

The Mandrake and the Ancient World

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[p.87]

Professor Harrison, of the Department of Old Testament in Huron College, University of Western Ontario, has already shown by articles in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY his interest and competence in the natural history of the Bible. Here he examines one of the more curious Biblical plants.

The mandrake is one of the plants which still grows widely in the Middle East, and which has claimed magical associations from a very remote period. It is generally assigned the botanical name of *Mandragora officinarum* L.¹ and is a perennial of the order Solanaceae. It claims affinity with the potato and eggplant, and is closely allied to the *Atropa belladonna* L.,² with which it is not infrequently confused by some writers. The modern Arab knows it by a number of names, including *Tuffah* el Majanin ('Madmen's Apple) and *Beid el Jinn* (Eggs of the Jinn), apparently a reference to the ability of the plant to invigorate and stimulate the senses even to the point of mental imbalance.

The former name may perhaps be a survival of the belief found in Oriental folk-lore regarding the magical herb *Baaras*, with which the mandrake is identified by some authorities.³ According to the legends associated with this plant, it was highly esteemed amongst the ancients on account of its pronounced magical properties. But because of the potency of these attributes it was an extremely hazardous undertaking for anyone to gather the plant, and many who attempted it were supposed to have paid for their daring with

[p.88]

sickness and death.⁴ Once the herb had been gathered, however, it availed for a number of diseases, and in antiquity it was most reputed for its ability to cure depression and general disorders of the mind. As a result it was frequently sought after by magicians and others who attempted the treatment of insanity in the ancient world, and was probably used most of all in the form of a potion.

The mandrake grew abundantly in Palestine, and was found flourishing in neglected fields and waste land. A thick, forked stubby root produced a short stem on which grew glossy oval leaves attaining a length of anything from six to sixteen inches, depending largely on the fertility of the place where it was to be found growing. The plant bore a flower, whose colour is variously described as bluish, purple, or greenish-white, and in appearance was rather flat and broad, being about two inches in diameter. In the Spring the blossoms gave way to round, sweetish red berries, which became ripe about May. The young plants had a thick tapering root very much like that of a parsnip, which went down into the ground for a

¹ The plant is variously described as *Atropa Mandragora* L. (I. Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* (1924-), iii, pp. 363 sect.), and *Mandragora officinalis* L. (J. Smith, *Bible Plants* (1887), p. 80).

² This is the familiar "deadly nightshade", and may be the plant referred to in Xenoph. *Symp.* ii. 24. and Plato. *Rep.* 448 C.

³ Cf. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (1918), ii, pp. 390 ff.; R. A. Cotes, *Bible Flowers* (1904), p. 64.

⁴ German folk-lore associated the mandrake with witchcraft, and since the time of the Goths, the word "alruna" has signified both "witch" and mandrake".

distance of two feet or more. As the plant matured, the root altered its shape, becoming more bulbous, and from it there emerged a number of short brittle outgrowths.

To the imaginative mind, the forked stumpy appearance of the root would suggest a crude human shape, to which many of the ancients were already accustomed in the worship of Ishtar and other fertility deities. For centuries it was the custom in the East to manipulate, pinch or carve the mandrake root until it assumed a vaguely human form.⁵ After this, it was generally sold as a charm to protect the wearer from the attacks of demons, or to stimulate sexual vigour. It is improbable that the entire plant was utilized in this manner on the person, since the root alone was often more than two feet in length. If the complete mandrake was used superstitiously, it would probably be kept hung up on an inner wall of the house, or in a position just inside the doorway, to ward off any demons that might chance to enter.

[p.89]

The mandrake received attention from early times in folk-lore, legend and magical practice as a love-charm. It was supposed to possess formidable human properties in this and other directions⁶ and it is possible that this belief was fostered by the quasi-human appearance suggested by the forked roots of the plant. If such qualities were superstitiously attributed to the mandrake, it is not particularly difficult to see how the credulously-minded could even come to the point of believing that it could stimulate conception.

From the idea that the herb was possessed of powerful properties, there seems to have arisen in antiquity a superstition that anyone who was so injudicious as to attempt to pull up a root of it would be stricken with violent illness, if not sudden death. This belief was recorded by Josephus, who also gave an account of the generally accepted techniques of uprooting the plant without incurring the disasters which were thought to accompany such a procedure:

It is not easily taken by such as would do it, but recedes from their hands, nor will yield itself to be taken quietly, until either the urine of a woman, or blood, be poured upon it; nay, even then it is certain death to those that touch it, unless any one take and hang the root itself down from his hand, and so carry it away. It may also be taken in another manner without danger, which is this: they dig a trench round about it, till the concealed part of the root is practically exposed, then a dog is tied to it, after which he who ties up the dog must go away. When the dog tries hard to follow him, this root is easily plucked up, but the dog dies immediately instead of the man that would remove the plant.⁷

Josephus does not mention the piercing demoniacal shriek which was supposed by the ancients to accompany the uprooting of the plant, but this superstitious accretion has survived in other quarters, and is alluded to occasionally by Shakespeare.⁸

⁵ Cf. Crowfoot and Baldensperger, *From Cedar to Hyssop* (1932), pp. 115 f.

⁶ Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, iv. 76, says that the Pythagoreans applied the epithet "anthropomorphic" to the mandrake. This and similar properties of the mandrake are sketched briefly by H. N. and A. L. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* (1952), pp. 137 ff.

⁷ Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum*, vii. 6. 3.

⁸ *Romeo and Juliet*, IV. 3. 48; *Henry VI* (Part II), III. 2. 310. He mentions the mandrake as a soporific in *Antony and Cleopatra*, I. 5. 3, and *Othello*, III. 3. 330. The speech made by Banquo in *Macbeth* (I. 3. 84), may perhaps have reversed the reputed use in antiquity of the mandrake as restoring sanity to the deranged mind, though his reference may be to the fact that, acting as an aphrodisiac, it causes men to engage in courses of

The plant has for centuries been native to many of the Mediterranean countries, including Spain, Crete, Sicily, Syria and north Africa, though apparently not to Egypt. Mandrakes were found in the tomb of King Tut-ankh-amen, and must consequently have been imported into the country, no doubt from Syria. In the fifth century B.C. it was mentioned by Hippocrates, and at the begin-

[p.90]

ning of the Christian era it was included by Dioscorides in his list of poisonous herbs. He identified it with the old Greek "plant of Circe" or κικκία, so named because of its reputed ability to enchant or stimulate the individual towards sexual activity.⁹ Dioscorides appears to have thought that there were two varieties of mandrake; a "male" kind (probably the *Mandragora vernalis* L.), which flourished in the spring, and one of a "female" order (perhaps the *Mandragora officinalis* itself), which grew to maturity by the autumn of the year.¹⁰ This classification was followed by Pliny,¹¹ who appears to have copied it directly from Dioscorides, and also by Gerarde¹² who also described male and female varieties of the mandragora.

Isidore¹³ and Serapion refer to it as being employed, probably in the form of an infusion or potion, to reduce sensibility to pain during surgical operations, and Dioscorides was reputed to have used mandrake wine as an anaesthetic when he was an army surgeon in the service of the Emperor Nero.¹⁴

The term *duda'im* (LXX μῆλα μανδραγόρων, Arab yabruh), means literally "love-producing", and is generally rendered "mandrakes" in the English Versions of the Bible. The word is thought to be derived from a root *dwd*, meaning "to love", or "to fondle", and the marginal reading of "love-apples", which is found in some Versions, reflects the influence of this derivation, and is also an indication of the fact that in ancient times, the fruit

[p.91]

action which under normal circumstances would be rejected by the rational mind as imprudent or unduly hazardous.

⁹ Cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, xxv. 147. A conjecture has been made by C. H. Gordon (*Ugaritic Literature* (1949), pp. 19, 21 and 24), that one of the obscure words which occurs in the text of the Baal and 'Anat Cycle (C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Handbook* [Rome, 1947] 'nt, III. 12; IV. 53; IV. 68, 73; pl. ix. 11. 20), may perhaps be rendered "mandrakes". The term occurs as part of a message from Aleya Baal to the Virgin 'Anat, after the latter has demolished her enemies. Baal is inviting her to his mountain-home Sapan, so that she may share a secret with him ('nt, III. 18 seq.). The message includes a request for the offering of oblations, amongst which is one for peace. Though there is a prominent sexual element in the Cycle as a whole (cf. Texts 67, 76, and 6), it is not clear that the term *d-d-y-m*, rendered "mandrakes", has any connection with the procreative activity mentioned. In the fragmentary text 132, there is a record of the union between Baal and 'Anat, but no offerings are mentioned. The fact that such gifts were to be offered "in the midst of the fields" might warrant the inclusion of herbs with known magical properties, such as the mandrake.

¹⁰ Dioscorides, *De Mat. Med.* iv. 75 f. He alleged that the male was white in colour, and the female black.

¹¹ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, xxv. 147.

¹² Herball (1597), p. 280.

¹³ Isidore, *Origines*, xvii. 9. 30.

¹⁴ Dioscor., *De Mat. Med.* iv. 76; cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xxv. 150.

of the mandrake plant was eaten as a stimulant to venery, especially by barren women. At quite an early period the root was frequently carried about on the body or in the clothing as a talisman to ensure fertility.

The medicinal virtues of the plant appear to have been discovered at a remote point in the development of ancient culture, and though much that was magical and superstitious tended to accrue to its use, it seems clear that the narcotic qualities of the mandrake were in evidence through the entire period of its usage. It does not appear to have been employed at all as a purgative or an emetic.

The fruit of the plant was eaten in antiquity as a love-charm, and its narcotic content was such that, taken in excess, it could produce nausea, rigor and general malaise. The root of the mandragora was of special potency in inducing narcosis, and in ancient Assyria it was administered as an anodyne. Since there was no means of ensuring a standard strength of the potion, its use was apt to be accompanied by a certain amount of risk. At the present day, Eastern children eat the sweet-smelling *tuffah* sparingly, without any apparent harmful effect, though Crowfoot and Baldensperger report occasional poisoning, due either to gross indulgence in the fruit or else to an inadvertent swallowing of the seeds.¹⁵ Canon Tristram stated similarly that the fruit was often eaten without any resultant sickness or unpleasant narcotic effects being suffered.¹⁶ Its use in modern times in the herbal practice of Africa and the East is that of an occasional narcotic and antispasmodic.

The mandrake is mentioned in Genesis 30: 14 ff. as an aphrodisiac. Rachel, who up to that time was barren, desired to have some of the plant which Reuben, the son of her sister Leah, had discovered in the fields at the harvesting of wheat, the time when the mandrake ripened. Leah was unwilling, but consented to the pleading of her sister after being assured that Rachel would surrender to her the privileges of the connubial couch that night. Her intentions reflect the ancient usage of the plant as a means of facilitating pregnancy for a sterile woman. There appear to be good reasons, however, for thinking that her conception, which followed a short time later, was probably due as much to emotional satisfaction and psychological suggestion, with a corresponding alteration in the hormone constituency of the blood, as to any intrinsic virtue, magical or otherwise, which the plant may have possessed.

[p.92]

Ginsberg has preserved an ancient Jewish legend, quoted by Frazer, which narrated the method employed by Reuben for obtaining the noxious herb. Having thoughtlessly tethered his ass to a mandrake plant whilst busy in the harvest, he returned in the evening to discover the beast lying dead beside the uprooted herb. Thus he was able to give it to his mother with impunity, and she shared the coveted charm of fertility with her childless sister.¹⁷

The reference in the Song of Solomon 7: 13, is apparently of a twofold nature, recognizing the fragrance of the mandrake flower as well as the familiar aphrodisiac use of the plant.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁶ In H. B. Tristram, *Natural History of the Bible* (1868), p. 467.

¹⁷ L. Ginsberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (1909), i, p. 336; Frazer, *Folk-Lore of the Old Testament* (1918), ii, pp. 393 f.

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That some people found the smell of the plant nauseating and overpowering, is mentioned by Pliny.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xxv. 148. Though some writers have regarded the smell of the flowers and fruit as being of a nondescript nature, Smith (*Dictionary of the Bible*, 1876, p. 515) says, "It is well known that the mandrake is far from odoriferous, the whole plant being, in European estimation at all events, very fetid." He goes on to indicate that there would be no fundamental discrepancy in identifying the mandrake with the plant mentioned in the Song of Solomon by quoting Oedmann's comment: "It is known that Orientals set an especial value on strongly smelling things that to more delicate European senses are unpleasing.... The intoxicating qualities of the mandrake, far from lessening its value, would rather add to it." In this particular reference, the plant seems to be mentioned in a sensuous context.