Are Orchids Mentioned in the Bible?

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Introduction

Only 100–130 plants are mentioned in the Bible, some in general terms such as “thorns,” “thistles,” “briars”, “grass,” and similar vegetation (Blackman, 1983; Felix, 1974a; Musselman, 2005; Souvay, no date). Others are mentioned by specific names such as “shoshana” (which has been interpreted to mean “lily,” but in present day Hebrew is used for “rose” as is the term “vered”), “shoshanat ha’amakim” (identified as *Lilium candidum*), “havazelet ha-Sahron” (*Pancratum maritimum*) and grape vines. There are over 525 references to trees in the Bible of which 22 can be recognized at present (Musselman, 2003). They include cedars of Lebanon, carobs, apples, almonds, date palms, figs and others (Musselman, 2003). Of these the date palm, fig, olive, pomegranate and tamarisk are also mentioned in the Koran (Musselman, 2003). Some biblical plant names have been applied to several species at present. An example of this is “lily” which may be a red tulip (*Tulipa*), anemone, white madonna lily (*Lilium candidum*), hyacinth (*Hyacinthus orientalis*) and crocus (the genus *Crocus*; Hepper, no date). Orchids are most probably not mentioned in the Bible. However, various biblical scholars of both the new and old testaments have claimed that some plants which are mentioned in the Bible are orchids.

One book about the plants of the Bible does not even mention orchids (Henslow, 1906). Another has stated that “although there are 70 kinds of orchids native to the Holy Land, it is not probable that Jesus’ listeners were at all acquainted with their dust-like seeds. These apparent dust motes probably would not have been recognized as seeds” (Moldenke and Moldenke, 1952; for physical characteristics of orchid seeds see Arditti and Abdul Ghani, 2000). The view of an American orchid expert (Ames, 1942) is that “there is not any indication of the use of orchids by the Hebrews either for medicine or decorations. This is not strange because the country of the Bible people was not an orchid country.” Still, a number of writers have suggested that other plants, even if they are referred to by their own names, are Orchidaceous in nature (Chatin, 1868; Sugaya, 1999; for reviews see Lawler, 1984). The logic behind these suggestions is neither obvious nor clear. It is actually strained and even contrived. Two of the attributions seem to be due to misunderstandings.

Aaron’s and Moses’ Staffs

*Orchis purpurea* Huds (Figs. 3-1C and 3-2C) has ovoid tubers and numerous short and thick roots. It has three to six leaves which are oblong or oblong-lanceolate, bright, grey-green, glabrous and shiny. They are 10–22 cm long and 2–5 cm wide. The inflorescence is robust, round, solid, 20–40 cm and 60–90 cm tall. Flowers are numerous, unscented, 15–20 mm in size, with a dark red, helmet like dorsal sepal and a pale reddish labellum with darker spots. This widely distributed species is found in the British Isles, Bulgaria, Caucasus, Czech Republic, Crimea, Denmark, Egypt, France, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, probably Jordan, Netherlands,