

LILIES & OTHER FLOWERS

“A Rose is not a Rose is not a Rose...”

Confusion arose about the flowers named in the Bible because the people who translated the ancient Hebrew or Greek texts did not know the botany of the Holy Land. They often used names like “lily” or “rose” for plants that *were not* lilies or roses. Modern scholars who have studied both the ancient words and the plants of Palestine have solved some of the questions, but there is still uncertainty about many biblical plants. Lilies are referred to often in the Bible, but many references seem to describe some other flower. In fact, sometimes the word appears to simply mean “flower”.

Matthew 6:28-29 (cf. Luke 12:27) (Greek “krinon”) *“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.”*

From all evidence, this most certainly is not a lily (which only grew in the mountains), but the poppy anemone (windflower). Many artists illustrate the common English lily here by error (including Leonardo daVinci). Blooming from a bulb after the spring rains, its colorful blossoms carpet the plains and roadsides, including the plain of Sharon. (*Zondervans Pictorial Bible Dictionary*). It is probably *Anemone Coronaria* (*Ranunculaceae* family).

Song of Songs 5:13 (Hebrew “shoshan”) *“His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh.”*

This is possibly a reference to a real lily *Lilium chalconianum*.

Song of Songs 2:1-2, 4 *“I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. Like a lily is my darling among the maidens....He has taken me to the banquet hall and his banner over me is love.”*

Here it could refer to a mountain tulip, lily, or yellow water iris! These are *Lilium candidum*, *Iris pseudacoris* or *Tulipa sharonensis*.

Song of Songs is a series of lyric poems on the love theme, full of images from the countryside. The time is spring. Possibly these are all allegories of God’s love for Israel or Christ’s love for his bride, the church.

One thing is clear after centuries of argument about the identity of the “rose” in the Bible – it is NOT a rose, as we know it.

Hosea 14:4-8 *“I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily...” (vs. 5)*

This is probably a yellow water iris!

Isaiah 35:1-2 *“The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus (rose in KJV) it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy...”*

This is a song about the joy of the redeemed! The rose of the KJV and the crocus of the NIV are most likely indeed a spring bulb and possibly a mountain tulip. However, it is most generally thought to be a narcissus, *Narcissus tazetta*. The white narcissus is abundant in Palestine (Caesarea, Jerusalem and Jericho). In the high country the flowers are a dazzling yellow. They flower as early as January. The flowers have a sweet odor and bouquets are sold in the marketplaces of Palestinian towns. It grows in the Plain of Sharon and could also be the “rose” of Song of Songs 2:1-2!

This chapter of Isaiah stands in striking contrast to the horror of chapter 34 (judgment by total destruction, rendering the land inhabitable). Destruction in ch. 35 gives way to re-creation. God is coming to bring his people home by a safe highway. At the sight of Him everything is changed. The dry and lifeless desert, bursting for joy, becomes a paradise of flowing streams, great trees and glowing flowers. (*Eerdmans*).

NARCISSUS: In Greek mythology: Demeter’s daughter, Persephone, went gathering flowers in Sicily and saw a blossom more beautiful than all the rest. The Greek name for this flower comes from “Narke”, meaning “numbness” and translates as “narcissus”. Persephone reached for the flower, a chasm opened, and Hades, god of the underworld, grabbed her and carried her down to become his bride. Persephone should have known better, for the narcissus had infernal connotations. Greek physicians knew of its ability to deaden the senses, and the flower often adorned coffins.

John Chancellor in “Fruits and Flowers of the Bible” has another version of the Greek myth about Narcissus. “Narkissos” failed to return the love of the nymph Echo, the daughter of Earth and Air; she pined away leaving nothing but her voice and the handsome Narcissus was drowned through admiring his own reflection in the water. A white narcissus sprang up at the spot where his body floated to the shore.

Narcissus and daffodil bulbs are toxic and can cause death. They are used medicinally to induce vomiting (in poison cases). It is so dangerous, however, that herbalists no longer use it.

Does this help you with the words *narcosis, narcotics, narcissism, narcotine?*

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Zondervan’s Pictorial Bible Dictionary; Fruits & Flowers of the Bible (John Chancellor); Eerdman’s Bible Handbook; Consider the Lilies (John & Katherine Paterson); Matthew I (William Barclay).