



Type: Book Chapter

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## The Olive in Greco-Roman Religion

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Source: *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*

Editor(s): Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch

Published: Provo, UT/Salt Lake City; FARMS/Deseret Book, 1994

Page(s): 248-261

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*John Franklin Hall*

In an offering of papers overwhelmingly directed toward concerns of the ancient Near East and Israelite religion, whether of the Old World or New, this paper stands in contrast and was invited in order to provide, largely for the sake of comparison of the Greco-Roman world with the ancient Near East, information concerning the role of the olive in the religion and ceremonial of those gods whose cults flourished among Greeks, Romans, or both. Although the Hellenistic kingdoms of Alexander and his successors encompassed much of the Near East during the third century B.C. and Rome's expansive dominion soon followed in holding sway over these same areas for more than seven centuries, this topic will remain limited to aspects of the olive in Greece and in Italy proper and not endeavor to encompass the vast and diverse regions subject either to Greco-Roman civilization or to Roman governance.

Extending beyond the aforementioned considerations of comparative religion, information about the olive in Roman culture seems especially pertinent in relation to any consideration of Paul's well-known allegory in Romans 11. While it is, of course, common knowledge that the Epistle to the Romans was not so much directed to the general citizenry of Rome as it was towards the early Christian community residing at Rome, which probably would have included few

actual Romans, nevertheless it is not unimportant to consider the experience of the Romans in regard to the olive, both in religion and otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

By the first century A.D. the olive was omnipresent in Italy as well as in the western Mediterranean provinces of the Empire. The introduction of olive cultivation in Spain, the greatest producer of olive products in the modern era, is, for example, attributed to the Romans and dates from this era.<sup>2</sup> Writers of the Imperial period are consistent in their testimony of the extent of olive culture throughout Italy. *Res rusticae*, a genre of works devoted to discussion of the agrarian enterprise and lifestyle, were popular among the Romans. Detailed instruction about crop raising, vineyard culture, and herd or flock production comprised much of the sort of fairly accurate material found in these practical guidebooks.<sup>3</sup> From the last century B.C. and the first century A.D., the agricultural works first of Varro and later of Columella, both entitled *De Re Rustica*, abound with references to the olive and its cultivation. Varro makes frequent mention of olive culture,<sup>4</sup> while Columella, the most detailed of the ancient horticulturalists, reviewed all varieties of olives, with diverse planting, pruning, and harvesting information for each. Also provided are carefully crafted directions about the production of oil and the comparative value, uses, and shelf life of oil from different olive varieties.<sup>5</sup> In a more scientific than practical vein is Pliny's *Natural History* from the same period. His narrative about olives ranges from the sort of practical agricultural material reviewed above, to minutia of a scientific sort or simply coincidental information about the significance of the olive in the life and culture of the time. Much of what religious information exists regarding the olive derives from Pliny.<sup>6</sup> This extensive familiarity with the olive was not new for

Romans of the Imperial era. Three centuries earlier the great Roman statesman and noted advocate of the simple rustic life as the best builder of character had compiled considerable instructional material on olive production for readers of his time. Cato's *De Agricultura* is not only one of the major agricultural treatises of antiquity but a guide for the pristine life afforded to those engaged in such enterprise.<sup>7</sup>

Not only was olive culture practiced very extensively in Italy from at least as early as the third century B.C., but, more significantly, the olive seems to have flourished far better in Italy with its milder climate and more fertile soils than it had in the Near East. The olive and its products were everywhere, commonly available at affordable prices. For this reason, the olive may have been considered in Italy perhaps not as valuable as it would have been in the eastern provinces during Roman times or among ancient Near Eastern peoples of an earlier era. Moreover, the value attached to the olive or its highly prized oil may well have influenced its significance in the religious ritual of an area or people.<sup>8</sup>

Greece, even more than Italy, has been popularly associated with the olive in both ancient and modern times. The olive could grow profitably in its poor rocky soil. While its volume of production might not have approached that of Italy during Roman times, olive cultivation was extensive in classical Greece.<sup>9</sup> Greek literature is far less discursive than Roman literature, at least in a direct or topical fashion, on the subject of olive cultivation. There are no ancient Greek treatises on agriculture or natural science that, if they existed, could supply information about the Greek olive industry. However, that olives were widely cultivated is attested not only by their frequent coincidental mention throughout the corpus of Greek literature but also by exam-

ination of the trade practices of the Greeks as recorded in written historical sources and tangible archaeological remains. Indeed, the Greeks were the first people to produce the olive on a large commercial scale. The export of both olives and olive oil formed the basis of the primary commercial enterprise of Greece from the eighth through third centuries B.C. Olive oil was traded as far away as Sicily or the regions north of the Black Sea for the grain that Greece could not produce in sufficient abundance to support her population. Colonization followed trade and Greek colonies in the East and West carried with them olive cultivation. The commercial empires of Corinth and Athens were raised on the profit of the olive oil trade. The Greek vases, white figure, black figure, or red figure, so much admired and studied in art history and humanities courses, were produced as simple containers for the export of the olive's oil, golden in more than one way.<sup>10</sup>

The Greeks believed themselves to have been the discoverers if not of the olive itself, then certainly of olive cultivation. Tradition attributes this discovery either to one Aristaeus, a son of Apollo, described variously as the discoverer of the olive or the inventor of olive oil, or else to Athena herself, goddess of the arts of civilization that would clearly encompass the cultivation of the olive.<sup>11</sup> Modern scientific opinion may sanction the claim of the ancient Greeks, since the earliest known locale of olive cultivation is now said to have been the island of Crete as early as 3500 B.C.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, it is in Crete where our search for the use of the olive in Greco-Roman religion must begin.

It is essential to remember that Greek religion and Roman religion are not the same. While it may perhaps be appropriate to speak of Greco-Roman religion in late antiquity after centuries of syncretistic borrowings and associa-



The Athenian dominance of the olive-oil market was symbolized by the myth of the contest of gifts between Poseidon and Athena to become the patron of a new city. Its founder, the serpent-bodied Cecrops, judged her gift of the first olive tree, planted on the Acropolis, to be superior, and the city was named Athens. In this scene from a fifth-century B.C. red-figure vase, Athena pours out a libation before the olive tree while a white-bearded Cecrops holds a sacrificial lamb and drink offering in honor of Erechthonios, hidden in the covered basket with saplings around it. A winged victory hovers above, holding an olive branch and jug.

tions had accomplished a homogenization of cult in the late antique world, to make such a categorization at any other period is to oversimplify vastly and erroneously.<sup>13</sup> Greeks and Romans may in large part derive from kindred peoples of Indo-European origin who may be presumed to have

shared certain similarities of religion and society when they migrated to Mediterranean regions from the cultural morass, which must have existed in the plains of central and eastern Europe at the end of the third millennium B.C.<sup>14</sup> Italic religion remained seemingly little changed as the sky-gods of Indo-European lore continued to exercise sovereignty over Italic peoples. Etruscan religious influences were of later date and preponderant only in matters of state rather than private cult and only in cities where Etruscan rule ordered and standardized religious practice. Of course, of all Italic settlements Rome was most heavily influenced by the Etruscans.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, the religion of the nomadic tribes who became settled and civilized as they inhabited Greece was subjected to the immediate influence of the more highly advanced civilization of the Minoans. The impact not only of Minoan culture but most particularly of Minoan religion was decisive. In numerous books and articles on the subject, Martin Nilsson has demonstrated how extensively Greek religion was reworked. Minoan divinities were transferred into the Greek pantheon, and cultic practices were adapted to Greek religion.<sup>16</sup> The strongly matriarchal bent of Minoan worship contributed major goddesses to the Greek system. From the old Minoan fertility mother goddess was derived no less important figures than Hera, Artemis, and Aphrodite. Even Athena, often held along with Apollo to be most representative of the spirit of classical Greece, was ironically a Minoan tutelary goddess dedicated to the protection of royal families and their palace citadels.<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, even so great and important a god as Apollo was not originally Hellenic either. His worship derives from the early peoples of Anatolia where his great cultic centers were located. At Greek sites such as Delphi he displaced

earlier divinities once worshipped by Minoans or Mycenaean Greeks.<sup>18</sup>

Three gods of classical Greece are variously associated with the olive—most often Athena but also Zeus and Apollo. Zeus's connection may derive from the abundant wild olive trees (oleaster) that surrounded his sacred precinct at Olympia. Frequent reference is made in the ancient sources to victors at the Olympic games, held at Olympia, being crowned with the wild olive, as was also the great statue of Zeus in his nearby Olympian sanctuary. A Zeus worshipped on Crete was called Zeus Elaious, the olive Zeus, perhaps from the fact that his original cult statue was carved from olive wood.<sup>19</sup> Apollo, whose mother Leto gave birth to the god under a palm and an olive tree, was said to have imported a species of grey olive, and the role of his offspring Aristaeus in discovering olive oil has been noted above.<sup>20</sup>

It is, of course, Athena who was most connected with the olive and Athena alone with whom was linked the domesticated olive (the *elaies* in Greek, the *olea* in Latin). If indeed the olive had been first domesticated on Crete of the Minoans, it is fitting that it be associated with a goddess of Cretan origin. That the olive might figure in the cult of Athena is consistent with a characteristic feature of Minoan religion, namely the sacred character and worship of trees. The earliest artistic depictions of Athena that are found in paintings of the Mycenaean era, represent the goddess seated beneath or standing beside an olive tree. Upon these the goddess is identified by her appellation of Athena. Earlier Minoan depictions of the guardian goddess of the fortress palace use much the same iconography but fail to make a name identification. Athena is very precisely the tutelary goddess of the old Mycenaean palace on the



Acropolis. From Athens her worship spread throughout Greece, and other cities with differently named versions of Athena's Minoan predecessor quickly assimilated the local deities to Athena.<sup>21</sup>

At Athens Athena seems in her earliest stage to have been worshipped as the rocky mound of the Acropolis itself, a mountain mother goddess of the usual Cretan-Anatolian sort. With her were linked the objects associated with her rock: the snake, the owl, and the olive trees that covered it.<sup>22</sup> Later, Athena seems to have been thought of as one particular olive tree, located in the inner courtyard of the fortress palace that Mycenaean princes constructed on the mound.<sup>23</sup> After the palace was gone, a sanctuary named for the famous Athenian ruler of Mycenaean times, Erechtheus, housed that same olive, no longer viewed as the goddess herself, but as a tree sacred to her. Later, legend associated the Erechtheum with the tale of the competition between Athena and Poseidon for the position of patron god of the Athenians. In it were Athena's gift to the Athenians, the domesticated olive, and the salt pool, the remnant of the waters brought by the sea god to kill the olive.<sup>24</sup> Athena was believed to have bestowed many of the arts of civilization upon her people, but no gift was considered greater than her domesticated olive. At the principal religious festival of Athena and the Athenians, the Great Panathenaea, victors were rewarded with oil pressed from olives from groves on the Acropolis and elsewhere, which were sacred and were held to belong to the goddess.<sup>25</sup>

In 480 B.C. Athens was abandoned to the onrushing Persian horde and the Athenians took refuge southward or in their strong wall of ships. After the Athenian fleet destroyed Xerxes' fleet, forcing a strategic retreat of Persian land forces, Athenians returned to the smoking ruin of their

city. Athena's sacred olive, by then believed to be the oldest tree in the world, was found destroyed. In his history of the Persian wars, Herodotus reports that the Athenians took heart when in a few days a new shoot sprang forth from the stump of the tree. It was said that the tree was a representation of the people of Athens, and that as it had reestablished life, so would the Athenians reestablish their lives and that of their city.<sup>26</sup> Here is a striking real life parallel to the scriptural allegories of the olive tree. For the Athenians the sacred tree of Athena was the sacred symbolic tree of their race.

To return now to the starting point of this paper—Rome—we move ahead several centuries and find olive culture at its height in Italy. Roman literature of the late republic and early empire is replete with references to the olive and its sacred and symbolic associations with Minerva, an Etrusco-Italian goddess of crafts and craftsmen, long since molded under the influence of Greek syncretism and literature to a Roman copy of the Greek Athena. Of course, the Minerva who appears in the pages of the poets is really only Athena with a Roman name, and all allusions to the olive fit the Athenian connections already discussed.<sup>27</sup>

Historical and antiquarian writings of an earlier date that investigate the origin of Roman cult are uniform in their omission of any connection of the pre-syncretic Minerva with olives, and so forth. All later references to Minerva and the olive are in reality allusions to Athena, by that time Minerva's Greek counterpart. In fact, only two connections of any kind can be made with any aspect of Roman cult.

One of the most ancient cults at Rome was that of old Saturn, an Etruscanized fertility god of Italic origins who presided over pastures and fields. Several evidences indi-

cate that his cult statue, made of ivory, was actually hollow and filled with olive oil, replenished several times a year. Alas, hidden here is no secret ritual of oil in Saturn's worship or that of any cult at Rome. Rather, the pragmatic Romans, with so great abundance of olive oil that it was used by rich and poor as a cosmetic panacea, had discovered its preservative powers. Saturn's statue had begun to deteriorate, and the Romans sought to preserve it by filling it with oil.<sup>28</sup> In Italy we find no sacred groves of olive and only one ritualistic use of the olive bough. Both Festus in his recounting of the religious practices at Rome, and Servius in his lengthy and detailed scholarly commentary on Vergil's *Aeneid*, reveal that the Flamen Dialis, priest of Jupiter and the oldest and most venerable of Rome's major priestly offices, wore a ceremonial cap, the *pilleum*, made from the leather of a white bull sacrificed to Juppiter and upon whose horns were tied olive boughs. No further comment is made or information supplied. The purpose of the ritual, the symbolism of the olive, and its connection to Juppiter are unknown.<sup>29</sup> Only that the practice is extremely archaic, predating any Greek syncretic tendencies, can be considered certain. Here, then, is the sole connection of the olive to Roman religion proper, as evidenced by any remaining sources—literary, historical, or archaeological.

What then can be made of this almost complete absence of any religious connection of the olive to the religion of Rome, in whose native Italy the olive was so omnipresent? What comparison can be made to Greek religion or other cultures where some associations of the olive in ancient cult, particularly that of Athena, are found? Several tentative hypotheses may be ventured.

The olive was less important in Rome than in Greece and the Near East probably because the olive had become

so common and was found virtually everywhere. Its value in Rome was, therefore, less than in lands further east, for scarce objects are usually of greater value. Moreover, the olive was not part of Indo-European religion. Its almost complete absence in ancient Italic cult corroborates its religious insignificance there. When they entered their respective areas of the Mediterranean, Greeks and the Italic ancestors of the Romans shared common cults of Indo-European religion. The olive would have played as little a role in Greek religion as it did in Roman, except for the extensive borrowings from the Minoan cult where female divinities, connected with trees and the arts of civilization, were adopted by various cities and peoples of the Greeks. Accordingly, to modern scientific views that the olive was first domesticated in Minoan Crete can now be added substantiating evidence from Minoan religion, including the extensive role of the olive in the cult of Athena, a goddess of Minoan origin. Clearly, the origin of the olive in Greco-Roman religion must be traced to Minoan Crete and quite possibly, so too the origin of that domesticated variety of the olive so important in the life and literature of the ancient Mediterranean world.

### Notes

1. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 168–95. Professor Anderson is accurate in his description of a cosmopolitan Rome with large population groups of non-Italians, and in his assessment of church membership at Rome in the early apostolic era as being largely composed of Jewish, Greek, and Hellenistic Greek converts.

2. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "olive." Also see F. M. Heichelheim, "Olive Culture," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 749–50, and Tenney Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, 6 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1940), 3:132, 140, 218.

3. The best summary treatment of *res rusticae* is K. D. White,

"Roman Agricultural Writers," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 1:4:439–97. Also see Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 9–10, 19, 63, 314, 574; Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 45–46; Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, 1:69, 100, 126, 158–75; 5:204–5, 221.

4. Varro, *De Re Rustica* I, 2, 7, 13, 22–24, 40–42, 46–47, 54–57, 60–62.

5. Columella, *De Re Rustica* I, 6, 1 and 8; V, 8, 1 to 9, 16; XII, 49, 1 to 52, 22; *De Arboribus* XVII, 1–4.

6. Pliny, *Natural History* XV, 1–32.

7. Cato, *De Agri Cultura* I, 64–69, 144. Also see Alan E. Astin, *Cato the Censor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 182–206.

8. Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, 1:170–77, 193, 200, 205, 284; 5:153–56, 221.

9. Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, 4:475, 477 and n. 7, 484; Peter V. Jones, *The World of Athens: An Introduction to Classical Athenian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 66–71.

10. Jones, *The World of Athens*, 180–82; John B. Bury and Russell Meiggs, *A History of Greece*, 4th ed. (New York: St. Martins, 1983), 68–88.

11. Vergil, *Georgics* II, 420; Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* III, 45; and *In Verrem* IV, 128.

12. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "olive."

13. Several basic studies on Greek and Roman religion, their differences and similarities, are H. J. Rose, *Religion in Greece and Rome* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959); Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Nicola Turchi, *La religione di Roma antica* (Bologna: Capelli Editore, 1939).

14. On the question of the Indo-European origins of the Greeks, and with some attention to the Romans as well, a good recent treatment is Robert Drews, *The Coming of the Greeks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3–45 and 158–202.

15. The standard authority for Etruscan Religion is Ambros J. Pfiffig, *Religio Etrusca* (Graz: Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, 1975). For Etruscan influences on Roman religion, see Albert Grenier, *Les religions Etrusque et Romaine* (Paris: Presses universitaires, 1948); Massimo Pallottino, *The Etruscans* (New York: Penguin, 1975 repr.); Robert M. Ogilvie, *Early Rome and the Etruscans* (Glasgow: Collins, 1976). Also see H. J. Rose, "On the Relations between Etruscan and

Roman Religion," *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 4 (1928): 161-77.

16. Martin P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and Its Survival in Greek Religion*, 2d ed. (Lund: Gleerup, 1950); *A History of Greek Religion*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1964); *Greek Piety* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1948).

17. Nilsson, *History of Greek Religion*, 23-30; *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion*, 417-20; W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston: Beacon, 1954), 106-9.

18. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, 183-204; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 143-49.

19. Pliny, *Natural History* XVI, 240; Pindar, *Olympian Odes* III, 16-34, 42; Herodotus, IV, 34; Pausanias, V, 7, 7; V, 10, 1; Also see Arthur S. Pease, "Oelbaum," *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Metzlerische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1937), 17.2:2018-19.

20. Strabo, XIV, 120; Tacitus, *Annals* III, 61; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI, 335; XIII, 634; cf. also n. 11.

21. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, 106-9; Nilsson, *History of Greek Religion*, 26-27, *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion*, 417-19; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 139-43.

22. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, 107, follows Arthur B. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914-40), 3:224-25, in arguing that the rock of the Acropolis at Athens was the original "Athene" and that the goddess developed as the deity of the site, taking its name. Later associations with the Mycenaean tree cult, snake goddess, and protecting goddess of the palace and its rulers were attached to the "pre-Greek mountain mother of the Acropolis rock."

23. Cook, followed by Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, 107, argues that Athena's connection with the olive derived from its presence on the acropolitan rock of which Athena was the divine personification. In contrast, Jane Harrison, in "Some Points in Dr. Furwaengler's Theories on the Parthenon and Its Marbles," *Classical Review* 9 (1885): 85-92, argues that Athena, as Athena Aglauros, functions specifically as an olive goddess. The connection, according to Harrison, arose because the goddess Athena's first cult statue was made of olive wood. From the olive wood statue, which was in a certain sense considered the person of Athena, came the association of Athena as being the sacred olive tree of Athens itself. The early belief that Athena was the olive is reflected in the goddess's later iconography on Athenian coinage as emerging from the trunk of an olive. The

identification of Athena as the tree perhaps dates to the era of Minoan influence and reflects the widespread tree cult of Minoan religion. On the latter point see Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, 106, and Nilsson, *History of Greek Religion*, 26–27.

24. The elder Pliny, *Natural History* XVI, 240, reports that the sacred olive of Athena still stood upon the Acropolis in his day and was considered by many to be the oldest tree in the world. Plutarch claims that the particular tree dated to at least as early as the reign of the quasi-mythical king Theseus (*Theseus* 18). Legend holds that this was the first olive tree, created by Athena as her gift to mankind, by striking the ground of the Acropolis with the point of her spear (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI, 80; Vergil, *Georgics* I, 18). The tree is frequently associated with Athena in iconographical and artistic depiction (Pausanias I, 24, 3–5). The competition between Athena and Poseidon to become patron deity of the Athenians resulted in Poseidon's attack on Athena's olive with a saltwater pool. Harrison, "Some Points in Dr. Furwaengler's Theories," 92, suggests that the attack was made not simply on the tree but on the person of Athena, embodied in the tree. Herodotus, VIII, 55, recounts the competition and Athena's triumph with the assistance of Cecrops, the Minoan-Mycenaean legendary founder of Athens. His son Erechtheus constructed a great palace on the Acropolis of which Athena was guardian in her guise as the Minoan protectoress goddess of princes and palaces (Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, 107). The palace housed both Athena's sacred olive and her protecting serpent. On the same site was later constructed the Erechtheum, named for Erechtheus. In historical times this was the site of Athena's olive (Pausanias I, 26, 5 to I, 27, 2). From these associations can be adduced additional evidence for Athena's Minoan-Mycenaean origin at Athens.

25. Plutarch, *Theseus* 22; Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* LX, 2.

26. The incident is recounted by numerous sources, most complete of which are Herodotus, VIII, 55; Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* XIV, 2; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* I, 27, 2.

27. On questions of syncretism of Greek religion and mythology into the Roman system in general, see n. 13.

28. Pliny, *Natural History* XVI, 240.

29. Festus, *De Significatione Verbum* 10 (M), s.v. *albogalerus*; Servius, *In Vergilium Commentarius* I, 270; II, 683. Also see Arthur S. Pease, "Oelbaum," *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, 17:2:2017.