

Olive Trees in the Bible

By Patrick Swayne

I've met a lot of people who don't like olives. Usually their aversion is revealed to me as they pick olives out of the food my wife has prepared. I've had to endure watching that sad little pile of rejected olives a lot over the years simply because my wife makes a lot of food with olives in it. We love olives! I grew up eating black olives straight out of the can and had them on pizza, pasta, and Subway sandwiches (I always have to say "extra olives" at Subway because they usually only put 4 or 5 slices on, barely enough to amount to a whole olive). When I moved to Australia, the woman who became my wife introduced me to Kalamata olives (not as common in the USA) and helped me to discover that green olives are much better than I thought they would be (even though I loved olives, the green ones always scared me as a child, particularly because of that red thing that was generally stuffed inside them).

For people who don't love olives as much as I do, it might be hard to imagine how highly regarded they were in the world of the Bible. In fact, an interesting study can be made of the times the Bible speaks of olive trees. It does so in the KJV 22 times;¹ however, the Hebrew word for olive trees appears 38 times in the Old Testament and the three Greek words for olive trees appear 18 times in the New Testament.^{2, 3}

Several of the mentions of olive trees in the Bible describe how precious these trees were in the eyes of the ancients. Moses promised the Israelites that the land God would give them would be "full of good things," and one of those good things was "olive trees" and their "oil" (Deuteronomy 6:11; 8:8; cf. Joshua 24:12-13; Nehemiah 9:25).⁴ Later, Moses warned them that if they sinned and turned their back on God, He would make their olive crops fail (Deuteronomy 28:40; Micah 6:13-15). This actually happened during the time of Amos (Amos 4:9) and later during the time of Haggai (Haggai 2:19). Further indication of their value can be seen in Jotham's fable, where the olive tree was the first choice of the personified trees who were searching for a king (Judges 9:8-9).

In light of their value and importance, it comes as no surprise that olive trees feature prominently in the books of history. An olive leaf was the welcome sign to Noah that the flood

¹ All Scripture quoted is taken from the KJV Bible unless otherwise noted.

² Whereas we would never think of an olive as an olive tree in English, in the Bible there appears to have been one generic word for both the fruit and its tree whether in the Old Testament (Hebrew) or the New Testament (Greek). Context determines whether the author is referring to the fruit or the tree. Further, it could be argued that there are not really three Greek words – there is one generic Greek word for olives/olive trees, one compound word (with the generic word built in) to refer to domesticated olive trees, and another compound word (also with the generic built in) to refer to wild/undomesticated olive trees.

³ Most references to olives / olive trees in the New Testament are actually references to the Mount of Olives, aka Olivet. See Matthew 21:1; 24:3; 26:30; Mark 11:1; 13:3; 14:26; Luke 19:29, 37; 21:37; 22:39; John 8:1; Acts 1:12.

⁴ One could argue that unspecified "oil" in the Bible is often olive oil. However, I've limited this study to explicit mentions of olive trees, their fruit, and oil that is specifically said to come from them.

was over (Genesis 8:11). Olive oil was a part of the recipe God gave Moses for the oil he was to use for anointing (Exodus 30:22-25). In the period of the judges, Solomon expressed his anger towards the Philistines by using fire dragging foxes to set fire to their crops, including their olive orchards (Judges 15:4-5). Later, God promised his people through Samuel that having a king “like all the nations” would see them lose their olive trees, which appears to have happened from the time of David onward even if it did not happen during the time of Saul (1 Samuel 8:5, 14). King David kept olive trees in the Judean foothills (1 Chronicles 27:28) and a hill of olive trees (aka “Olivet”) became a part of his capitol city, Jerusalem (2 Samuel 15:30).⁵ The wood from olive trees was precious enough to find its way into the temple Solomon built (1 Kings 6:23, 31-33; most versions render this “olive wood” instead of the KJV’s “olive tree”). Such was the appeal of olive oil that Rabshakeh, the Assyrian ambassador, even tried to use it to tempt the inhabitants of Judah to surrender (2 Kings 18:32).

Twice in Old Testament history olive orchards appear to have been the subject of greed. Elisha refers to “oliveyards” to speak of his servant Gehazi’s greed in receiving money from Naaman after Elisha had refused it (2 Kings 5:26). Even though Naaman did not give Gehazi any land let alone any olive trees, perhaps it was in Gehazi’s heart to buy an olive orchard. Later, as the Jews were rebuilding Jerusalem and her walls, Nehemiah had to pause to rebuke the wealthy of his day for taking the olive trees of the poor (Nehemiah 5:11).

These last couple of references provide a segue to some important points. God knew that people highly valued olives and as a consequence He issued three commands concerning them under the Law of Moses. First, the Israelites were to offer olive oil in a quantity sufficient to fuel a lamp that was to perpetually burn in the tabernacle (Exodus 27:20; Leviticus 24:2). Second, once every seven years, the Israelites were commanded neither to tend the olive trees they owned nor to gather olives from them; instead, the olives of that year were to be left for the land (to return nutrients to the soil), for the poor, and for the animals (Exodus 23:11). God promised to send them a “bumper crop” (i.e. an abundant yield) in the sixth year, enough to provide for them until the harvest of the ninth year (i.e. the harvest after the first year of a new cycle) (Leviticus 25:20-22). Third, each year the Israelites were to leave the leftovers after the initial harvest “for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow” (Deuteronomy 24:20). In this way, God taught his people to be conservative with their blessings (they had to make a single crop last effectively for three years) and to be generous instead of greedy. Perhaps Nehemiah was trying to teach the same lesson when he instructed people to use even highly valued olive branches to make booths in order to keep the feast of tabernacles (Nehemiah 8:15).

⁵ Zechariah 14:4 contains another Old Testament reference to the Mount of Olives, though it appears to be in a figurative context.

As in Jotham's fable referenced above, olive trees occasionally are used figuratively or representatively in the Bible. Some of the more obvious figurative uses are in similes. Two times the prophet Isaiah uses the illustration of a harvested olive tree to describe how many people are going to be left after the Lord brings judgment because of sin (Isaiah 17:6; 24:13). However, at roughly the same time (albeit to the northern kingdom of Israel instead of to the southern kingdom to which Isaiah prophesied), the prophet Hosea was promising a future based on repentance in which God would restore the Israelites to glory. He said their beauty would be "as the olive tree" (Hosea 14:6).

Other figurative references are not as straightforward. God once gave Zechariah a vision of two olive trees and later told him he was seeing "the two anointed ones" (Zechariah 4:3, 11). Most likely these anointed ones refer to Zerubbabel (then governor of Judah) and Joshua (then high priest). The vision appears to have been designed to give confidence to the Israelites that Zerubbabel and Joshua were capable leaders and that the plan God was working through them would succeed. The picture from Zechariah's vision is reused in the book of Revelation (Revelation 11:4), and while it is unclear who the two olive trees there represent other than two unnamed witnesses, the picture once again appears to be one of competence and sufficiency.

The above pictures in Zechariah and Revelation perhaps provide some background to the Psalmist's statement: "I am like a green olive tree in the house of God" (Psalm 52:8). The Psalmist is describing himself in contrast to those trusted in their own strength and riches (v.7) and the point seems to be, "While the wicked may seem to be strong, safe, and steadfast, there is no better place to be than to be in the service of God. When I serve God, I am provided for and my life will be fruitful." Such benefits can even be experienced as a family – another Psalm describes the children of the righteous as being "like olive plants round about thy table" (Psalm 128:3).

An olive tree is not an evergreen tree – Habakkuk promised to serve God even if the olive trees failed, which they sometimes did (Habakkuk 3:17-18). While serving God will keep one green, so to speak, failing to do so will be the ruin of one's tree. Job's friend Eliphaz said the wicked would "cast off his flower as the olive" (Job 15:33). Jeremiah later pointed out that really the entire nation of Israel was at one time "a green olive tree" but stated that they lost that position due to sin – their branches were on fire or were already broken off (Jeremiah 11:16).

Later, Paul pictured Christians as branches of an olive tree (Romans 11:16-24). In fact, he stated that God's people have always been an olive tree before Him. In describing the New Testament era, he stated that God removed some of the Jews from being His people, as one removes branches from an olive tree, because of their unbelief. In their place, God brought in the Gentiles – wild (i.e. uncultivated, undomesticated) olive branches were grafted to God's

cultivated tree. In the context, Paul's hope was that the cut off branches (Jews) could be part of the tree again as well as that the tree would continue to grow. However, it is clear as a subpoint of that text that to be in Christ is to be in a place of blessing, just as the illustration was sometimes used in the Old Testament.

The question of James is perhaps a good way to end this article: "Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?" (James 3:12). We've seen how valuable olive trees were to the Israelites and how prominent they were in Israelite history. We've seen how God used them to combat greed and encourage generosity in His people. We've seen that they've been used figuratively to describe one's service to God and that really, serving God is like being a part of a fruitful, green olive tree. So, the question, following James, is this: are we bearing olives or some other fruit in our lives?