israel. Other than the region along the River Jordan and the occasional oasis, Israel, largely a desert country, had one source for water—rain. The Hebrew words for heaven, *shamayim*, and water, *mayim*, share the same root. Etymologically, in Hebrew, water comes from heaven. Rain is Israel's "only major source of water, and the rain comes, at most, six months of the year. How did people survive the dry months? Cisterns. Hewed laboriously out of solid rock, the cistern functions as a bank. You deposit every drop in the winter, and withdraw, very, very carefully, during the summer." During our tour, one of the main features of every ancient city or town that we saw was a large cistern.

One generally does not drink this stagnant cistern water by itself. It had to be mixed with wine to disinfect it. Hence, one's fluid intake consisted solely of wine, or of wine mixed with water.

According to Ne'ot Kedumim's website, "In the ancient Mediterranean, wine was an important component of the diet and a major source of calories, sugar, and iron. In ancient Israel, the drinking water available at the end of the summer was rainwater that had been sitting in a cistern for at least six months. Adding wine to the water improved the taste and lowered the bacteria content. Water mixed with wine was a standard drink. And "wine gladdens the human heart" (Psalm 104:15). Every holiday, every family celebration, is sanctified by blessing the fruit of the vine."<sup>5</sup>

Grapes grow throughout Israel. In the early spring, the leaves and delicate white flowers appear on the vines, and the fruit ripens in mid- to late summer. To harvest the grapes quickly before they spoil on the vine, the entire family moves into the vineyard watchtower, to harvest, tread the grapes in the

winepress, and store the fresh juice in jugs to ferment.

Like wheat, grapes depend on the winter rains. Without enough water during the winter, the growing parts of the vine shrivel. But the same rain that can benefit the wheat in the spring can damage the grapes if the blossoms have already opened. And the heat that the grape blossoms need to open and be pollinated can parch the wheat. A tricky situation.<sup>6</sup>

Oil is olive oil. I suppose my first thought when I think of oil is anointing. But olive oil had a variety of uses in ancient Israel, the primary one being light from clay oil lamps. These were the light-bulbs of ancient Israel. Olive trees can live for a thousand years and bear fruit for centuries. Olive oil is one of the blessings of the land, highly valued for cooking, healing, and especially for lighting. “Messiah” is the Hebrew *mashiakh*—the one who is anointed—with olive oil.<sup>7</sup>

The green olives are harvested in the fall, and the ripe, black olives, full of oil, in November and December. To make oil, the olives are first crushed by a large, rotating stone. The olive pulp is then put in round, woven baskets and the oil is squeezed out.<sup>8</sup> Like the grapes, olives bloom in the spring. The delicate olive flowers are in the same vulnerable state as the grape blossoms, easily damaged by the winds and the late rains of April.<sup>9</sup>

In order to survive, the ancient Israelite needed all three—the grain *and* the wine *and* the oil. For the wheat and the grapes and the olives to *all* grow, a fine-tuned ecological balance was needed—a balance between rain and sun, heat and cold, that was—and is—beyond human control.<sup>10</sup> For this life-sustaining balance, the ancient Israelite farmer could only hope—and pray. Inevitably, the grain, the wine, and the oil became major players in his ritual life. The Temple ritual centered on a permanent display of twelve loaves—the showbread—and the menorah that was lit with olive oil. A wine libation was poured over the altar. The grain offering was semolina from the inner kernel of the wheat mixed with olive oil.

In the course of history, the Temple was destroyed, and with it the powerful rituals that channeled and focused the plea for survival. The Jews scattered from Israel to every corner of the earth.<sup>11</sup> But the grain, the wine, and the oil were not forgotten. How is every Jewish holiday, every Sabbath, sanctified? By blessing bread, and blessing wine, and kindling lights. The Sabbath table, no matter where in the world, holds a weekly reminder of the ancient Jewish origins in a narrow, rocky strip of East Mediterranean coast, of the ancient Israelite farmer’s fervent plea for the ecological balance that meant survival, and of our own ultimate dependence on the earth.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, corn, wine, and oil represent the essentials for human existence: food, liquids, light.<sup>13</sup>

I was immediately struck by the association of oil with light, which I had not perceived before. When I considered the wages of a Fellowcraft Mason, I immediately saw a relationship between the activities of the Fellowcraft and the procurement of more light. The Fellowcraft is to come out of ignorance into knowledge. His wages supply him with nourishment, refreshment, and more light. A major source of light is his cultivation of the seven liberal arts and sciences. Manly P. Hall asserted that “Equipped with the knowledge conferred by familiarity with the liberal arts and sciences, the studious Freemason therefore finds himself confronted by few problems with which he cannot cope.”<sup>14</sup> These arts and sciences are the means by which we “trace the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Grand Artificer of the Universe,” being the means by which we “minutely analyze his works.”

I urge you to read Dr. Philip Phillips' paper, "The Seven Liberal Arts in the Fellowcraft Degree," printed in the Tennessee Lodge of Research's book, *Traveling East*, on pages 400-410.<sup>15</sup>

For a Masonic Treatment of Corn, Wine, and Oil, I recommend Short Talks Bulletin from August 1930, which treats the subject of corn, wine, and oil very well from the point of view of Masonry (reprinted following this article).<sup>16</sup>

For an esoteric exploration of the possible meanings of Corn, Wine, and Oil, see Dr. Thomas Driber's paper, "The Secrets of the Fellowcraft Degree," in *Traveling East* on pages 193-209.<sup>17</sup>

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1. ["What Are We," June 13, 2008.](#)
  2. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  3. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  4. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  5. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  6. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  7. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  8. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  9. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  10. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  11. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  12. ["GRAIN, WINE, AND OIL - virtual tour at Neot-Kedumim," June 13, 2008.](#)
  13. ["Hands-on Installations - Neot Kedumim The Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel," June 13, 2008.](#)
  14. Hall, Manly P., *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, 1975) 173-174.
  15. Driber, Thomas J., Ph.D. and Philip E. Phillips, Ph.D., *Traveling East*. (Nashville: Eveready Press, 2006) 400-410.
  16. *The Short Talk Bulletin*, The Masonic Service Association of the United States, VOL. 8 AUGUST 1930 NO. 8.
  17. Driber, Thomas J., Ph.D. and Philip E. Phillips, Ph.D., *Traveling East*. (Nashville: Eveready Press, 2006) 193-209.