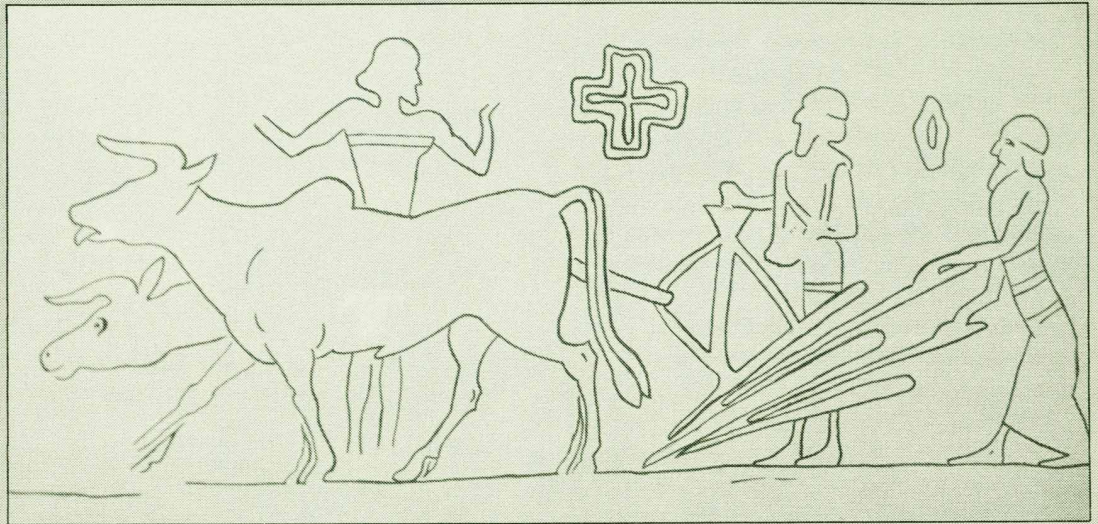


Gil Lain

First-Century Agricultural Practices



Farming techniques developed early in man's existence. This Kassite seal impression shows an automatic seeding device attached to a plow.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/UNIVERSITY MUSEUM/UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (296/295)

Prostitution is not the world's oldest profession. The world's oldest profession is farming. Since the beginning of time, man has been involved in agriculture. God instructed Adam to cultivate the garden in which he had been placed (Gen. 2:15). Later He told Adam that he would make his living as a farmer (Gen. 3:17-19).

Although the human family adopted thousands of other professions through the years, agricultural production remained the primary profession in Palestine.¹ By the days of Jesus, industry and commerce were prevalent. The success of industry and commerce, however, depend on the success of agricultural production.

Success in agriculture did not come easily. God told Adam that his farming would be difficult (Gen.

3:18,19). What He told Adam remained true for the first-century farmer for several reasons.

One problem was the nature of the land. It was filled with stones and rocky ledges. The Book of Isaiah tells how the owner of a vineyard had to remove all the rocks before he could plant (Isa. 5:2). The first-century farmer had to do the same. Even then, some of his seeds fell on rocky soil (Luke 8:6). The land not only was rocky, it was hilly as well. In fact, most of the farming had to be done on hillsides.²

A second major difficulty for the Palestinian farmer was the climate. Summer lasted from May to October, often without a drop of rain in some areas. Generally speaking, the

Lesson reference: BBS: John 12:24
L&W: Luke 8:5



These terraced fields in Lebanon attest to man's ingenuity in overcoming mountainous terrain.

northern areas received more rainfall during the year, with the highlands receiving up to thirty inches. By contrast, the southern areas of Palestine may have received as little as half that amount and with much less regularity. It is also a general truth that the western slopes received more rain than the slopes facing east. Wherever a farmer lived, he could be relatively certain of receiving very little rain in the summer months and some rain during the cooler months. Thus, he planted his crops accordingly.³

At various times plant disease and/or insects posed a threat to the early Palestinian farmer. Haggai spoke of a dreaded mildew (2:17) as did his predecessor, Amos (4:9). The most dreaded insect was the locust (Joel 1:4). Locusts could devour a whole countryside in a few days, leaving nothing but a few dry stalks (see "Locusts" Sum '86).⁴

Even with these hardships, farming continued to be the first line of commerce. It was vital for physical life. It



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After the grain harvest, the crop must be winnowed, using the wind to blow away the chaff.

likewise was vital for religious life. The Israelite religious year revolved around the cultivation of the crops. Generally, the Jews fasted at the beginning of harvest and feasted at the end. Several of the annual festivals were tied directly to agriculture. What the New Testament Christian



Romans worshiped Lar, god of the farm and household, to insure good crops.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/INNY (350/5)

celebrates at Pentecost was called at first the Feast of the Harvest (Ex. 23:16). This "feast of harvest" (sometimes called the "feast of weeks") took place in the month of Sivan (our June), after barley harvest and coincided with wheat harvest.

Another annual festival directly tied to agriculture was the Feast of the Ingathering (Ex. 23:16). Commemorating Israel's time of wilderness living (sometimes called the "feast of booths" or "tabernacles"), this festival took place after grape harvest and coincided with olive harvest.

These festivals and others were celebrated to pay reverence to God who provided. They began in the Old Testament period and were still a part

of Jewish life when the New Testament was written.

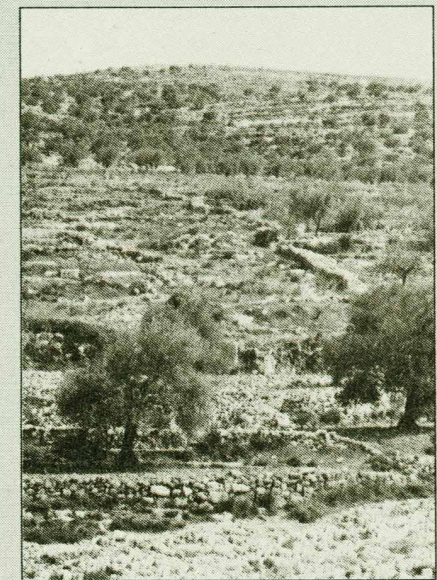
In order to correctly interpret the New Testament, it is important to know that part of its context which deals with agriculture. Since physical and religious life revolved around it, Jesus often alluded to agriculture in order to teach eternal truths. When He made reference to agriculture, He usually would mention the crops themselves and/or their implementation (planting, cultivating, harvesting).

Three crops dominated the agricultural life of the country—grain, grapes, and olives. The primary grain crop was wheat (often translated "corn" in the King James Version). Wheat, when harvested, was ground into meal or into flour for making bread. Bread, being the staff of life, was a vital part of the Jew's diet. Every farmer in Palestine would save his most favorable field for the growing of wheat. It could be grown in nearly every area of Palestine since it was planted and grew during the rainy season (late October or early November) and was harvested in early summer. According to Jesus, the yield of one grain of wheat could be a stalk whose head held up to 100

grains (Luke 8:8). The most productive area for wheat was Galilee.⁵

Barley also was raised as a grain crop, particularly in the south and east. Like wheat, it was planted in the

Many fields in Israel could double as stone quarries. Fences are made of stone, partly to separate plots, but also to get the larger rocks out of the way.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KEVIN TOUCHTON (72/29)

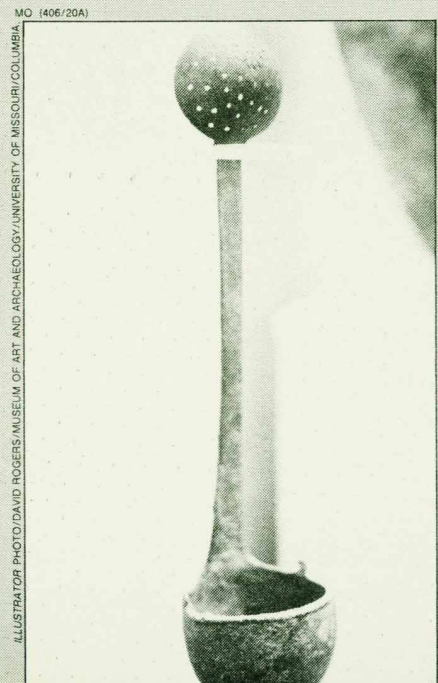
fall. Barley harvest, however, took place in April or early May (about a month before wheat harvest).⁶ Barley bread served as a staple food, particularly for the poor (see John 6:9).

A third grain found in Palestine was spelt (translated "rye" in Ex. 9:32). Although an inferior kind of wheat, it could grow under more adverse circumstances. In Isaiah's day, it was sown around the borders of wheat and barley fields (Isa. 28:25). Perhaps this was done since the law said the corners of each field were to be saved for gleaning by the needy or the stranger (Lev. 19:9-10).

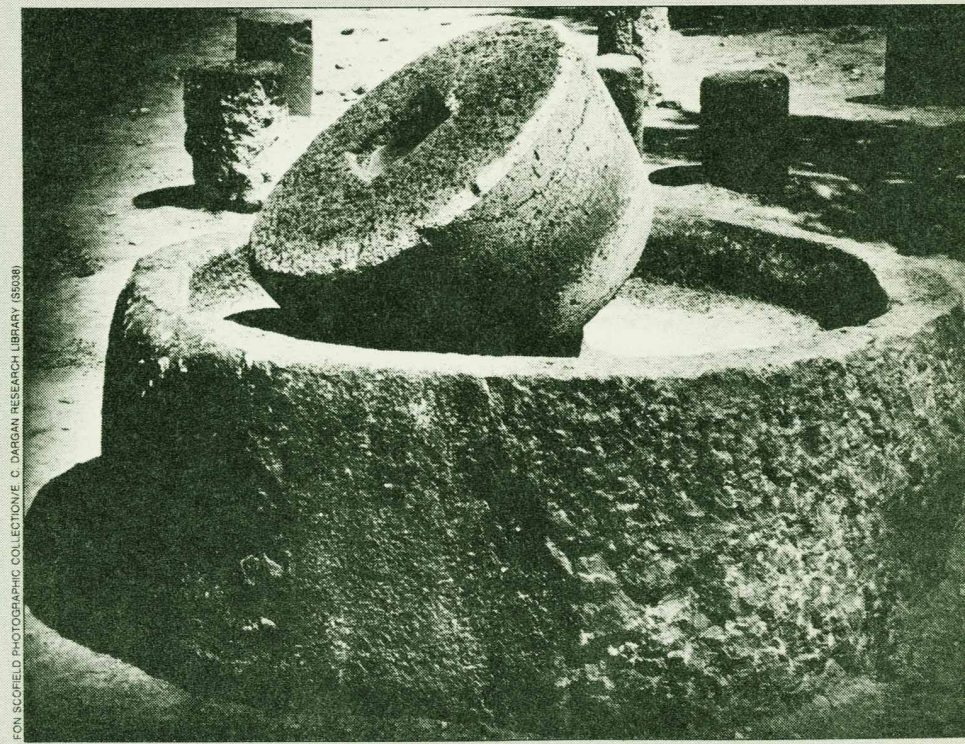
Planting the grain began by plowing the ground. The plow of the first century was hardly more than a wooden stick with a metal point and rarely went past a depth of five inches. Cultivation often took place by use of draft animals, normally two oxen yoked together (see "Yokes,"

The olive has been a main agricultural product of Palestine for three millennia. Most of the crop goes through the olive press to extract its oil. This one is in Capernaum.

An interesting implement from the 1st century is this bronze sieve-ladle combination.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY/UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI/COLUMBIA MO (406/20A)



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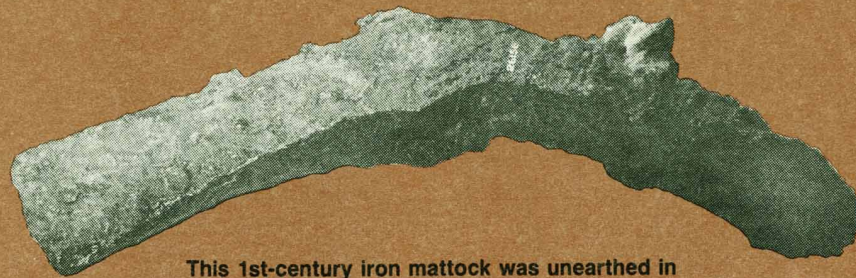
Summer '85). Usually the farmer would guide the plow with the left hand while goading the oxen from time to time with a share in the right hand. The share also could be used to keep the plow clean. The farmer needed to look forward in order to keep his furrow straight (Luke 9:62).

Usually men planted the grain.⁷ A man would carry the seed in a basket or pouch attached to his waist, then broadcast the seed over the plowed ground. After the seed was scattered, he then would either plow the seed under or drag a log over the seed to push it into the ground.

When it came time to harvest the grain, the reaper would hold several stalks in one hand and cut the stalks (close to the ground) with a hand sickle. The stalks were gathered into unbound sheaves to facilitate carrying them to the threshing floor. Normally men cut the grain, children aided in gathering it into sheaves, and the women gleaned for stray stalks. Some of the stalks were left intentionally for the poor or hungry. (Deut. 24:19; Matt. 12:1).

The stalks then were taken to a threshing floor. A threshing floor could be owned privately or communally. It could be either the large flat surface of a rock, or an area of pounded earth located in an open space exposed to the wind.⁸

Once on a threshing floor, the kernels were separated from the stalks. This took place by one of three methods. Sometimes a person would thresh the wheat by beating it with a stick (Gideon did it this way, Judg. 6:11). Deuteronomy 25:4 records that oxen could be used to walk on the stalks to separate the kernels. A third way to thresh grain took place by virtue of a sledge (Isa. 41:15). A sledge was a wooden frame with sharp stones or pieces of metal attached underneath that was pulled by draft animals over the harvested plants. Sometimes the farmer or his



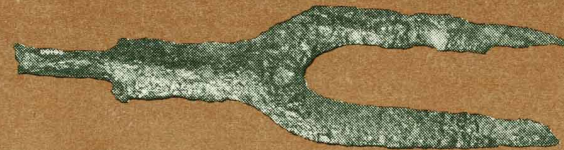
This 1st-century iron mattock was unearthed in Italy.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/FIELD MUSEUM/CHICAGO (370/35A)



Picks have changed little since Jesus' day. This one is of iron.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/FIELD MUSEUM/CHICAGO (370/23A)



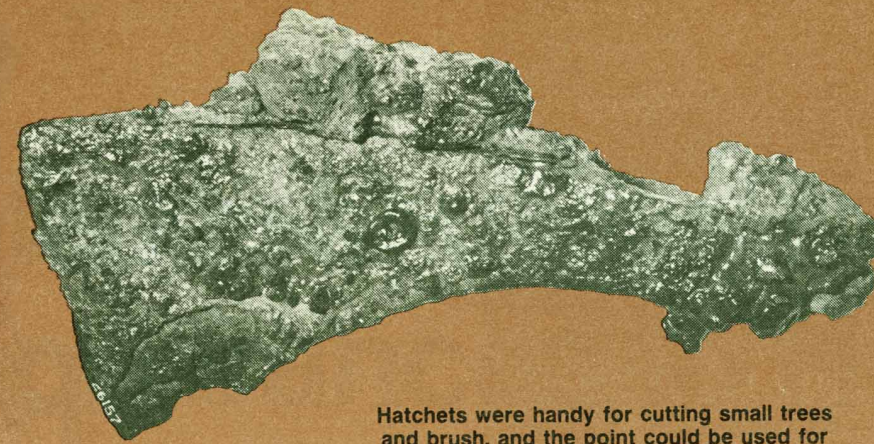
These iron forks had sockets for inserting wooden handles.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/FIELD MUSEUM/CHICAGO (370/29A)



This 1st-century rake with six tines would have been used for coarse raking. Note the hole for the handle.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/FIELD MUSEUM/CHICAGO (370/33A)



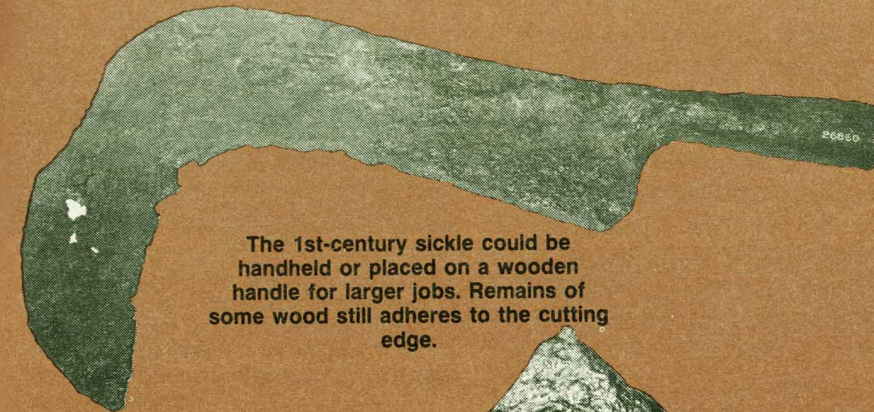
Hatchets were handy for cutting small trees and brush, and the point could be used for digging up rocks.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/FIELD MUSEUM/CHICAGO (370/21A)

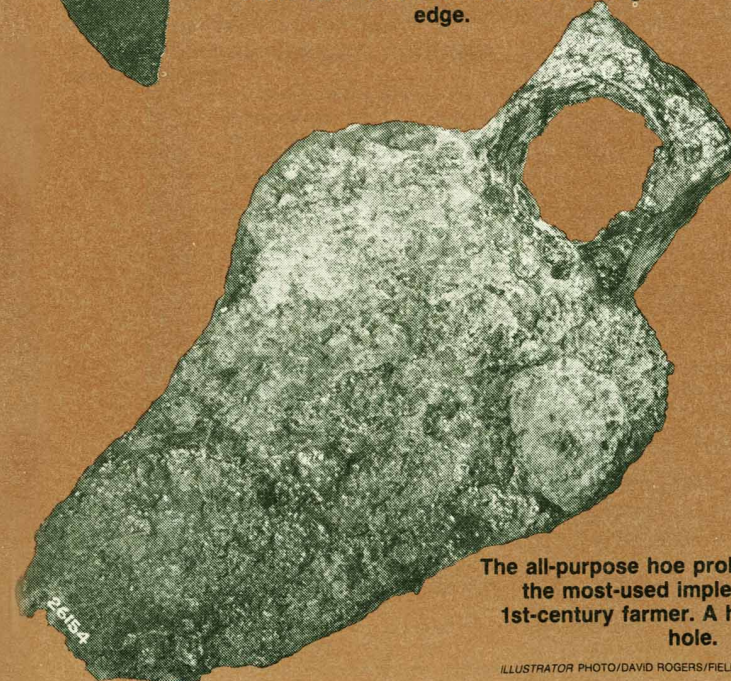


A wooden handle also was used with this iron spud. What remains of the socket is on the left end.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/FIELD MUSEUM/CHICAGO (371/1A)



The 1st-century sickle could be handheld or placed on a wooden handle for larger jobs. Remains of some wood still adheres to the cutting edge.



The all-purpose hoe probably was one of the most-used implements of the 1st-century farmer. A handle fit in the hole.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/FIELD MUSEUM/CHICAGO (370/26A)

children would ride the sledge to give it more weight, thus more effectiveness.

The third step of harvest operations was winnowing. With a shovel-like instrument resembling today's pitchfork, the winnower would throw the grain into the air, letting the wind blow the chaff away (see Ps. 1:4). After this procedure, whatever foreign material was left on the grain was taken care of by means of a sieve. A sieve was a perforated device through which grain could flow but foreign or coarse material could not. After winnowing, the grain was bagged and carried away for storage.

When the grain harvest was over, a farmer then would occupy himself with the growing of grapes (viticulture). Although vineyards could be found throughout Palestine, Judah led in viticulture. Vineyards usually were planted on hills so the flatter fields could be used for grain. The work was done by either the landowner himself, hired laborers (Matt. 20:1), or by tenant farmers (Matt. 21:33).

Preparing the ground meant removing stones and plowing. Many times a wall was built (Matt. 21:33) or hedge grown to protect the produce from foxes (Song of Sol. 2:15), boars (Ps. 80:13), or thieves (Jer. 49:9).

Vineyards did not have to be planted every year. The first planting, however, involved placing the vines in rows eight to ten feet apart. Pruning took place in the spring by a vine-dresser after the vines budded. When the clusters of grapes began to appear, they either were propped up with forked sticks, allowed to climb a tree, or left to run along the ground.⁹ While the grapes were ripening, the ground around the vines would be hoed and nonbearing branches would be cut off (Isa. 5:6; 18:5).

Grape harvest took place in August or September. Such an important

event required watchmen who stationed themselves in a tower overlooking the vineyard (Isa. 5:2). Many times the entire family would move into a temporary shelter in the vineyard in order to provide added protection against possible thieves.

Sometimes hired laborers did the harvesting (Matt. 20:1-16). Sometimes the owner with his family did the work. Harvest could occur only once since the gleanings were left for the poor (Lev. 19:10).

Harvested grapes could be eaten fresh, dried into raisins, boiled to make a thick syrup (like honey), or pressed for juice or wine. The grapes to be pressed were taken to the winepresses in baskets. The "common method of extracting grape juice was by placing the grapes in the upper end of a wide stone receptacle where they were crushed under foot with the juice draining into a basin at the lower end of the receptacle."¹⁰ The treaders of the winepress shouted and sang while they worked (Isa. 16:10). The winepress itself often was located on the ground floor of the watchtower.¹¹ The juice or wine then was stored in new goat-skin bags (Matt. 9:17) or in large pottery containers.

The third ranking crop in first-century Palestine was the olive. Olive trees could be found all over Palestine, particularly around Bethlehem and Hebron.¹² An olive tree needed little care. Sometimes the farmer would plow around the tree to create surface mulch for retaining moisture. Also, nonbearing branches were pruned in the spring so the productive branches could have the extra moisture needed during the summer. Still, the olive tree could withstand long periods of drought and produce fruit for hundreds of years.¹³

Olives were harvested at the beginning of the Jewish year (mid-September to mid-November).¹⁴ They were picked by hand, beaten down

by the use of poles, or shaken down from their branches.¹⁵ The harvested olives could be eaten fresh, made into relish, or pressed for oil.

A simple method for getting oil involved crushing the berries in a bowl-shaped stone which had a channel to convey oil to a receptacle. A mill operation pressed the olives by use of a thick vertical stone wheel, operated by a long pivoted wooden bar. The wheel was rolled over the olives on a flat circular stone grooved to carry the oil to a basin on one side. It was possible to produce up to twenty gallons of oil from one tree. Olive oil was important for its different possible usages. Oil was used for cooking (1 Kings 17:9-16), for fuel (Matt. 25:1-13), for anointing (Matt. 6:17; Luke 7:46), and medicinally to treat the sick or injured (Luke 10:34).

Agriculture was the source of life for people of the first century. Practically everyone grew foodstuffs for consumption or sale. Jesus was very familiar with the processes of agriculture. From it He drew illustrations to teach the eternal truths of God. We are indebted to the ancient profession of farming not only for physical sustenance but for insights to the ways of our heavenly Father. ○

1. H. N. Richardson, "Agriculture," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:56.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

3. G. J. Jennings, "Agriculture," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:73.

4. Richardson, "Agriculture," p. 58.

5. Jennings, "Agriculture," p. 75.

6. Richardson, "Agriculture," p. 58.

7. Jennings, "Agriculture," p. 76.

8. H. N. Richardson, "Threshing," *Interpreter's Dictionary*, 4:636.

9. Steven Barabas, "Vine, Vineyard," *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), p. 881.

10. Jennings, "Agriculture," p. 77.

11. Henry F. Lutz, *Viticulture and Brewery in the Ancient Orient* (Leipzig: J. P. Hinrichs, 1922), p. 62.

12. W. E. Shewell-Cooper, "Olive, Olive Tree," *Zondervan Encyclopedia*, 4:528.

13. J. C. Trever, "Olive Tree," *Interpreter's Dictionary*, 3:596.

14. H. N. Richardson, "Harvest," *Interpreter's Dictionary*, 2:527.

15. Shewell-Cooper, "Olive, Olive Tree," p. 528. Some olives were left to feed orphans, widows, and strangers (Deut. 24:20).

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