

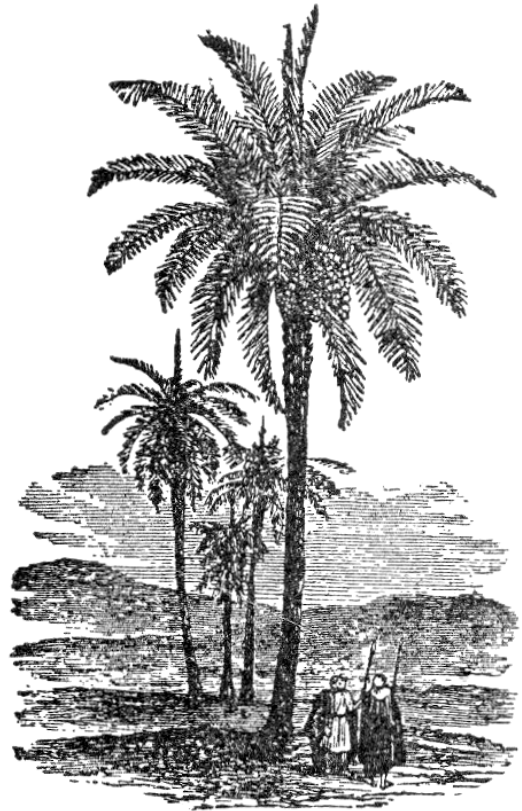
Dates

By Jacob Golden

Dates were one of at least thirty different kinds of fruit that grew in the Holy Land during the time of Jesus. Dates are the fruit of the date palm tree. There is archaeological evidence of date palms in the ancient near east at least 40,000 years before the birth of Jesus. The palms have been cultivated by humans since at least 5,000 BCE.

the Bible has many references to dates and date palms. It is likely, for instance, that the “honey” mentioned in the description of the land God promises the Israelites was actually the thick honey-like juice that can be extracted from dates.

So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that **land** into a good and spacious **land**, a **land** flowing with **milk** and **honey**... (Exodus 3:8).



This honey was made by boiling dates in water and straining the cooked fruit through cloth.¹

The name “date” probably comes from the Greek word for “digit,” since the fruit on the tree looks a bit like a cluster of dark-brown fingers. The scientific name for dates is *phoenix dactylifera*. This name is related to the mythical bird, the phoenix, that rises from the ashes to live again. Like the bird, date palm plants will regenerate from the roots of the plant even after a fire has destroyed everything above ground!

In Jesus’ day the city of Jericho was known as “the city of palms” and was a well-known producer of dates. The Roman conquerer Mark Anthony took over the date farms around Jericho and gave them to the Egyptian queen Cleopatra as a gift. Roman conquerers also used the image of the date palm on their coins. In the year 70 ce the Romans produced a coin in celebration of the subjugation of the revolt of the Jews. The coin shows a Jewish woman kneeling under a date palm with a Roman soldier towering over her. The caption reads “Judaea capta” — Judea captured.

Dates came to be associated with “life” in the ancient near east. This was because the trees, which can reach as high as 70 feet, grew near oases and wells in the dry, barren

¹ All the information in this report was taken from these sources: (1) Miriam Vamosh, Food at the time of the Bible, ©2000 Palphot Ltd., Herzlia, Israel; (2) Allan A. Swenson, Foods Jesus Ate and How to Grow Them, ©2008, Skyhorse Publishing, New York; (3) The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, website: www.fao.org; (4) The Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, website: www.agmrc.org; Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix_dactylifera

deserts. Travelers could see the towering palms from afar and knew that life-giving water could be found beneath them. Large trees can produce more than 1,000 dates every year, growing in bunches, similar to bananas, that can weigh as much as 40 pounds.

As a symbol of life, pictures and carvings of the date palm adorned the ancient temple of Israel. Date palm fronds were used to build booths or sheds for the celebration of Sukkoth, a Jewish festival. It is also likely that the branches carried on the first “palm Sunday,” when Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, were from the date palm trees of that city.

Today dates are eaten throughout the world. The United States ranks 17th on the list of date producing countries, with the state of California harvesting 20,500 tons in 2009. The largest producer in the world is Egypt, which produces well over a million tons each year. All other producing countries are in the Middle East or Africa, except for China which produce around 130,000 tons a year.

In addition to being tasty, dates are a good source of fiber and have been used to treat intestinal and alimentary problems. The seeds can be ground up and used to make a good feed for animals. Indeed, in some countries nearly every part of the date palm is used in some way, from construction to medicines to crafts.