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Locusts

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“THE same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.” Matt. 3:4. “Did John really eat locusts?” is an enquiry one often faces. There seems to be an impression here in America that locusts are not edible, so that the gospel narrative has had to be explained and interpreted in order to meet this difficulty. The common interpretation is to the effect that Palestine produces a kind of bean, called the locust, and it was this bean, together with honey, which furnished the prophet’s sustenance. Here, however, as is so often the case, the Scripture means exactly what it says.

In the first place, the locust is recognized by the Levitical code as lawful food. Compare Lev. 11:21: “These may ye eat of every creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth . . . the locust after his kind.”

Further evidence that John actually ate the insect and not some hypothetical bean is the fact that the locust is eaten today in large quantities, and whenever there is a locust visitation and for many months afterwards, baskets of locusts, previously boiled and dried, may be seen for sale all through the bazaars of Arabia. The Arab, in matters of eating and drinking, follows the Jewish law, and the locust therefore comes under the list of “things ye may eat.” In truth, it is not unpalatable and tastes rather like a chestnut.

The Bible is full of references to the locust, from the time when (Exod. 10:15) “they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened, and they did eat every herb of the land,” to the time when in Rev. 9:7 occurs the fine passage “And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle. . . . Their teeth were as the teeth of lions. . . . The sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle.”

The Bible’s classic on the subject, however, occurs in the Book of Joel, where in Chapters 1 and 2, a plague of locusts is described as

a ruthless, invading army. The imagery is as perfect as it is accurate, while the language is inimitable.

It was in March, 1914, that I first witnessed a plague of locusts. Early in the afternoon we suddenly noticed that the light was hazy, and looking up we were astonished to notice what seemed to be heavy dust clouds. Slowly these dust clouds approached us and resolved themselves into myriads of locusts. "The sound of their wings was (truly) as the sounds of chariots and of many horses running to battle." Then they began to settle down to earth and this process reminded me of nothing so much as the falling of brown leaves in the autumn. The watery, hazy light, caused by these clouds of insects, only heightened the illusion. My big sheep dog became very much excited and chased and barked at groups of settling locusts until he wore himself out. As the creatures settled, the town got busy and people were out by the hundred collecting the insects and stuffing them into sacks. The locusts, tired from their long flight, and heavy with eggs, were comparatively easy to catch. Great quantities of them fell into the sea, where they were gathered in by small armies of men and boys who waded out to their limit for the purpose. Even boats were requisitioned, and by nightfall people were busy boiling and salting their harvest of the skies, preparatory to drying it next day.

There was another section of the population that was just as busy but in a different way. The locusts were threatening the demolition of the city's precious gardens and the owners of these latter were busy with long sticks driving the invaders on to new territory. In addition, the beating of drums and tin cans was indulged in. This practice is supposed to keep the locusts from settling, but I was unable to satisfy myself that it is really efficacious. However, the tradition of the ages is behind the custom and who shall challenge its value?

This was the first woe and it passed quickly. The real business of the locusts was egg-laying and this they proceeded to do all over the surrounding desert, and having performed this duty, disappeared. Some say that, having laid their eggs, the locusts soon die, but if this is true, it seems strange that they do not die right there on the spot, but go away in swarms, just as they come. In connection with the eggs, there is a tradition which I heard referred to many times during those days. The story goes that a locust once fell into the hands of Mohammed, who noticed inscribed on its wings the words "We are the host of Allah, the Most Mighty, and we have 99 eggs, and had the hundredth remained to us, we should have eaten the world with all that is in it." Certain it is that the Arab believes that the locust lays exactly 99 eggs, though of course no one ever troubles to count to see for himself. The spirit of research is lacking in the Arab mentality. As a matter of fact, I believe the number is approximately one hundred eggs. There is a similar superstition about the scorpion, which teaches that the scorpion is blind, for if it were not blind, it would be able to see men and attack them, and mankind would soon become extinct. Thus their reasoning! If they would take the trouble to look, they would find that the Kuwait scorpion has more eyes than they, in the proportion

of three to two, and that moreover he is not aggressive towards man but invariably endeavors to flee his presence. I have often used this superstition in my dispensary services to illustrate the fact that the Arab is perfectly ready to accept fable on the mere say so of any babbler, but yet when the truth is set before them, they put it aside with indifference or contempt. Before leaving this subject of the locust in Mohammedan tradition, it is to be observed that the insect is not mentioned in the Koran.

Meanwhile we forgot all about the locusts, but "God was giving the increase," and some five or six weeks after the invading flight, we suddenly became aware of the fact that the ground under our feet was literally alive. A mighty army of tiny wingless locusts was marching into the city. The eggs had hatched out. As one looked out over the desert, the whole landscape was one shimmering yellowish green mass. It was then that I began to appreciate the Book of Joel. The oncoming hordes were animated by one purpose—they were all moving in one definite direction. Each locust kept his own place (Joel 2:7). Nothing stopped them; if they came to a wall, they climbed straight up it. They swarmed in at doors and windows (Joel 2:9), and finding their further progress barred, they settled under curtains and clothing.

These immature locusts have nothing to commend them and are not even good to eat. They made life wellnigh unendurable and one learned anew the meaning of the plague of locusts in Exodus 10. Sheikh Mubarek was in camp out in the desert, but the locusts drove him back into town. He told me that they were rapidly ruining the tents, eating great holes in them in no time. They crawled into the cooking pots and spoiled the food; they crawled into the water jars the minute they were left uncovered and fouled the water. They worried the horses and camels as they stood tethered by their picketing ropes and hobbles. There was nothing for it but to break camp and come home.

The owners of gardens had an anxious time and sought to stay the ravages of the enemy by putting up fences of tin and glazed paper. This scheme worked well and copies of "The Illustrated London News" and "The Sphere" were in high demand. The shop keepers in the bazaar were the next community to feel the power of the locust. Calicoes and piece goods, umbrellas and handkerchiefs, were all welcome food to the hungry and rapidly growing immigrants, so that much glazed paper and eternal vigilance were the price of security.

They fell into open wells and cisterns by the thousand and the stench of the dead was fearful. They choked up our hospital in spite of all we could do and to this day we find their shrivelled remains in the garrets, and the stains of their body juices in door jambs and window sashes are still to be seen. All night long one could hear their hop, hop, plump, and one learned to loathe it for fear a locust should settle on one's face or pillow. Whenever touched, the creatures exuded from their mouths a horrible, black, viscous substance and these revolting stains mocked the efforts of the laundryman through many washings.

For weeks this sort of thing went on, the locusts passing through their various moults or change of skins. Larger and larger grew the insects and more and more voracious. They had long since eaten up everything green. Trees were stripped bare. Their very bark was bitten off. Compare Joel 1:7 "He hath laid my vine waste and barked my fig tree; he hath made it bare and cast it away; the branches thereof are made white." There was no grass left in the desert, usually at that time, April, covered with green. Cattle and sheep grew thin. Camels languished. Compare Joel 1:18 "How do the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed, because they have no pasture."

The locusts now fell back upon cannibalism and everywhere one would see a weaker locust fall a prey to a stronger one, who would come up alongside and calmly bite off a leg or part of the body,



IN THE BAZAARS OF KUWEIT.

and as soon as the weaker member of the party went down, a whole gang of stronger fellows would set on him and in an incredibly short time, there would be nothing left of the victim. An especially gruesome story was to the effect that an unattended baby was attacked by a horde of these voracious creatures, and so badly bitten that it died. There is no reason whatever to doubt this story, in fact, the incident or accident probably occurred several times.

The only time in the twenty-four hours when there was any lull at all in the activities of the enemy was at night. Then it was that the people would go along the roofs and parapets of their houses and,

with kerosene torches, burn off the locusts that were massed three and four deep in huge swarms at eaves and corners.

Gradually, the effect of the constant attrition due to man's energy and their own cannibalism began to make itself felt. The hordes were diminishing, though our real deliverance was to come in a way that none of us anticipated. A gale of wind suddenly sprang up from the southeast. This was too much for the locusts, whose wings, still far from maturity, were useless appendages. Headlong they were whirled, at sixty miles an hour, and by whole battalions were flung into the sea. Hour after hour I watched the unending procession of helpless insects being blown over the bluff which separates our hospital front from the sea, and how vividly I recalled the passage in Exodus 10:19 "The Lord turned a mighty strong west wind, which took away the locusts, and cast them into the Red Sea; there remained not one locust in all the coasts of Egypt." The last part of the sentence does not quite represent the situation that obtained in Kuwait when the gale subsided, but the few that remained were the merest remnant which had been fortunate enough to be in sheltered hiding throughout the storm. Their dead comrades, when the tide went out, could be seen in a six-foot-wide swath, extending along the beach for miles.

It was, indeed, a time for thanksgiving, though the Arabs took the new state of affairs calmly, as always. "Destiny! Destiny! Thanks be to Allah! Praise be to Allah in the highest! There is no god but Allah!" I say "calmly" for there was never a trace of emotion on the faces of those who uttered these solemn, resonant phrases. No one can fail to be struck by the Arab's simple faith in the unerring decrees of Allah.

Of the surviving remnant of locusts, many grew to maturity, emerging from the final moult with fully developed wings. At the time of leaving the old skin, the wings are folded upon themselves, and it is extremely interesting to watch them slowly open out and dry. The perfect insect is really a beautiful specimen of nature's art, with its exquisite coloring and transparency of wing, but in spite of that, no one was sorry when the now adult locusts took to their wings and left us.

In 1915 we had a second visitation from these Huns of the sky, when the experiences of the previous year were more or less repeated. We saw them no more until, I think, 1918, when a few outposts of the main army passed through. The main army, fortunately for us, was busy elsewhere.

To most of us Westerners, a plague of locusts is something to see, and an experience which, once it is over, would not be willingly foregone. Moreover, it is one more of those wonderful links in the chain which connect Bible Lands with the Bible and make us understand, ever better and better, The Land and The Book.