

# The Olive Tree in Scripture

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**Preface:** ISBE called the olive tree *one of the most characteristic, most valued and most useful of trees in Palestine*.<sup>1</sup> The reference to the *olive tree* as the *king of trees* in Judges 9:8–9 would even suggest that the olive tree is the most important tree in the Palestine area.

1. Zayith (זַיִת) [pronounced ZAH-yeeth], means *olive, olive tree*. In the plural, this refers to an *olive orchard*. Strong's #2132 BDB #268. It is found 31 times in the Old Testament.
2. Background:<sup>2</sup>
  - a. The olive tree takes a long time to develop, but can live and produce olives for several centuries. ZPEB suggests 40–50 years.
  - b. Although we of the west may not appreciate the olive tree, it grows in difficult places with little water or cultivation. In the Orient, where evergreens are difficult to grow, the foliage of the tree is therefore attractive and the fruit abundant.<sup>3</sup>
  - c. If the tree is cut down, shoots will often come up from the root; as many as five trunks will emanate from the same root.
  - d. The olive flowers around May; clusters of small white flowers, which fall as showers from the ground (Job 15:33).
  - e. Although the first olives mature as early as September, the olive harvest in the mountain district is November or even as late as December.
  - f. The trees are beaten with long sticks; and usually women and girls pick the olives near the ground.
  - g. Even modern villages in Palestine allow the poor to pick from the gleanings of the olive trees (Deut. 24:20).
  - h. A good year for an olive tree could be followed by a poor year for the very same tree.
  - i. Green olives are often pickled in brine, and the black olives packed in salt or brine. The salt modifies the bitter taste.
  - j. More importantly, oil is extracted from the olive, sometimes by crushing a few berries in a stone, where there is a channel for the oil to run out (Ex. 27:20). They are also tread by foot (Micah 6:15), although that tended to be quite inefficient. This oil could be used medicinally (Luke 10:34 James 5:14). It is used as food; for instance, bread was dipped into it (2Chron. 2:10).
  - k. The oil was also used to anoint (Psalm 23:5 Matt. 6:17).

<sup>1</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; Vol. III; p. 2134.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted and paraphrased from *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; Vol. III; p. 2185.

<sup>3</sup> This point is from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 4, p. 528.

- l. For a long and pleasant life, the Roman maxim with regards to fluids was “Wine within and oil without.”
- m. Today, some soaps in Palestine are made from oil.
- n. Oil has been used since time immemorial to burn in lamps (Matt. 25:3).
- o. The wood of the cultivated olive tree is a rich amber color with fine grain, and is often used for doors and posts of the Temple<sup>4</sup> and other places where this could be shown to its greatest advantage. However, since the trunk of the olive tree tends short and twisted, it is impossible to get boards of any length from an olive tree.
- p. Apparently, the cultivation of the olive tree was even a greater industry in olden times, given all of the rock-cut oil and wine presses, which have been found within and outside the city of Gezer. In addition to this, there are many deserted olive orchards filled with wild olive trees, many of which sprung up from the roots of cultivated olive trees or from the fallen drupes. Isolated trees throughout Palestine are those which are often sown by birds.
- q. These wild olive trees are really just shrubs, with small leaves, a somewhat prickly stem, and a small hard drupe with little or no oil. To take a branch from a wild olive tree and graft it to a cultivated tree would be useless and contrary to nature.

### Olive Tree Photographs



Above: an olive grove in Bethel, Israel.

From <http://www.olive-tree.net/>



Above: two houses sitting in an olive grove in Corfu, a Greek Island.

From <http://www.utia.cas.cz/jaja/corfu/corfu.html>



Image: UConn Plant Database

Above: an olive tree



Image: UConn Plant Database

Above: a close up of the olive fruit

The two pictures above came from <http://www.naturehills.com/new/product/productdetails.aspx?proname=Autumn+Olive>

<sup>4</sup> The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 4, p. 528.

3. In the Old Testament, there are many references to the olive tree. The first time it is found, Noah sent out a dove from the ark after the rain had stopped and the waters had abated. The dove brought back an olive branch. It is interesting that both of these symbols, the dove and the olive branch, have come down to us as symbols of friendship and peace. Gen. 8:11 Psalm 52:8
4. The sons of Israel were to keep pure olive oil in the lamp that burned continuously inside the court of the Tent (or, Tabernacle) of Meeting. This represented the fact that God and his grace were available 24/7 to the children of Israel (and to everyone). Ex. 27:20 Lev. 24:2
5. And anointing oil was made to consecrate the Tent of Meeting and olive oil was used with this (along with specific spices). Ex. 30:24
6. Moses told the children of Israel about the Land of Promise, and how it was filled with olive orchards that they did not plant as well as houses that they did not build (Deut. 6:11). The olive tree was one of the many natural resources of that land (Deut. 8:8). Olives were seen to be so essential, that some had to be left on the trees for widows and orphans (Deut. 24:20 Isa. 17:6).
7. One of the cursings of disobedience was the non-production of the olive tree. Deut. 28:40
8. The olive tree is used in one of the two fable/parables of the Old Testament. Jotham uses it to tell the people how far they have fallen to accept just anyone as a king over Israel. Judges 9:8–9
9. When Solomon built the Temple, several parts of it and accessories were made from olive trees (1Kings 6:23, 31–33).
10. The Rabshakeh tried to turn Israel against Hezekiah by promising them their own land in a land of olive trees and honey (2Kings 18:32).
11. Only one olive blossom out of a hundred produces fruit, so when an olive tree blossoms and the petals fall to the ground, it looks like a snowstorm.<sup>5</sup> Eliphaz used the olive tree having its blossoms cast off as an analogy to Job and his problems (Job 15:33).
12. Our passage is the first time that we have to actually do some real interpretation. It reads: **But as for me, I am like the green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the grace of God forever and ever** (Psalm 52:8). Being a green olive tree, means that David recognizes that he is not mature yet, an extremely important understanding for a new believer to make. I can't tell you how many new believers pick up immediately at salvation and assume the same basic attitudes and values that they had pre-salvation. If they are environmentalists prior to salvation, they are even more so after salvation, believing God wants them to preserve and protect His earth as a part of their stewardship. If they believe in nonviolence before salvation, they believe in nonviolence after salvation. Nothing in their opinions or values change. David recognizes that he is a green olive tree, a tree which will produce fruit at some point in time, *after* it has grown. Furthermore, the implication is that David will become a mature olive tree, which production that lasts for years, even centuries (little did he know that his impact would still be felt over 3000 years later). The application is, quite obviously, that there is a whole realm of thinking in the Christian life which is not necessarily innate in the new believer.
13. Again, the idea of an olive tree must be interpreted in Psalm 128:3, where a man who is blessed has children who are live olive plants around the table. Olive trees speak of blessing and provision and production. Oil, in the Old and New Testaments, often is a reference to God the Holy Spirit; and this oil is found within the production of the olive tree (in the olives).
14. Isaiah uses the olive tree to describe the earth when God executes judgment over it. Once an olive tree is shaken, what remains of it is just a handful of olives. After God's judgment, this is how most men will be—as though they were an olive tree which God has shaken. Isa. 24:13
15. In fact, the olive tree is often used of Israel when being judged (Jer. 11:16) and being prospered (Hosea 14:6 Amos 4:9).
16. Habakkuk speaks of rejoicing in God even apart from enjoying material blessing, and mentions the olive tree in this. Habak. 3:17
17. In Zech. 4, we have the vision of the two olive trees. The angel explains, **“These are the two anointed ones, who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth”** (Zech. 4:14). Although I have not spent an extensive time with this passage, I would assume the two olive trees represent Israel and the Gentiles. However, since the literal rendering of this is *sons of oil*, and since oil represents the Holy Spirit, this would not be a reference

<sup>5</sup> Paraphrased from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 4, p. 528.



to God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. It must be a reference to two things empowered by the Spirit of God, which would most reasonably be Israel and Gentile believers. We need to be careful in the interpretation of such passages—particularly Old Testament passages—as the Church Age and the institution of the church were not revealed in the Old Testament. The church is a mystery doctrine. However, that Gentiles would believe in the God of Israel is certainly revealed in the Old Testament.

18. <http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1475-did-the-ancient-gentiles-have-the-hope-of-salvation> appears to be a reasonable webpage which reveals God's plan for the Gentiles and His concern for Gentiles is found in both the Old and New Testaments, without violating the concept of the church being a mystery until revealed by Paul and the other Apostles.
19. The words *olive* or *olives* (in the KJV) are found only 18 times in the New Testament and they are found in fifteen verses. Many of these references are to a place, the Mount of Olives.
20. First of all, the word. In the Greek it is *elaia* (ἐλαία) [pronounced *el-AH-yah*], which means *olive, olive tree, olive fruit*. Strong's #1636. This word is found 15 times in as many verses.
21. We of course have several references to the *Mount of Olives*, in Matt. 21:1 24:3 26:30 Mark 11:1 13:3 14:26 Luke 19:29, 37 21:37 22:39 John 8:1. Given that there were so many olive trees throughout Judea, we would expect there to be a place called by this name. The Mount of Olives, also called Olivet, is actually *a small range of four summits, the highest of which is 2723 feet and overlooks Jerusalem and the Temple Mount from the east across the Citron Valley and the Pool of Siloam*.<sup>6</sup> During the time of Jesus, this would have been heavily wooded. However, it was stripped of trees during the reign of Titus. We will go into more detail on the **Mount of Olives** at another time (2Sam. 15:30).
22. You will recall the very last reference to the olive tree in Zech. 4:14 above; Paul refers to it in almost the same way in Rom. 11:17–24. Israel is the olive tree of God, which God planted; Gentile believers are the branches which are grafted into the existing olive tree. These grafted-in branches bear fruit because they are supported by the olive tree. Paul warns the Gentiles not to look negatively upon the Jews, as they are the foundation upon which the Gentiles believers depend. They are also warned that God may tear their branches out as He tore out the branches of the Jews who did not produce. In this passage, there is a second word, which means *good olive tree*, which is found only here. There is a third word in this passage which is translated *wild olive tree* (vv. 17 and 24) and is found only here in the New Testament. Just as Paul makes reference to wild and cultivated olive trees, so such a differentiation existed in the Palestine area. ISBE suggests that not only is the wild olive tree indigenous to the Palestine area, but that this area was the origin of the cultivated olive tree. Now, I know very little about plants, but I assume these were olive trees which were grown for the purpose of producing olives, and that seeds (or, more likely, cuttings<sup>7</sup>) from the finest of those trees were used for even better olives. Grafting was a part of the procedure, as the *wild olive tree* was really nothing more than a bush which produced unappetizing, small, hard fruits. Douglas: *To become prolific, the olive must be grafted, a process by which good stock is made to grow upon the wild shrub. Paul uses this fact as a powerful allegory (Rom. xi. 17) in showing how the Gentiles are under obligation to the true Israel, indicating that it is contrary to nature for a wild olive slip to be grafted on to good stock*.<sup>8</sup> What Paul suggests—grafting the branches of a wild olive plant onto a good strong tree—would be unheard of. The response of an ancient gardener to such a proposal would be very similar to the response of the Jew to find that they will have Gentiles grafted in next to them in the plan of God. By the way, ISBE describes the grafting process on p. 2184 of Volume 3.
23. James uses an olive tree in a completely different way in James 3:12; he asks: **Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh.** His point was, you should not curse and bless out of the same mouth (vv. 5–10). The alternative interpretation is that we should produce divine good since we are believers (v. 13).
24. I must admit that I looked upon the application and use of olive oil for medicinal purposes mentioned in the New Testament as perhaps a little backwards and a sign of the times during the time of the Apostles.

<sup>6</sup> Slightly paraphrased from *The New Bible Dictionary*; ed. J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 907.

<sup>7</sup> Although my knowledge about plants is limited, I do understand cuttings. If you cut a limb off some trees and stick it into the ground, it will sometimes grow. I planted several cottonwood trees around my second house that way. Cottonwoods grow like weeds.

<sup>8</sup> *The New Bible Dictionary*; ed. J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 907.

However, I unearthed a source from the internet, <http://www.globalherbalsupplies.com>, which lists many of the medicinal uses of the parts of the olive tree.

### Medicinal Uses of the Olive Tree

#### Bark

febrifuge [an agent that reduces or eliminates fevers]

#### Leaves

antibacterial [an agent that destroys bacteria; bactericide]

antifungal [an agent that destroys fungi]

antiseptic [an agent for inhibiting the growth of microorganism on living tissue or destroying pathogenic or putrefactive bacteria]

antiviral [an agent that destroys viruses]

astringent [a binding agent that contracts organic tissue, reducing secretions or discharges of mucous and fluid from the body]

febrifuge [an agent that reduces or eliminates fevers]

tranquilizer

#### Oil

aperient [a mild stimulant producing a natural movement of the bowels; a gentle purgative]

cholagogue [an agent for increasing the flow of bile into the intestines]

demulcent [a substance that soothes inflamed mucous membranes and protects them from irritation]

emollient [an agent used externally to soften and soothe]

laxative [an agent promoting evacuation of the bowels; a mild purgative]

nutritious [gives nourishment]

The upshot of all this is, the use of the oil from olive was not just some ancient ritual or voodoo medicine. The benefits, as noted above, are considerable and varied. There is actually a much longer list of uses and applications of the olive oil and leaves (this site is a part of Global Herbal Supplies). I do not recommend any or its products nor have I tried any of their products. I simply refer to it by way of example.

Taken from [http://www.globalherbalsupplies.com/herb\\_information/olive\\_tree.htm](http://www.globalherbalsupplies.com/herb_information/olive_tree.htm). Accessed July 25, 2010.

25. Rev. 11:4 also has a reference to two olive trees, just like Zech. 4:14, and they probably refer to Israel and to the Church.
26. Our conclusion is that we cannot apply just one symbolic use to the olive tree. It is so tied to the land of Palestine that the olive tree can represent Israel, but 2 trees seem to represent Jews and Gentiles. When David makes a reference to the green olive tree, he is recognizing that he is young and needs some cultivation and growth before he produces. However, the end result is that he will produce for a long time.