The History of the Date through the Ages in the Holy Land

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Introduction
The cultivated date (Phoenix dactylifera L.) has existed in the Holy Land at least since the Neolithic Age (6000-4000 B.C.), perhaps even before, when ancient man first took to sedentary life in Jericho, all along the banks of the Jordan and in the neighbourhood of the Dead Sea.

Because of their superior fruit, date palms of the Jordan Valley were famous throughout the length and breadth of the countries of this palm. There were palms along the coast as well, less important in that respect but tremendously impressive in their towering grandeur. The northern littoral of the Holy Land was known as Phoenicia, and it may be that we have here the origin of the early name of the date in Greek, 'phoenix.' Pliny, in his Natural History (XIII, IX, 42), theorizes that 'phoenix' comes from the name of a fabled bird of Egypt—according to Herodotus, it is a bird of Arabia, but, according to Philostratus, a bird of India. The legendary phoenix cremated itself, yet lived on, or a second one arose from its ashes: exactly as a palm goes on growing after it is scorched on the outside or puts forth shoots at its base, perpetuating the date culture. The date palm is, indeed, regarded as a symbol of immortality, but it is a matter of speculation whether the bird was named for the tree or the tree for the bird. At all events, for the ancient Greeks and Romans, this northern stretch of Palestine was the 'Land of the Date,' Phoenicia.

Origin
The source of the cultivated date is still unknown: some say northeast Africa; others say Asia—in Iraq and India, with its centre on the Persian Gulf; others, again, the Arabian Peninsula. Vavilov writes: "The origin of the date is in the mountains of northeast Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea," whence it crossed to Egypt, North Africa, Israel and the countries more particularly identified with it—Yemen, Iraq, Northern India. Post gave an area from "North Africa through the Arabian Peninsula to northern India." Serranus, Olivier de Marseille and Johannes Eurenius, botanists of no less authority, ascribed the origin to Israel.

A distinguished Jewish botanist, Warburg, in his The Scientific Work of Aaron Aaronsohn (1944), considers that the origin was along the banks of the Jordan and in the proximity of the Dead Sea, as the wild date is a denizen of rock-crevices and hillsides in that region.

Ancient Hebrew literature refers to the wild palm, with its short leaves. The Mishna (Sukkah, 3, 1) speaks of wild palms near the Mount of Iron, not far from the Dead Sea and north of the Arnon, and authorizes their branches as ritually acceptable for

1 Rendered from the Hebrew by Marc Nuroc.
2 Ministry of Agriculture, Jerusalem, Israel.
3 It should be observed that from Haifa northwards, and also slightly to the south, the coastal palms yield an immature fruit, because there is not enough heat for ripening. In Jaffa, however, further south, and especially round Gaza, the fruit ripens but, even here, only in certain soft-date varieties which do not require many heat units.
4 It is of interest that the Hebrew name of the Tigris, which flows through a region that was and still is an important centre of date-cultivation, is Hidokel, and the second half of that name is plainly the Hebrew word for date; in Sumerian 'ideklat,' and in Aramaic 'deglet'.
6 Mentioned by Josephus, Wars, Book IV, VIII, 2, a place in Trans-Jordan "stretching out to the Land of Moab."
thatching booths at the Feast of Tabernacles. But it is very probable that the wild palms in question were trees that had escaped or were perhaps truly wild, all the way from India to West Africa.

Nor is there unanimity as to the forebears of the date as we know it. One view suggests _Phoenix sylvestris_, a wild date of great age in the region of the Persian Gulf and as far as India; _Phoenix reclinata_, from Africa, and the prickly variety, _Phoenix spinosa_, are also claimants.

For thousands of years the palm and its date were highly valued by the inhabitants from India through North Africa to the Atlantic Ocean; it was a sweet fruit and, fresh or dried, fed them in all seasons, a part from the profit of countless uses of palm leaves and wood. No wonder the palm was holy. To the early Egyptians, it symbolizes life, for did it not put out a new leaf month after month, whenever another grew old and withered? So they immortalized it in their temples, on columns, in murals.

In the Middle East, it was a symbol of fertility: Osiris is decked out in palm leaves and palm branches are in his hand; Ishtar, goddess of Mother-Earth and of love, and her Tyrian namesake, Astarte, divinity of lust and fruitfulness, are similarly portrayed.

For the Jews, too, the date was a token of sanctity: at the Feast of Tabernacles, they would say a blessing over it and decorate the booths with palm leaves: "And ye shall take you on the first day . . . branches of the palm trees . . . and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days" (Leviticus, 23, 40); "... that the Children of Israel shall dwell in booths . . . and that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying: Go forth unto the Mount, and fetch . . . palm branches . . . to make booths. . . ." (Nehemiah, 8, 14-15). To this very day, during that Feast, Jews bless the four "species"—citron, palm, myrtle and willow—which the Bible (Leviticus, 23, 40)