



WHAT IS MYRRH?

BY THE REV. W. SPIERS, M.A., F.G.S., F.R.M.S.



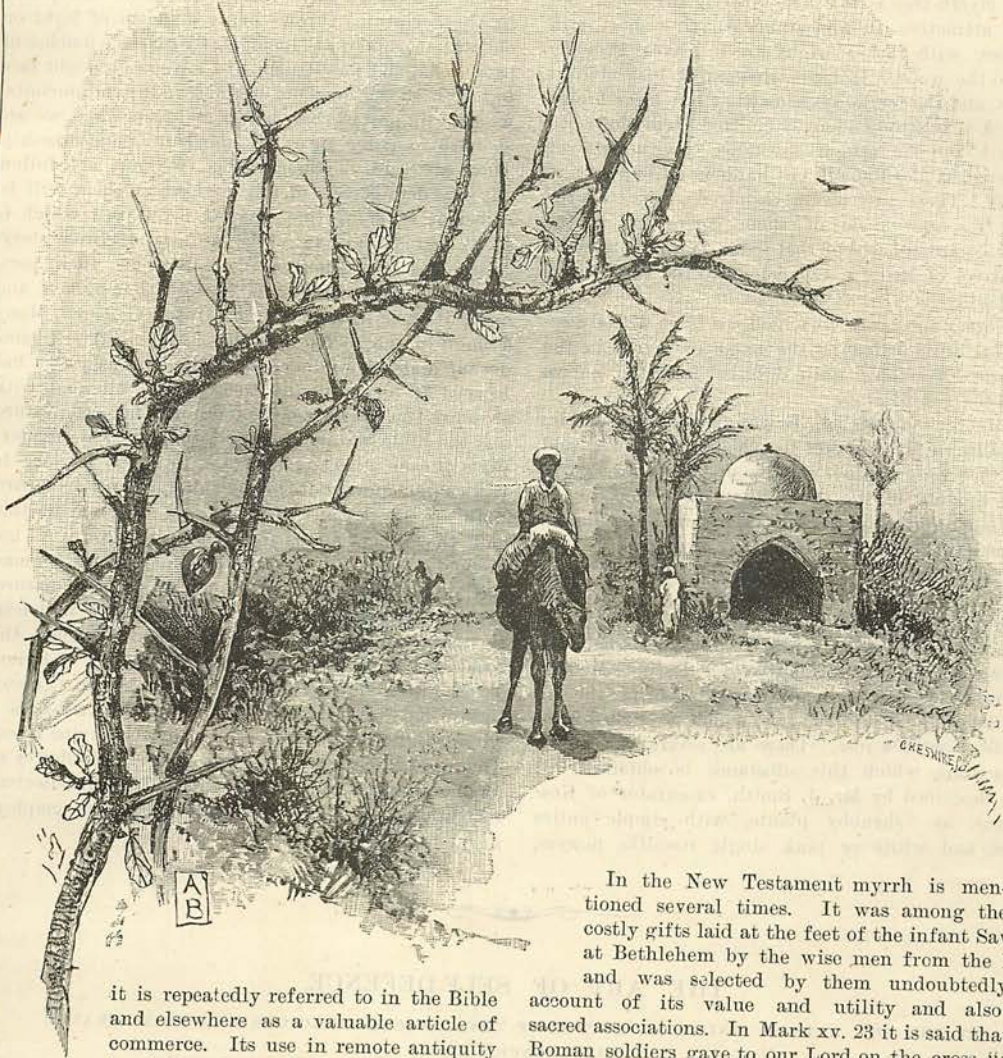
THE student of Scripture botany does not always find it easy to determine with absolute certainty what precise plant corresponds to the one denoted by the original Hebrew or Greek word used by the inspired writer. We have already found this to be the case in our previous papers on Bible plants. But in regard to the plant now under consideration no such difficulty is encountered. Both on account of its name and the familiarity of Easterns with it, the identification of this fragrant perfume and the plants which produce it is a matter about which there can be but little question.

The only caution that need be given by way of preventing confusion is that the reader should bear in

mind that in the two first occurrences of the word myrrh in the Authorised Version—viz., in Genesis xxxvii. 25 and xliii. 11—it is probably the produce of a species of rock-rose that is referred to, the Hebrew word being a different one from that which commonly denotes myrrh. The correction of this is made in the margin of the Revised Version, and the explanation of it is, of course, that the general term myrrh was occasionally applied to fragrant exudations from various plants.

The Hebrew *mōr*, the Æolic Greek *myrra*, the Latin *myrrha*, all signify the myrrh-tree known to modern botanists as *Balsamodendron*, and belonging to the natural order of *Amyridaceæ*.

From very early times myrrh has been celebrated as a perfume, and has been used not only in the making of incense, but also as a medicament. Consequently



it is repeatedly referred to in the Bible and elsewhere as a valuable article of commerce. Its use in remote antiquity is indicated in Exodus xxx. 22—25, where it is specified as one of the ingredients of the holy oil for anointing. "Moreover the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Take thou also unto thee the chief spices, of flowing myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet cinnamon half as much, even two hundred and fifty, and of sweet calamus two hundred and fifty, and of cassia five hundred, after the shekel of the sanctuary, and of olive oil an hin, and thou shalt make it an holy anointing oil, a perfume compounded after the art of the perfumer; it shall be an holy anointing oil."

In Esther ii. 12 its purifying qualities are suggested, for it was to be used on that account in the king's palace at Shushan.

In Psalm xlv. 8 the sweetness of its perfume is indicated; "All thy garments smell of myrrh and aloes and cassia." Another reference to its fragrance is found in Proverbs vii. 17.

In the New Testament myrrh is mentioned several times. It was among the costly gifts laid at the feet of the infant Saviour at Bethlehem by the wise men from the East, and was selected by them undoubtedly on account of its value and utility and also its sacred associations. In Mark xv. 23 it is said that the Roman soldiers gave to our Lord on the cross "wine mingled with myrrh," but "He received it not." St. Matthew, in relating the same circumstance, says it was "vinegar mingled with gall" that was offered. As there are several species of myrrh-tree, it is probable that this "gall" was myrrh of a rather acrid kind, or it may be that the word was used in its more popular or general sense. In the narrative of the Redeemer's interment, as related by St. John, Nicodemus is said to have brought "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred-pound weight." (St. John xix. 39.) This special use of myrrh seems to have been learned from the Egyptians, whose methods of embalming the dead are fully described by Herodotus.

Ancient authors agree in fixing upon Arabia as the original home of the *balsamodendron*. It is indigenous also to the opposite coast of Africa. It is not astonishing that it should find its way to Palestine, for Arabian merchants travelled in all directions with their merchandise, and Palestine was at the crossing

point of the old highways of commerce, besides being in itself an important centre of trade.

The myrrh-tree is low and scrubby in aspect, not at all attractive in appearance, having short, stiff branches, with rather bright green leaves, growing close to the wood. It bears clusters of insignificant flowers, and the fruits are somewhat like large brown peas. A very strong odour is emitted from the wood and bark, and the resinous substance, the "myrrh" of commerce, exudes like oil, but hardens on exposure to the air. There are several kindred species of the myrrh-tree, but none of them correspond to the aromatic garden herbs of that name, several of which are natives of Britain, and belong to the Umbelliferous plants.

The other substance to which we have already referred as being called by the name of myrrh in the Authorised Version is quite different from the one we have been considering.

Its Hebrew name is *lôt*. It was amongst the articles carried by the Ishmaelites to whom Joseph was sold when they were on their way from Gilead to Egypt, and it was one of the things that Jacob sent to the Egyptian ruler when his sons, along with Benjamin, returned to Egypt for the purchase of food.

The difference of name in the Hebrew shows conclusively that this substance could not have been the myrrh which has already been described, and this is made all the more certain by the fact that the *balsamodendron* was not a native of Palestine. Modern writers, as we have already stated, identify the *lôt* with the gum called *labdanum*, which is exuded from the *Cistus* or rock-rose. There are several species of *Cistus* from which this substance is obtained, all being described by Mr. J. Smith, ex-curator of Kew Gardens, as "shrubby plants, with simple entire leaves, and white or pink single rose-like flowers,

abounding in the rocky country of Gilead and other parts of Palestine."

The mention of these various perfumes and plants in the Scriptures throws many a gleam of light on old customs, and quite incidentally gives us touches of patriarchal and Palestinian life. We are brought face to face with the ancients in their industrial pursuits, we get glimpses of their habits and tastes, and we are enabled to enter into the spirit of their worship. These are lines of thought that we may not follow out into details, but merely to hint at them will be sufficient to show that no toil is in vain which is spent in inquiring into the minutiae of Bible story. Researches of a scientific character have their part, as well as those which have to do with language and antiquities, in illuminating the inspired page. Many a chord in the sacred text has been silent till some devout and open-minded traveller or naturalist has learned to touch it, and then it has vibrated with sweet and subtle harmonies unknown before. Nature and the Bible are not in opposition, but are counterparts of each other. They stand together, not face to face as in conflict, but side by side for mutual support. Both are revelations from Heaven, the one written and the other unwritten, and although it is not pretended that all the questionings of the human spirit can find an answer from the study of nature, yet when conducted reverently that study will lead to truth and to God. Thus Science becomes the handmaid of Faith, and Reason the ally of Religion. To the Christian the Bible will always be the "greater light," but Nature wisely and devoutly studied is a "lesser light," and is also ignited by the Divine Hand. Thus regarded, the study even of a simple flower or an obscure plant may become not only an intellectual recreation but also a profitable religious employment.

THE ART OF SELF-DEFENCE.

BY THE REV. ARTHUR FINLAYSON, AUTHOR OF "EVANESCENT PHILOSOPHIES," "CONSECRATED INFLUENCE," ETC.



HAVE you ever studied the art of self-defence?" said a young fellow to a man of magnificent physique and noble bearing.

The elder man looked at his questioner with a quiet smile, and then answered thoughtfully—

"Yes; I have both studied and practised it."

"Ah!" said the other eagerly. "Whose system did you adopt—Sutton's or Sayers'?"

"Solomon's," was the reply; "and as I have now been in training for some time on his principles, I can confidently recommend his system."

Somewhat abashed, the youth stammered out—

"Solomon's! And what is the special point of his system of training?"

"Briefly this," replied the other: "A soft answer turneth away wrath."

For a moment the young man felt an inclination to laugh, and looked at his friend anxiously, to see whether he was serious. But a glance at the accomplished athlete was enough; and soon a very different set of feelings came over the youth, as his muscular companion added, with solemn emphasis, "Try it!"

The recommendation is worthy of everyone's serious consideration. There must be times in the lives of all when we need a system of self-defence; and to go into training on Solomon's method will avert many a painful conflict. "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city." "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity;" and precisely because "the tongue can no man tame," so it is well to watch and discipline it constantly, lest by a single hasty utterance we commit ourselves, doing to ourselves more discredit with our own lips than all the