

GRANT COUNTY CHURCH OF CHRIST

AGRICULTURE IN THE BIBLE

Israel's society remained basically agricultural throughout biblical times. Although cities and towns developed in Israel as early as the time of David and Solomon, both Old and New Testaments contain many references to agricultural customs and practices.

The Bible indicates that one of man's basic tasks was to "till and keep" the land (Genesis 2:15). Man was given by God the ability to be a gardener or farmer. Man's close relationship with the soil is also indicated by the similarity between two Hebrew words for man (adam) and earth (adamah).

Although Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob moved about within Palestine and were concerned primarily with looking after their flocks, they were also involved in farming. Isaac, for example, was instantly aware of the "smell of a field" on Esau's clothes. He prayed that Jacob might be blessed with "plenty of grain and wine" (Gen 27:27-28).

When the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan, they were largely confined to the heavily wooded hill country, while the Canaanites continued in the valleys and along the coast (Judges 1:27-33). The Israelites, therefore, began the long process of clearing the forests. The uplands of Ephraim and Judah as well as the land east of the Jordan River were gradually made suitable for cultivation.

With the expansion of Israel during the time of the United Kingdom under David and Solomon, agricultural activity prospered (1 Kings 4:25). Some agricultural products, such as wheat, olive oil, and honey, were even exported (Ezek 27:17). Certain kings, such as David (1 Chron 27:26-31) and Hezekiah (2 Chron 32:28), took a special interest in agricultural production, and none more so than Uzziah, who is described as one who "loved the soil" (2 Chron 26:10). This prosperity, however, was not enjoyed by everyone. Ahab's attempt to take over Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) is only one example of how the poor were exploited. The prophet Isaiah condemned those who "add field to field" (Isa 5:8).

The years of Israel's captivity in Babylon brought a considerable decline in agricultural activity. Much of the land was neglected, desolation was increased by the ravages of wild animals (2 Kings 17:25-27), and only the poor were left to till the land "as vinedressers and farmers" (2 Kings 25:12).

Some restoration of agriculture took place after the return from captivity, but some of the earlier problems persisted. In the prophet Haggai's time, God's corrective judgment had a noticeable effect on food production (Hag 1:11). And Nehemiah received complaints from the poor concerning the financial difficulties they were experiencing in keeping their farms going (Neh 5:11).

Agriculture was also important in New Testament times. Jesus made frequent reference to the land and its products in His teaching, indicating that He and His hearers were quite familiar with such matters. Matt 13, for example, contains four agricultural parables- the sower (vv. 1-23), the wheat and the tares (vv. 24-30,36-43), the mustard seed (vv. 31-32), and the treasure hidden in the field (v. 44). Other New Testament writers also refer to agricultural matters. The apostle Paul for example, spoke of reaping and sowing (Gal 6:7-10) and the cultivation of olive trees (Rom 11:17-24); and James referred to the farmer patiently waiting for the rain (James 5:7).

The Bible supplies two striking agricultural metaphors concerning the purposes of God. God Himself is twice described as a farmer. He is the "vinedresser" who tends the vine, which is both Christ and those who abide in Him (John 15:1-8); and He farms the field of His church, where He is working to produce a perfect harvest (1 Cor 2:7,9). The second picture is slightly different. It illustrates God's constant supply of rich and varied food for His people, especially in heaven. This idea is found both in the Old Testament prophets (Amos 9:13-15; Joel 2:18-19) and in John's vision of the New Jerusalem, where the tree of life produces 12 different monthly crops of fruit (Rev 22:2).

The traditional picture of Palestine is that of "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8,17). This view is supported elsewhere in the Bible, as in Deut 8:8: "A land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey."

Israel's festivals were closely associated with the agricultural year. Passover with unleavened bread was celebrated at the beginning of the barley harvest. This was followed 50 days later by the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost with the offering of the first fruits of the wheat harvest. The Feast of Tabernacles, or Ingathering, took place when the harvest was complete.

Israelite agriculture included the farming of the land and the rearing of animals. In the days of the patriarchs, livestock farming was the major activity; but as the Israelites settled in the land, the role of animals became less important. Herds and flocks were kept basically for their wealth and for food, although meat was much less important than it is in modern Western society. Most families also owned work animals, the ox being the most valuable and the donkey the most common. Neither horses nor camels were used much in agriculture. Horses were kept mostly for military use and camels for trading purposes.

The growing of crops in ancient Israel was no easy matter. Palestine's location between the Mediterranean Sea and the desert produced unpredictable rainfall. The growth of vegetation in some lowland areas, such as the Jordan River Valley and parts of the Plain of Sharon along the coast were so luxuriant that they contained mostly dense forests. Other areas, mainly in the east, were dry and barren, with stony terrain and only occasional rain. These were impossible to farm and unable to support a settled population. Even the areas that could be cultivated had their continual hazards, such as locusts, hail, desert storms, and invading armies.

The Israelite farmer well understood the truth of Gen 3:19: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread."