



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 1 | Number 1

Article 12

4-1-2000

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Skinner, Andrew C. "Autumn, Olives and The Atonement." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 1, no. 1 (2000). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol1/iss1/12>

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Autumn, Olives and The Atonement

Andrew C. Skinner

Autumn is a magnificent time of the year in the Holy Land for many reasons. The intense heat of summer begins to dissipate. Anticipation of change permeates the air. In a normal year, the first or “early” rains usually come in September or October and bring with them the promise of desperately needed, life-sustaining moisture which come from the “regular” rains that fall November through March. With the early rains also comes the season of the olive harvest. And it is this intense activity centering on the olive harvest and oil production that points our minds and hearts to Him who is symbolized by olive culture. The autumn season of harvest, no less than the spring season of Passover, is a graphic reminder of the truth declared by Nephi that all things given of God are a typifying of Christ (2 Ne. 11:4).

The cultivation of olive vineyards and the production of olive oil have a long and honorable history in the Holy Land among all groups of Abraham’s posterity. In ancient times, olive trees and olive oil played a significant role in Israel’s daily life. (In more modern times, the same could also be said of Ishmael’s posterity.) Evidence indicates that olive trees were even more abundant in the Holy Land in Jesus’ day than today¹. The olive tree acted as both a religious and a national symbol for the people of Israel, and its fruit became one of the most important domestic and exported products in the biblical period. In Old Testament times, most houses and virtually every village had a small oil press to supply families with the necessities of life deriving from olive cultivation. By New Testament times stone olive crushers and lever presses were also quite plentiful throughout the land.

In ancient Israel, the olive tree was supreme among all others, as is reflected in scripture. First mentioned in connection with the great flood, the dove released by Noah is described as returning to the ark with an olive leaf in her mouth, signifying that the waters were abating (Gen. 8:11). Thus, by the appearance together of these two symbolic objects, the dove and olive leaf, the promise of continuing life on earth and peace with Deity were assured. Later in the Pentateuch, olive trees are mentioned in the early descriptions of Canaan, signifying both that the land was a holy land of promise given by Deity to Israel, and that the olive tree itself was a gift from God.

And it shall be, when the Lord thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not,

And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full (Deut. 6:10-11).

In the Temple built by Solomon, the cherubim placed within the Holy of Holies were made of olive wood (1 Kgs. 6:23). This was the very seat of God's presence, the place of his earthly dwelling, and the connection between Deity and the olive tree surely did not go unnoticed. In both the Tabernacle and the Temple, only "pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause the lamp to burn always" (Ex. 27:20) was permitted to be used. Furthermore, the entrance or doors to the inner sanctuary of the Temple were constructed of olive wood, as were the jambs to the entrance of the main hall of God's house (1 Kgs. 6:31-33). Olive branches were also used in the construction of booths for people to dwell during the mandated Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8:14-15).

Jeremiah 11:16 indicates that even Israel itself was called by Jehovah “a green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit.” Later rabbinic commentary expounded on this: “Israel was called ‘an olive tree, leafy and fair’ because they [Israel] shed light on all” (*Shmot Raba* 36,1).² This imagery undoubtedly came from the coloration of the olive leaf itself (as well as the fact that the oil was burned for light).

The underside of the olive leaf is covered with miniature whitish scales, while its upper side is dark green. This contrast of shades produces a unique silvery sheen when the wind rustles the leaves of the olive tree. The outer branches, moving in the breeze, expose the silver-colored underside of their leaves, in contrast to the dark green top side of the leaves of the motionless inner branches. These silver clouds of light seem to leap from tree to tree as the wind stirs the leaves. olive tree after olive tree.³

It is not simple happenstance that when Gideon’s youngest son, Jotham, climbed Mount Gerizim and proclaimed a parable to the citizens of Shechem, the olive tree was given pride of place.

And when they told it to Jotham, he went and stood in the top of mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried, and said unto them, Hearken unto me, ye men of Shechem, that God may hearken unto you.

The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us.

But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honor God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? (Judges 9:7-9)

As reflected in this passage, one of the reasons the olive tree was foremost among all others was because it was used to worship God as well as to sustain man. The olive tree and its oil were unequivocally regarded as one of the necessities of life. In fact, nothing from the olive tree went unused in the daily life of Israel. The oil from the fruit (the olives) was used for cooking, lighting, medicine, lubrication, and anointing. Those olives not crushed and pressed were pickled in brine and spices, and then eaten. The wood of the olive tree was not only used in constructing buildings, but also in making furniture, tools, and carvings, and even in crafting the shepherd's crook or staff. In turn, one may truly say that the olive tree was (and continues to be) a staff of life in the Middle East.

Oil Production

Techniques of olive oil production in more modern times suggest the way olives were cultivated, harvested, and processed in ancient times. Olive trees do not mature quickly, and the best yields come only after twelve or more years of patient care—a circumstance that presupposes a certain degree of settlement and peace. But with only a little attention given, an adult olive tree will continue to produce heavily (usually every other year) for many hundreds of years. Yield from a good tree was expected to be anywhere from ten to fifteen gallons of oil each season.⁴

Interestingly, olive trees do not produce the best yields if they are given too much water during the year. Olive trees are hardy and survive—sometimes even thrive—under tremendous stress. Severe frost is harmful to them, but they can withstand long and intense periods of drought. Though it might sound effusive to say so, it is nonetheless true that when one sees an ancient olive tree, gnarled and bent and

weather beaten, one feels a certain sense of reverence in the presence of a living thing that has endured so much travail in a hard land. Reputable studies have shown some of the olive trees on the Mount of Olives and in the Garden of Gethsemane to be between 1,800 and 2,300 years old.⁵

Anciently, oil production was a significant and time-consuming undertaking. It consisted of six basic steps or procedures.

1. **Harvesting** the olives, of course leaving some for the poor, the fatherless, the widow, or the sojourner as specifically commanded in scripture (Deut 24:19-21; Leviticus 19:9-10; Ruth 2:2-3). Olives in ancient times were harvested during the period from September to late October, right after the first rains—which signaled the time for the harvest to begin (as they still do according to growers in the Holy Land today). In fact, the cycle of the farming year is portrayed in one of the oldest, non-biblical, Hebrew inscriptions from the Holy Land, which dates to about the time of King Solomon (tenth century B.C.). It is called the Gezer Calendar and bears the resemblance of a child’s ditty to help one remember the months of the agricultural year (similar to our own “Thirty days hath September . . .”). It begins with the olive harvest:

His two months are (olive) harvest,
His two months are planting (grain),
His two months are late planting;
His month is hoeing up of flax,
His month is harvest of barley,
His month is harvest and *feasting*;
His two months are vine-tending,
His month is summer fruit.⁶

2. **Separating** the olives into two groups—those for pickling and those for crushing.

3. **Crushing** the olives singled out to produce oil so as to make them into a pasty, oily, mash or pulp—pits and all. In Old Testament times, the crushing was usually done either through the use of a millstone, or by pounding from human feet in a rock-hewn press, even a wine-press (Deut. 33:24; Micah 6:15). By New Testament times, crushing was accomplished in a specially designed, carved rock basin called a *yam*. A crushing wheel made of stone was fitted snugly inside the stone basin and was either pushed around the interior of the basin by a strong man or pulled around by a beast of burden.

4. **Gathering** up the crushed pulp from the *yam* and placing it into several flat, round, woven baskets. The baskets, usually about two feet in diameter and three to four inches high, were then stacked, two or three at a time, under one of two traditional kinds of presses—either a lever press or a screw press. The lever press consisted of a long heavy wooden beam with huge stone weights attached to the opposite end of the beam from where the woven baskets were placed. Use of the lever press can be dated to the early Iron Age period (10th century B.C.). However, the screw press is not known to have been used until the late Hellenistic period (first century BC - first century AD).

5. **Pressing** the olive pulp. When pressure was applied to the olive mash located in the woven baskets stacked under the press, the oil then oozed out of the baskets and ran down a shallow channel into a collection pit. To facilitate the flow of the oil, hot water could be poured over the baskets being squeezed. Unlike the production process involving modern hydraulic presses, the pressing procedure in ancient times

took many hours, even days, with pressure constantly having to be increased.

6. **Refining** the oil by allowing it to sit for several days in the collection pit before using it. When the oil flowed into the collection basin, it actually consisted of two liquids: the pure olive oil and a heavier, watery, sediment-filled liquid called the “dregs.” When the two liquids were allowed to set up or settle, the pure oil rose to the top of the collection pit and was either skimmed off by hand or allowed to spill over into another collecting vat where the settling process was repeated, further refining the oil.

Symbolism

While olive cultivation and oil production inform our understanding of daily life and religious worship in biblical times, there is another aspect of olive culture which gives pause for deeper reflection on the meaning of the olive culture for us today. As Latter-day Saints know, all things testify of the Savior (Moses 6:63). And this is nowhere better demonstrated (or even as well for that matter) than with the cultivation of olive trees and the process of olive oil production. We are taught powerful and lasting lessons about the Savior’s life and ministry. For the olive tree and its products, especially the pure oil, are the great symbols of Jesus the Messiah and his Atonement! And when we witness priesthood holders anointing family members and friends, the sick and afflicted, and even those who worship in temples of the Most High, we know to whom those anointings point, and to whom the olive oil points, and to whom the very olive trees point. Anyone who has been in the Holy Land during autumn will likely never forget the unmistakable connections between olives and the Savior. The following are some of the symbolic relationships:

1. Olives are one of the seven native fruits indigenous to the Holy Land (Deut. 8:8), just as Jesus was a native of the Holy Land. The ancient rabbis likened Judah—the lineage of Jesus—unto the olive tree (Babylonian Talmud, Menahoth, 53b).

2. At least one strand of Jewish tradition identifies the tree of life as the olive tree,⁷ just as the Book of Mormon equates Jesus Christ with the tree of life and identifies his Atonement as the reality behind the symbol of the *fruit* of the tree of life in Lehi’s dream (1 Ne. 11:21-22, 25-33).

3. Just as Jewish tradition consistently refers to the olive tree as the tree of *light* (*Shmot Raba* 36,1) and a symbol of “light to the world” (*Tankhuma Tzave* 5,1), so too Jesus is *the* “Light of the World” (John 1:4-5, 8: 12, 9:5, D&C 11:28). “The *menorah* was lit with ‘pure oil of pounded olives’—‘not with walnut oil or radish [seed] oil, but only with olive oil which is **a light unto the world.**’ However, it is not only the olive oil which gives forth light, but also the olive tree itself.”⁸ Among eastern Jews today, olive oil is still the only oil permitted for the eternal lamp in the synagogue. Anciently, Rabbi Tarfon had similarly declared that only pure olive oil could be used for the Sabbath lamps (Mishnah, *Shabbat* 26a).⁹

4. Just as the branches that bear the olives have been regarded from earliest times as a universal symbol of peace, so too Jesus is the Prince of Peace whose recognition will someday be universal (Romans 14:11). This is the message of Doctrine and Covenants 88, which “was designated by the Prophet as the ‘olive leaf . . . plucked from the Tree of Paradise, the Lord’s message of peace to us.’” (See D&C 88 heading.)

5. Just as olives are best picked individually so as not to damage the tree (ideally the olives are not to be stripped from the branches!), so too Christ’s love is individual. If one uses

alternative methods of harvesting the olives, such as stripping the branches or beating the tree (Deut. 24:20) in order to finish the harvest more quickly, the tree may be damaged¹⁰. As with olives, so too with souls; it takes time and effort on an individual basis to effectively harvest both. But even the process of “beating” the tree is itself a symbol of the atoning act of the Savior (Isaiah 53:4-5), and perhaps that is why it is permitted in the scriptures as a harvesting technique.

6. One of the places Jesus most often visited in Jerusalem was the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:2). It was the place he went with his disciples during the last hours of his life. The name Gethsemane is a contraction of two Hebrew words (*gath* and *shemen*) and literally means “oil press”—or, practically speaking, *olive* oil press since that is the kind of oil that was produced in Gethsemane, which sits at the base of the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39). The connection between the name of the place Jesus went often, what was done there agriculturally, and what he would ultimately do there in the last hours of his mortal life is inescapable.

7. Just as olives were harvested and then bruised and crushed in the *yam*, and the life-fluid of the olives was pressed out under intense pressure in the place called “the oil press,” so too the goodness and perfection of Jesus’ life was “harvested” in Gethsemane. There *he* was “bruised” (Isaiah 53:5), and there *his* life-fluid, his blood, was pressed out by the crushing weight of sin and the extreme pressure of agony in the garden of the “oil press” (Mark 14:33-35; Luke 22:44).

8. Just as the actual bitter taste of the natural olive pulp is removed or “pressed out” with the pressing process (olives straight from the tree are exquisitely bitter), and the remaining oil actually retains a kind of sweet flavor, so too the bitterness of mortal life, brought on by both sin and the other effects of the Fall of Adam, was removed or “pressed out” by Christ’s

Atonement (D&C 19:16-19). As a result of the Atonement both physical death and life beyond the grave become sweet (D&C 42:46). For example, nothing was so “sweet” to Alma as his joy over being redeemed through the Atonement of Christ (Alma 36:19-21).

9. Just as the first hues or color-tones of the oil from the best olives initially run red in the crusher and under the press, so too the perspiration of the best, finest, purest being on earth turned red as he began to bleed from every pore (Luke 22:44). Pure, fresh olive oil is the perfect symbol of Christ’s blood which heals our wounds caused by sin, sickness, and death. Those who have been privileged enough to witness a first pressing of the season, when the oil initially flows over the limestone channel on its way to the collection vat, can testify that the color indeed runs red initially—a truly arresting, even chilling, sight. Such imagery turns our thoughts not just to the Savior’s first coming, but also to his Second Coming as taught in the scriptures:

And it shall be said: Who is this that cometh down from God in heaven with dyed garments; yea, from the regions which are not known, clothed in his glorious apparel, traveling in the greatness of his strength?

And he shall say: I am he who spake in righteousness, mighty to save.

And the Lord shall be red in his apparel, and his garments like him that treadeth in the wine-vat. . . .

And his voice shall be heard: I have trodden the wine-press alone, and have brought judgment upon all people; and none were with me (D&C 133:46-48, 50).

The connection in ancient times between oil pressing and ancient wine presses was a real one. Wine presses were sometimes used as oil presses to crush olives when they were

trodden out with the feet (Micah 6:15), and thus were regarded as interchangeable.

10. Just as the pressure on the olives under the press became more intense with each passing second, and thus resulted in the olives exuding more of their oil as more pressure was applied, so too the pressure on the Savior in the Garden became more intense over time and put him under greater and greater stress the longer he was in the place called the “oil press” (Luke 22:39-44; Matt. 26:36-45).

11. Just as pure olive oil was used as a great healing agent for the physical body in the ancient world (a concept that the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches in a profound way [see Luke 10:34]), so too the Atonement—the product of the “pressing” process in Gethsemane—is *the* greatest healing agent in all the universe, “worlds without number” (D&C 76:42-43). Christ is truly the “balm of Gilead.”

12. Just as the finished product of the olive-pressing process yields the purest and brightest burning of the vegetable oils (a fact known in ancient Israel—Ex. 27:20), so too the pressing process in Gethsemane involved the purest and brightest, even brightest-burning (in terms of eternal glory) of the Father’s children.

13. Just as the refined product of bruised, crushed, and pressed olives, i.e. *pure* olive oil, is set apart to consecrate the sick in order to foster healing, so too the purest of God’s children was consecrated and set apart in premortality to be bruised, crushed, and pressed for our “sicknesses” and “pains” as well as our sins (Alma 7:11-12) so that we can be healed on the inside as well as the outside.

14. Just as pure olive oil was used in the temple in ancient times for anointing (Lev. 8:6-12), so it is similarly used in the Lord’s temples—in those buildings which teach us the most about *the* “Anointed One.” Every aspect of LDS temple

worship ultimately centers on, is grounded in, and points us to the Savior and his Atonement.

15. In ancient times, Israel anointed her prophets, priests, and kings with olive oil (see as examples Exodus 30:30; 2 Samuel 2:4; 1 Kings 19:16). This was done as a type and foreshadowing of *the* Anointed One to come (Hebrew, *mashiach* or “Messiah”), who was also the true Prophet, Priest, and King of all eternity—as testified of in song (“I know that my Redeemer lives. . . . He lives, my Prophet, Priest, and King,” *Hymns*, 136). Jesus was anointed to be the Redeemer (D&C 138:42).

16. Just as Deuteronomy 21:23 foreshadowed the death of the Messiah upon a “tree,” so too history and geography (unlike art) teach that Roman crucifixion crosses in Palestine were often solidly rooted olive trees with their excess branches removed, and a crossbar (Latin, *patibulum*) attached. This is the image presented by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians on the merits and mercies of Christ (Gal. 3:13); ironically he describes Jesus—who is symbolized by the olive tree—as being crucified *on* an olive tree.¹¹

17. In ancient times, olive oil was kept in a horn, the well-recognized and suitable repository for the anointing agent. “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam. 16:13). In ancient Israel anointing with olive oil was linked to the Messiah. And the Hebrew idiom, “horn of salvation,” signified the Messiah’s great power to judge and save (1 Sam. 2: 10; 2 Sam. 22:3; Psalm 18:2, and Psalm 132:17). So too Jesus is symbolized by the “horn”—which represents his power. We note what Zacharias said about the Messiah at the time his own son, John the Baptist, was born:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people.

And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (Luke 1:68-69).

18. Just as we, like the ancients, cannot anoint and consecrate ourselves with olive oil in order to perform ordinances on ourselves (we can only anoint and consecrate others), so too only another, the Anointed One, could make an infinite and eternal atonement for us (Alma 34:9-15). As we serve others by anointing them, we imitate the Messiah, who served *not* himself by consecrating his life, but, rather, served us and our needs.

19. Just as the prophets Zenos and Jacob (like Paul in Romans) symbolized the scattering and gathering of Israel through the image of the tame and wild olive trees, so the Book of Mormon teaches that the actual scatterer and gatherer of Israel is Jesus Christ himself, “and all the people who are of the house of Israel, will *I* gather in, saith the Lord, according to the words of the prophet Zenos” (1 Ne. 19:16, emphasis added). Israel is gathered first and foremost to the Person of Jesus Christ.

20. Just as putting “oil in the lamp” was a common, everyday necessity in the ancient world, so too “oil in the lamp” has become a powerful metaphor signifying faithfulness and readiness for the time of the Anointed One’s Second Coming (Matthew 25:1-13). “Wherefore, be faithful, praying always, having your lamps trimmed and burning, and oil with you, that you may be ready at the coming of the Bridegroom” (D&C 33:17; 45:56-57). Metaphorically, we must constantly strive to burn as brightly as though we were vessels containing pure olive oil.

Conclusion

As those who have lived in or visited the Holy Land know, a person cannot escape the image of the olive tree. Olive vineyards and ancient olive presses seem to be everywhere, and one's heart and mind become acutely attuned to their existence. Especially after witnessing an autumn olive harvest, some of us will never look at olive trees the same way again. We will never regard them as we might have in the past, never view them as being common or an ordinary part of the landscape.

Olive trees are not ordinary; they are extraordinary in an extraordinary land. They are part of the landscape of belief. It is not by accident that we anoint those seeking a blessing with olive oil. Olive trees and the oil derived from them are the most powerful and plentiful symbols in the Holy Land of Jesus Christ—the master healer, one who was born into a land with abundant reminders of his divinity. Olive trees are witnesses of his and his Father's love. Just as olive trees and olive oil were regarded as gifts from God (Deut. 6:10-11; 11:14), so too we realize that the Savior is our greatest gift from God (John 3:16). Just as the olive tree and olive oil sustained life, so the Savior sustains us. In the place called the “(olive) oil-press,” Gethsemane, the Savior became like the olive.

Notes

1. At least two major episodes in the history of the Holy Land witnessed the wholesale destruction of olive trees—from which the region never fully recovered. The first occurred during the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66-70) when the Roman legions cut down trees all around Jerusalem to fuel the fires which burned the city and destroyed the temple. The second was the period of the so-called “tree-tax” imposed

by the Ottoman Empire (A.D 1517-1917) in Palestine.

2. Quoted in Nogah Hareuveni, *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage*, trans. Helen Frenkley (Kiryat Ono, Israel: Neot Kedumim, 1981), 139.

3. *Ibid.*, 139.

4. John C. Trevor, "Olive Tree," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed., George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:592, 596.

5. The following note comes from "Gethsemane's Ancient Olive Trees," *Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 40, No. 2 (May, 1977):50. "Tour guides are inveterate romantics so it is not surprising that the guides to Gethsemane maintain that its grove of olive trees sheltered Christ. They may, in fact, be right. Carbon-14 tests on roots from the trees show that they are 2,300 years old. Such dating is notoriously flexible, but the antiquity of the trees is also supported by Prof. Shimon Lavi, director of the Orchard Department of the Volcani Institute, who estimates that they are between 1600 and 1800 years old, but possibly more."

6. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed., James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320.

7. Louis Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947), 1:93, 2:119. See also the apocryphal writing *Apocalypse of Moses* 9, 12 where the tree of life is associated with the olive tree.

8. Hareuveni, 134. Bolded words appear in the quotation.

9. "Oil," eds., R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 509.

10. In speaking with "old-timers" in the Holy Land today who know olives, they almost unanimously and emphatically say that the tree should *not* be beaten.

11. Research collected by the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem, Israel, and available in their brochure describing their biblical gardens.