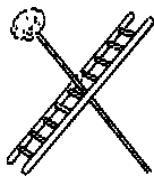


PLANTS OF PASSOVER AND PASSION

Hyssop and Bitter Herbs



There are few things that touch the Christian heart as much as a glance toward the cross to see Jesus suffering for the sins of the whole world. On the cross our Savior was subject to cruel torment and agony, all so that *He* might feel the weight of God's holy wrath instead of us. How we thank Him for His bleeding and dying!

There are various plants of the Bible that bring to mind Scriptural occasions or truths. Here, it is the *hyssop* and the *bitter herbs* that we consider. These are the plants that are forever linked with the great sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

Hyssop

It is quite difficult to determine with certainty exactly which plant the Biblical hyssop was. The plant now known as "common hyssop" (*Hyssopus officinalis*) was not known in the middle east during Bible times, so botanists have searched elsewhere for possibilities. As a result, two leading candidates emerge for what the Scriptures term hyssop:

CAPER BUSH (*Capparis spinosa*)
The caper is a spiny, shrub-like bush that is native to the Mediterranean region. It can grow anywhere from 3 to 5 feet high and produces small, white flowers that are pleasing to the eye. Usually, however, it grows near the ground more like a vine and has a tendency to cover walls much like ivy.



Caper bush with blossoms

MARJORAM PLANT (*Origanum aegyptiacum* or *Origanum maru*) The plants of the genus marjoram grow everywhere throughout the Holy Land in considerable abundance. Like the caper bush, this herb also will grow well on walls. Consider what was said of Solomon in 1 Kgs 4:33, "Also he spoke of trees, from the cedar tree of Lebanon even to the hyssop that springs out of the wall . . ." The plant has a hairy stem that is actually quite strong. Marjoram as a flavoring herb is popular in dressings and meat dishes.



Origanum maru in bloom

Based on Bible references the descriptions given there of how the plant was used, most believe that the hyssop mentioned in the Bible was some variety of marjoram rather than the caper bush, but explore the references for yourself—

Exodus 12:22-23

Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe . . . When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.

As you might note from the picture above, the *Origanum maru* would have been particularly useful as a "brush" for the Israelites to use in putting the blood over the doorframes.

Psalms 51:7

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

In the Bible, hyssop was used for ceremonial washing; see Lev 14:52; Num 19:18; Heb 9:19-22. Here in Psalm 51, it is King David asking God to make him clean from all his sins.

Jhn 19:28-29

Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on the stalk of a hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.

On the basis of this verse, suggestions have been made that the hyssop was the caper bush or even the sorghum plant because a lengthy stalk would be needed. This is not necessarily true, however, if one takes into account that a marjoram stem can reach 40-50 cm and the cross was probably not very high. In Matthew and Mark, the Scriptures say a "reed" was used (Mt 26:29; Mk 15:36). Either the hyssop and reed were the same thing, or a reed *and* hyssop were held up together. The smell of the hyssop would have softened the strong odor of the vinegar.

The hyssop holds a prominent place in Biblical botany. Not just because it is difficult to determine the exact species of plant, but because wherever it occurs, it seems to have a direct connection to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

! In Exodus, it was the plant used to put the blood on the doorframes so the angel of death would pass over. To commemorate this event, God had the Jews celebrate "Passover" every year. But even more than a remembrance, Passover was a picture of the coming Savior. How is the blood of the Passover a picture of the blood of Jesus? Read also 1 Pet 1:18-19; 1 Cor 5:7.

! Elsewhere in the Old Testament, hyssop is used to cleanse that which is unclean. What does this remind us of concerning Jesus Christ? Read 1 Jn 1:7. See TLH 157.

! The season of Lent serves as a special reminder to us that Jesus suffered the punishment for sin in our place. Through this suffering, Jesus cleanses us from all our sins (Jn 3:14-17; 1 Pet 3:18a).

Bitter Herbs

On Maundy Thursday evening, the day before Jesus was crucified, He met with His disciples in an upper room to celebrate the Passover with them. Jesus had been looking forward to this Passover meal with His closest friends for a long time. The Passover had been instituted many years earlier (Ex 12-13), but this particular Passover held special significance because it marked the time during which the Son of Man would be sacrificed.

The Passover meal consisted of a roasted lamb, unleavened bread, wine, and *bitter herbs* (Ex 12:8; Num 9:11). The bitter herbs were to remind the Israelites of the bitterness of their slavery in Egypt— slavery from which the Lord delivered them and brought them to the promised land.



Endive

The bitter herbs of the Bible were dandelion, endive, chicory, and some varieties of lettuce. (Basically, they were the edible weeds of the day). For Jesus on the night of His last Passover, the bitter herbs might also have been a reminder of the bitterness He would soon endure.

Conclusion

These Bible plants, hyssop and bitter herbs will grow in most American gardens. If you plant them or eat any of them, let them remind you of the plants that played a role in the last days of Jesus' earthly life. Let them remind you of the bitter suffering and death which the Son of God endured in order to secure for you the joys of heaven and everlasting life.

Resources

Bible Plants for American Gardens, Eleanor Anthony King
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07612a.htm>
<http://www.mediterraneangardensociety.org/plants/Capparis.spinosa.html>
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/3664/index.html>