

## THE HISTORY OF OLIVE OIL<sup>1</sup>

*"The whole Mediterranean, the sculpture, the palm, the gold beads, the bearded heroes, the wine, the ideas, the shops, the moonlight, the winged gorgons, the bronze men, the philosophers, - all of it seems to rise in the sour, pungent taste of these black olives between the teeth. A taste older than meat, older than wine. A taste as old as cold water. Only the sea itself seems as ancient a part of the region as the olive and its oil, that like no other products of Nature, have shaped civilizations from remotest antiquity to the present."*

Laurence Durrell, Prospero's Cell, 1945



### THE ETYMOLOGY OF "OLIVE"

*Says an olive tree to its master, "Look after me and I will nourish you. Water me and I will enrich you."*

It is generally believed, as we will see, that olives were first cultivated simultaneously on the island of Crete as well in the area we now refer to as Syria. The tapping of the olive for the production of oil has become synonymous with the birth of Western Civilization. The Mediterranean names for the olive, themselves, indicate how valuable an inter-cultural resource the olive was. It is believed that from Syria, the olive spread south and west throughout North Africa and to a lesser degree expanded north and west. The Semitic word for olive is zeit, or zayt, becoming zayith in Hebrew, zaita in Aramaic, zait in Arabic, zeitun in Farsi, zeituni in Swahili and dzita in Armenia. The names of several sites in these regions are derived from the word zeit: Zejtun in Malta; Wadi Zeit in Jordan; Mt. Zeit in Egypt; El Zeitun, a village in Egypt; and Zeytinburnu, a Turkish village.

<sup>1</sup> Research compiled by Cynthia Zaferatos, AWISHhellas.

The Cretan word for olive, elaiwa, also changed as the olive and its oil moved north and west through Southern Europe, becoming elaia in Classical Greek, oliva in Latin, olivera in Spanish, olew in Welsh and olive in German. There is speculation that the Greek word for olive tree, elaion, may have been derived from the Semitic Phoenician word, el'you, meaning superior, perhaps alluding to the higher quality associated with olive oil compared to other oils that were available at the time.

Just as with the word zeit, many name places throughout the Mediterranean region relate to the Greek word, elaia and the Latin word, oliva: Ela, a cape and river in Cyprus; Elaia, Elaikhorian, Elaiofiton, Elaion, Elaiothos, all villages in Greece; the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem; Olivet, a village in France: and Olivares, a Spanish village.

### THE CULTIVATION OF THE OLIVE

Sun, stone, drought, silence, solitude. These are, according to traditional Italian folklore, the five ingredients that create an ideal habitat for the cultivation of olive trees. They must be able to withstand harsh winters, blazing summers, rainless months and ferocious winds, possessing an "almost titanic resistance, a vital force which renders them nearly immortal" (Global Gourmet).

The olive tree's ancestor, the wild oleaster, grows prolifically throughout the Mediterranean Basin. It bears tiny, inedible olives and does not resemble the cultivated olive tree, the Olea Europaea. Fossilized remains of the oleaster, dating back 20 million years, have been discovered near Livorno, Italy while sixty thousand year old fossilized olive trees have been found in the volcanic rocks of Santorini, Greece. Records exist revealing that wild olives were also collected by Neolithic People in Anatolia as early as 8500 B.C.



Experts agree that the olive tree is amongst the oldest known cultivated trees and was tended before written language was developed. They disagree, however, on the exact location where domestication first occurred. Some scholars theorize that the olive was first cultivated in Asia Minor, in the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium, B.C., along the Levantine Coast, in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in the area between Syria and Iran. Other scholars

contend that the Mesopotamian Fertile Crescent is where the domestic olive originated. There are also theories hypothesizing that the first cultivation of the olive occurred on the island of Crete prior to 4000 B.C. during the Early Minoan Era, and still others that suggest that olive oil pressing existed in 4500 B.C. in the land of Canaan, in modern day Israel. It is generally believed that the peoples of the Levant and the peoples of Minoan Crete developed olive cultivation independent of each other as no evidence exists that they experienced any contact with one another. The evolution of the respective names for the olive would support this conjecture. For example, in Egypt, the olive was referred to by its Semitic name, suggesting that the Egyptians were introduced to the olive by people living in the Levant region.



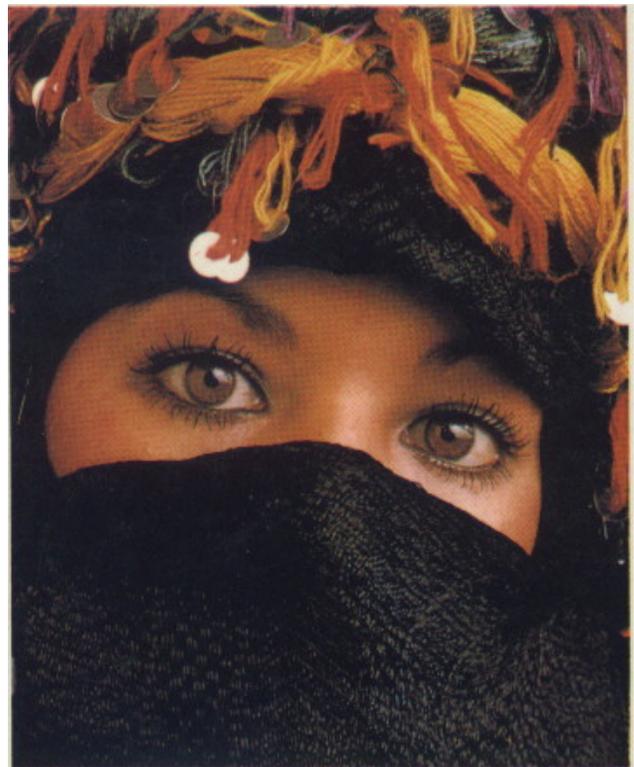
Depictions of the olive appear throughout the Mediterranean on ancient pottery, coins and tomb decorations. Hieroglyphics reveal that Egypt was importing olive oil from Syria, as well as from the West Side of the Nile Delta as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium, B.C. The study of 3,000 year old mummies confirms that mummies were customarily preserved with olive oil and adorned with olive branches. Cured olives were also placed in the tombs as food for the afterlife. The olive was mentioned by the Pharaoh Thutmosis III in an ancient Egyptian writing. He

described how whenever his men traveled, they received good bread, olive oil, wine, honey and fruits. There is also a reference to the Egyptian Temple of Karnak, noting an inscription engraved on one of the temple walls: "And the men of his majesty's army were anointed in Djahi with the oil of olives, day after day, as is their wont during feast days in Egypt."

Olives, a source of great wealth, were of tremendous importance to the Minoan civilization on Crete. Olive oil was a significant trade commodity and the Minoans most likely exported olive clippings for cultivation along with the oil to Greece and to the North Coast of Africa. Samos, an island on the Minoan trade route, near the Gulf of Smyrna, literally translates as "planted with olives". In the Knossos Palace on Crete, in the Room of the Olive Press, open pipes flowed into amphorae, enormous jars used to store oil, that are still in use to this day.



Once introduced to Greece, the Greeks were responsible for raising the olive and its oil to a status unrivaled by any other substance, plant or food. Homer, the immortal Greek poet, makes innumerable references to olive oil in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. By 1500 B.C., Greece was the largest producer of olive oil in the ancient world and as the Greeks, along with the Phoenicians, emigrated west and established colonies in Italy, France, Spain and North Africa; olive oil became the currency for establishing trade with these respective cultures. By the 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., olive orchards flourished in Attica, and by the 6<sup>th</sup>



Century B.C., Solon, the great Athenian statesman and poet, enacted laws that protected the olive trees of Athens. Trees were inspected on a monthly basis and anyone that was convicted of cutting down a tree was punished by death. Solon also instituted legislation that, for a time, prohibited the export of olive oil. However, the winners of Athens's most important athletic competition, "The Panathenaic Amphorae", whose victory prize was 5 tons of oil stored in gigantic amphorae, were exempted from this law. Consequently, the victors enjoyed the potential of becoming quite wealthy. By the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., Herodotus, the Greek historian who is sometimes referred to as "The Father of History", described Athens as "a vast center of Greek olive culture". So much oil was being produced, in fact, that the prohibition of exporting olive oil ended and it became a major

export. Along with her oil, Greece also disseminated her techniques for olive cultivation and for olive curing across the Mediterranean.

During the Early Roman Empire, olives and their oil were highly prized, particularly by the Roman Emperors. Until 70 B.C., the oil was considered a luxury item, to be used sparingly. On important occasions, such as the election of a new emperor, olive oil was distributed to the Roman citizens as a precious gift to be used as a means of celebration. Because Rome did not produce sufficient amounts of oil herself, she began to import oil, in the form of tax payment, from her subjects in Spain, Tunisia, Istria and Greece. In fact, in Tunisia, olive cultivation was at its height during Roman occupation, with Tunisians being taxed 300,000 gallons annually and olive groves covering more than 2 million acres of Tunisian soil. However, by the First Century A.D., the Roman historian, Pliny, noted that Italy had "excellent olive oil at reasonable prices".

As olive oil began to be more widely used in Roman cooking, standards were established, categorizing the quality of the various olives. Cato, the Roman statesman, explained that the finest oil was made from small, white, immature olives picked in September. Oil from green olives, picked in December, was considered to be good quality table oil while oil pressed from black olives was used by commoners as well as for lighting lamps and for ceremonial anointments. By the time Rome fell, in 400 A.D., the olive was flourishing throughout the Mediterranean and the Romans had invented the screw press, producing oil in the manner that would continue for the following 2000 years. Though the Roman Empire fell, the status of the olive did not. In fact, the olive tree was so highly regarded that by the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the punishment dealt to citizens of conquered cities was not death, but rather the cutting down of their olive trees.

Following millennia of vibrant exchange by Babylonians, Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans, the olive oil trade, was abruptly halted with the invasion of the Barbarians from the North. During the centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire, it was the monasteries and fortress farms that continued the tradition of cultivating and pressing the olive. The Greek Orthodox monks, especially, were able to produce vast amounts of oil, ensuring that the essential oil was available, not only for physical sustenance, but also for the solemn rites and rituals of the Church. To this day, the olive remains an important, integral and treasured part of the Mediterranean culture. In Greece, civil servants are allowed time off from their jobs during the annual olive harvest, so that they

can return to their ancestral villages and participate in the customs and traditions that sustained their families for millennia!

#### TRADITIONAL USES OF THE OLIVE

*"Oh, olive tree, blessed be the earth that nourishes you and  
blessed be the water you drink from the clouds  
and thrice blessed He who sent you for the poor man's lamp and  
the saint's candlelight."*

Cretan Folksong

To the peoples of the Mediterranean, the olive has traditionally been more than just a nutritious and ubiquitous source of food. It has also been essential to the health, well-being, economics, religious ceremonies and daily customs of Hebrews, Muslims, Greeks, Romans and Christians since antiquity. In both ancient Canaan and pre-Homeric Greece, olive oil was used as a vital ingredient in sacred anointments and perfumes, as an important fuel for illuminating lamps (one liter of olive oil provides at least 200 hours of light), as precious medicine, and of course, as a major component of the Mediterranean diet. Because olive wood has such an efficient burning capacity, (37.3 million BTU's per cord), the olive tree was also highly valued as a source of heat.

Simply stated, olive oil has been, and continues to be, an integral part of everyday life throughout the Mediterranean. At various times it has been used as soap, skin cleanser and conditioner, shampoo, chapstick, boot polish, axle grease for Roman machinery, a primary lubricant for machines during the Industrial Revolution and as a lubricant for clocks and watches. Today, jewelers continue to use high quality olive oil to polish expensive diamonds.

According to Homer, olive oil was so valuable that it was considered to be "liquid gold" and played a significant role in funeral rites. Intricately detailed vases from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. depict rituals of ancient Greek funerals. The tombs of wealthy people were decorated with vases of sweet aromatic olive oil which were either shattered at the grave site or placed in the tomb for use in the afterlife. Perhaps this is also why drops of the sacred oil seeped into the bones of dead saints and martyrs through holes in their tombs. The custom of breaking small containers of olive oil at Greek funerals continues in some cases to this day. Olive branches dipped in purifying water have also been used in funeral ceremonies. In Jordan, it is customary that people eat a variety of pancakes fried in olive oil on the morning after a funeral.

In ancient Greece, the ultimate honor bestowed on victorious athletes was the placing of fresh olive wreaths on their heads. The branches of the wreaths were cut from special olive trees that grew at the western end of the Temple of Zeus and were specifically cut by a pure, young boy who cut them using a golden sickle. Athletes would also rub their bodies before exertions and competitions. Common people, too, would rub olive oil into their skin, especially on their feet, before and after long journeys. In the public baths and gymnasiums in Greece and Rome, professional masseurs massaged their clients with olive oil. Attendees at banquets were also anointed with aromatic olive oil and crowned with olive wreaths.



Several additional practices involving olive oil were common as well. Families in some old Mediterranean cultures would announce the birth of a son by hanging an olive wreath on the front door of their homes. Farmers rubbed olive oil into the bark of fruit trees as a deterrent to harmful insects. This practice also insulated the tree against frost and helped to retain moisture during the months of stifling heat.

Weavers rubbed oil onto their fingers in order to soften them, thereby increasing their dexterity. They also greased the woolen fleece, enabling the wool to be more easily spun and woven. Sandal makers liberally applied oil to leather in order to make it more pliable. The leaves of the olive tree were often fed to animals, or dried and used as fuel or even to make paper. The wood of the olive tree, regarded for its beauty, was often used in the creation of religious buildings.

Finally, despite being extremely hard and therefore difficult to work, several objects mentioned in Greek mythology were constructed from olive wood: the club and arrows of Hercules, the bed of Odysseus and the icon of the goddess Athena in the Parthenon.

#### THE OLIVE AS MEDICINE

*"Consume olive oil and anoint it upon your bodies  
since it is of the blessed tree."*

Prophet Muhammad

In the 7<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. the Prophet Muhammad advised his followers to regard olive oil as an essential component of health, noting more than 70 different diseases that the oil was believed to cure. In fact, throughout the Mediterranean, the belief that olive oil, leaves and blossoms conferred strength, health, vitality and youth was widely held. A Greek text from 1550 B.C. lists olive oil as one 700 therapeutics, to be taken orally as well as to be applied as a healing lubricant and soothing emollient. Between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries B.C., ancient philosophers, physicians and historians began classifying the olive botanically and referring to the curative properties of olive oil.



In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., the Greek physician, Herodicus, perhaps history's first sports physician, prescribed olive oil massages to enhance the performance of Greece's elite athletes. These athletes were apparently so revered, that the oil and sweat that dripped from their bodies was bottled and sold for medicinal purposes for exorbitant prices. Herodicus' student, Hippocrates, considered to be the "Father of Western Medicine", further advocated the restorative properties of olive oil. Central to his adage, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food" was the rejuvenate power associated with the olive. By drinking the oil, it was believed that the following conditions would be rectified:

- Intestinal parasites
- Bladder and kidney afflictions
- Mucous membrane inflammation
- Bowel afflictions
- Teething discomfort
- Rheumatic diseases
- Yellow fever
- Tumors and diseases of the thyroid gland

Topical potions made by mixing olive oil with herbs, flowers, limestone, clay, charcoal and even snake skin and centipede legs were used to treat:

- Mushroom poisoning
- Burns, including sunburns
- Venereal disease
- Earaches
- Alcoholism
- Pimples
- Skin diseases
- Paralysis
- Coughs

- Arthritis
- Dull, damaged hair

Such was the regard for the benefits of olive oil that during the Middle Ages, the word “ladi”, Greek for oil, was the name given to all medicines that were prepared with this life giving oil. As the Romans declared, “For one’s well being, wine within and olive oil without.”

### MYTHOLOGY AND SYMBOLISM OF THE OLIVE

Olives figure prominently in the mythology and symbolism of the Mediterranean, representing rebirth, light, tranquility, victory, wisdom, euphoria and wisdom. They are also commonly regarded as a symbol of peace and because they grow to be extremely old and are capable of continuously producing fruit, they also became an ancient symbol of fertility.

*“Its mystical glow illuminated history.”*

Global Gourmet

Greek mythology is particularly rich in references to the revered olive tree. In fact, many of the ancient Greek gods and goddesses were believed to have been born under the branches of the olive tree. It is likely that this is the reason olive leaf wreaths decorated accomplished soldiers and scholars, olive branches and jars of olive oil were given to victorious athletes, and tombs from antiquity were adorned with wreaths figured from golden olive leaves. Ancient navigators also revered the olive, placing an olive branch between the hands of an image of their god, as they sought protection from the potential wrath of Poseidon.

Perhaps the best known and most loved tale involving the olive tree is the Greek myth explaining how the olive tree was brought to Greece. Zeus, ruler of the heavens and father of other gods and mortal heroes, promised to give Attica and her newly built city, to the god or goddess who created the most useful invention. The victor would become the protector of the new city and the city would assume the victor’s name. The contest narrowed to two competitors, Poseidon, the God of the Sea and Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom and the Arts. Poseidon struck a rock with his trident and out poured water, followed by a beautiful mighty horse capable of winning wars. Meanwhile, Athena struck the rock with the spear and created the olive tree, a tree possessing the power to illuminate the night, soothe wounds and nourish the body. Zeus marveled at Athena’s creation and thus, she was awarded the position of becoming the protector of Attica and its new city,



Athens and the virtue of peace was honored over the destruction of war

Athena planted her olive tree in a “rock”, a rock guarded by soldiers who were commanded to protect the tree. The

“rock” became known as “The Acropolis”. It is said that a son of Poseidon tried to uproot the tree, an act which proved impossible, as the tree’s roots were literally embedded in the rock. In the futile process, he wounded himself and furthermore, as a consequence of this sacrilegious act, he was put to death. Athena’s sacred tree was also torched by invading Persians. Yet, miraculously, the tree regenerated itself and its offshoots were planted throughout Greece. The olive, consequently, became a symbol of all that was good and noble in mankind as well as a symbol of permanence and perseverance.

In addition to Athena becoming the patron deity of Athens, there are other important mythological references to the olive tree. Irene, the Greek Goddess of Peace, is typically portrayed with a cornucopia in one hand and an olive branch in the other, thereby connecting abundance and peace. On a more gruesome note, Homer describes Odysseus as jabbing an olive branch into the eye of the Cyclops in order to blind him and thus escape being eaten.

### THE FOLKLORE OF THE OLIVE

*“Angels with long braids and hearts of olive oil.”*

Frederico Garcia Lorca

Alongside the rich mythology and legends that grew out of the olive culture, many fascinating superstitions also evolved regarding the magical properties of the olive tree.

- Athenian brides wore crowns of olive branches or carried bouquets of olive branches in order to ensure a fruitful marriage.
- Throughout Italy, an olive branch placed over the doorway was believed to repel witches and wizards.
- In Spain, an olive branch was said to keep a husband faithful and the wife the master of the house.
- Spaniards also believed that an olive tree touched by a prostitute or by an unfaithful husband would fail to produce fruit. Conversely, trees tended by young and innocent children would result in an increased harvest.

- In Bild, Algeria, it is purported that there was an ancient olive tree that infirm people drove nails into in order to cure their ills.
- In some regions of the Mediterranean, it was believed that the quality and yield of the olive harvest could be predicted by the colors and shades of the rainbow, and that if an olive tree blossomed during the night, the harvest would be bountiful.
- The Venetians believed that attaching an olive branch to a chimney would prevent lightning from striking.
- During harvest festivals in Greece, a choir of boys carried wreaths of olive branches wrapped in wool. The wreaths were later hung on the doors of houses to ensure prosperity.
- In Greece, sailors contended that a few drops of oil from the lamp of Saint Nicholas, patron saint of sailors, had the power to calm turbulent seas.
- A traditional Cretan folksong proclaims that “the one who eats the oil and bread and olive oil pie will not get struck by the bowshots of death.”
- Pickled and cured olives were considered by some to possess aphrodisiac qualities.
- Finally, because the olive tree was so revered in Greece, legend has it that only virgins and chaste men were allowed to cultivate it. Furthermore, during the harvest, an oath of chastity was required from the harvesters!

## THE OLIVE AND RELIGION

*“And God blessed man with wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthen man’s heart.”*

David, Psalm 93

It is generally agreed upon that olive oil was used as an anointment throughout the Mediterranean before being commonly used for food or fuel. Its application was so significant that anointing evolved into a deeply religious rite. There are innumerable references to the oil harvest, to olive cultivation and to the application of oil in the religious scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as in the sacred texts of ancient



Egypt, Greece and Rome. The pottery of Greek antiquity depicts elaborate rituals in which olive crowns and branches were offered to Greek deities as symbols of benediction and purification.

In the Bible, alone, there are more than 140 references to olive oil, substantiating the notion of how prolific olive cultivation was in the Land of Canaan. Perhaps one of the most renowned Biblical references, found in the Book of Genesis, occurred in the Garden of Eden where God visited the Patriarch Adam and gave him the gift of an olive tree to plant in the garden. Adam was given very precise directions by God as to how to cultivate and care for the tree so that “oil which would heal man’s wounds and combat all ills” could be produced. Olive oil was regarded as a God given gift and Adam the gardener who was entrusted with the responsibility of passing this gift on to future generations.

In Morocco, there is a similar story about the sacred olive tree in the Garden of Eden. According to this version, on each leaf of this tree, the name of God was invisibly written. It is deemed that it was, in fact, the olive tree, itself, that advised Eve not to be tempted by the serpent and that also advised Adam and Eve to repent after partaking of the forbidden fruit. God, acknowledging the olive tree’s love and concern for mankind decreed, “Your leaves will be the color of silver and emerald. Your fruit will be worth its weight in gold. Flocks will find shelter under your leaves and saints will seek your shade and bless you.”

The Book of Genesis also contains the story of Noah and the Great Flood. Noah, a patriarch chosen by God because of his righteousness, was commanded to construct an ark and populate it with honest and virtuous members of his family, and many species of animals, both male and female. God was preparing to send a ravaging flood to Earth to destroy the corrupted cities. It rained for forty days and forty nights, water covering even the highest mountains. Yet, Noah, because of his obedience to God, saved all the creatures on the Ark. After 150 days, the Ark came to rest on the Mountains of Ararat, in the region we now refer to as Turkey. Noah sent forth a dove and when it returned, it was carrying an olive branch in its beak, signifying the end of the Great Flood and a return to safety, peace, regeneration and abundance.



The first recorded oil extraction is mentioned in the Old Testament in the Book of Exodus. It is written that oil was derived from hand

squeezing the olive berries and the juice produced was stored in special containers that were guarded by priests. In Exodus 30:22-33, Moses is directed by God to mix spices with olive oil and to use this oil for holy anointing. God commands Moses, "This shall be a holy anointing oil unto me throughout your generations." In Exodus 27:20, God also specifically decrees that olive oil is to be the oil used to fuel the lamp in the Tabernacle. He instructs Moses that the Israelites should "bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly. It shall burn from evening to morning before the Eternal. It shall be a due from the Israelites for all time throughout the ages."

Another Biblical citation is found in Kings 5:25 which describes how King Solomon bartered olive oil for cedar and cypress wood. Olive groves were evidently so highly prized by both King Solomon and King David that guards were placed in the orchards and around the warehouses to ensure the safety of the trees and the treasured oil. Such was the veneration of the olive, that an ancient Jewish law forbade the destruction of any productive olive tree, even if owned by an enemy. Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 24:20, there is an edict requiring olive tree owners to leave any ungathered olives, after the harvest, for the poor to glean, as an act of charity and social justice.

In Jewish religious observance, olive oil is the only fuel allowed to be used in the seven branched Menorah, in a service called "Mishkan". Mishkan refers to the temporary dwelling place of the Presence of God during the Exodus of the tribes of Israel from Egypt and later in the permanent Temple of Jerusalem, the Holy City that was founded at the foot of the Mount of Olives. This sacred oil was produced from the first drop squeezed from an olive and consecrated especially for this observance by the temple priests. The oil was then stored in special holy vessels. A copy of the Menorah is now used during Hanukkah, a holiday that commemorates the discovery of the last of such a vessel that was found in 163 B.C. during the re-dedication of the Temple of Jerusalem. The oil, enough to burn for one night, miraculously burned for eight nights. The ritual of squeezing and consecrating the first drops of oil is where the term, "pure olive oil" originated.

The olive has also played an instrumental role in the evolution of the Christian religion and faith. The name, Christ, which means "the anointed one", comes from the Greek word *chrism*, which means "to anoint with oil". There are references to washing and anointing with oil throughout the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark relays that Jesus had precious ointment poured onto his head. The followers of Christ often carried olive branches as they

journeyed, signifying, "I come in peace." It was on the Mount of Olives, *Jebel ez-Zeitun*, and east of Jerusalem, where Jesus stood, gazed upon the Holy City and wept. And it was in the Garden of Gethsemane, a Hebrew word that translates as "the garden of the oil press", where Jesus prayed and was arrested before he was crucified.

To the Roman Catholic, Greek and Eastern Orthodox Churches, olive oil became a symbol representing the sacred cycle of life and



therefore has been used in every important ceremony, including rites marking birth, baptism, marriage, illness and death. These perfumed oils are referred to as the "Chrism Oils", the anointed, holy oils that strengthen the spirit of those being anointed.

Fourteen hundred years ago, the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, encouraged his followers to apply olive oil to their bodies and he, himself poured oil on his head. The importance of the olive tree is evident in the Qur'an in the following passage from Islam's Holy Book: "God is the light of heavens and earth. An example of His Light is like a lantern inside which there is a torch, the torch is in a glass bulb, the glass bulb is like a bright planet lit by a blessed olive tree, neither Eastern nor Western, its oil almost glows even without fire touching it, light upon light.:"

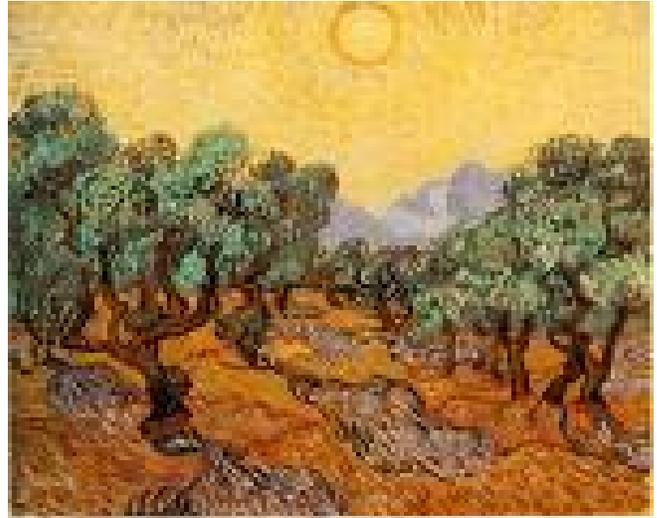
In Islamic tradition, it is said that at the death of Muhammad, most of the trees mourned by shedding their leaves. When the olive tree, who did not shed its leaves, was asked why it did not mourn, it replied by saying, "You show your sorrow by external signs,



but our grief, who care not for the opinion of others, but only that Allah, who reads the secrets of the heart, should approve of our motives, is no less sincere, though inward. Should you cleave my trunk open, for instance, you would find that at its core it has become black with grief."

As one considers the history and significance of the olive, it is difficult to imagine any other food rivaling the role it has played in so many cultures. Since the dawn of civilization, it has been revered as sacred and immortal, it has provided sustenance and nourishment, it has signified peace and prosperity. Poets, artists, historians, physicians, artists, gods, goddesses, priests and prophets have extolled its virtues and paid homage to its life giving qualities. As the Greek poet, K. Palamas so simply yet so eloquently wrote,

*I am the Daughter of the Sun;  
I am the Olive Tree,  
The Blessed One.*



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