Medicinal plants of the Bible—revisited
Amots Dafni* and Barbara Böck

Abstract

Background: Previous lists number from 55 to 176 plant species as “Biblical Medicinal Plants.” Modern studies attest that many names on these lists are no longer valid. This situation arose due to old mistranslations and/or mistakes in botanical identification. Many previously recognized Biblical plants are in no way related to the flora of the Bible lands. Accordingly, the list needs revision.

Methods: We re-examine the list of possible medicinal plants in the Bible based on new studies in Hebrew Biblical philology and etymology, new studies on the Egyptian and Mesopotamian medicinal use of plants, on ethnobotany and on archaeobotany.

Results: In our survey, we suggest reducing this list to 45 plant species. Our contribution comprises 20 “newly” suggested Biblical Medicinal Plants. Only five species are mentioned directly as medicinal plants in the Bible: Fig (Ficus carica), Nard (Nardostachys jatamansi), Hyssop (Origanum syriacum), balm of Gilead (Commiphora gileadensis) and Mandrake (Mandragora officinarum). No fewer than 18 medicinal plants are mentioned in old Jewish post-Biblical sources, in addition to those in the Bible. Most of these plants (15) are known also in Egypt and Mesopotamia while three are from Egypt only. Seven of our suggested species are not mentioned in the Bible or in the Jewish post-Biblical literature but were recorded as medicinal plants from Egypt, as well as from Mesopotamia. It is quite logical to assume that they can be included as Biblical Medicinal Plants.

Conclusions: All our suggested Biblical Medicinal Plants are known as such in Ancient Egypt and/or Mesopotamia also. Examination of our list shows that all these plants have been in continuous medicinal use in the Middle East down the generations, as well as being used in the Holy Land today. Precisely in King Solomon’s words, “That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done. And there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

Keywords: Bible, Medicinal plants

Background

Identification of Biblical plants
Most of the massive research on the identity of Biblical plant names is based on linguistics and philology [1–8 and references therein]. Wlodarczyk [9] reviewed “how many plants are mentioned in the Bible” and concluded that the list contains 206 plant names, 95 of which “are recognized by all contemporary researchers of the floras of the Bible.” This discrepancy is not at all surprising since most authors of books on plants of the Bible [4, 10–17 a except 3, 5–7] were not familiar with Hebrew and/or the Holy Land flora. For example, Duke [1] enumerates at least 176 species as “Biblical Medicinal Plants” (hence BMPs), while the total number of recognized plants in the Bible is about 100 [8]. Needless to say, too many species of his list are not related at all to the flora in the region and were never grown or traded in the ancient Middle East. Jacob [2] listed 55 plants (most on a species level but some on a genus level) as BMPs, based on a comparison to Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature.

Amar [8] revised the flora of the Bible, based particularly on old Jewish post-Biblical sources and their succession down the generations. He arranged all the traditional plant names in several categories according to identification reliability: (a) plant names identified with certainty (40); (b) plant names identified at a high reliability level (11); (c) plant names whose identification is on a high reliability level but not fail-safe (22); (d) plant names that are unidentifiable or whose identification reliability is very low (13); (e) accumulative names and non-species-specific names like “thorn” or “lily"
chose to follow Amar’s (8) exceptions). In most cases of disagreement among the leading authorities (3–7), we chose to follow Amar’s (8) (see the discussion for few exceptions).

Identification of Ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian plants

Plants are undoubtedly the main source for curing and alleviating diseases in Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. Both civilizations belong to the world of the Old Testament, which explains why a short survey about their knowledge of medicinal plants is included. In the strict sense, Mesopotamia refers to the land between the rivers, namely the Tigris and Euphrates, but the region includes the area most of now Iraq, eastern Syria and southeastern Turkey. While the first written documents, namely clay tablets, date to the end of the 4th millennium BCE the main information on medicinal plants comes from cuneiform tablets dating to the second and first millennia BCE. Ancient Egypt spans the region of the Nile Valley, reaching areas east and west of it along the Mediterranean coast; to the south, Ancient Egypt stretched deep into the north of modern Sudan. The first hieroglyphic texts on medicine date to the middle of the second millennium BCE. The pharmacopoeia of both cultures included more than 200 plants, most of which cannot be identified. Ethnobotanical studies (e.g. Borchardt (19:190)) often refer to the pioneering work of Campbell Thompson (20) for the identification of Mesopotamian plant terms, or von Deines and Grapow (21) for ancient Egypt; they are unaware of the present, often highly specialized, linguistic and philological discussions in the fields of Assyriology and Egyptology. Philologists such as the Egyptologist Pommerening (22) or the Assyriologist Böck (23) attest to the need to challenge and revise the methodology used so far to identify ancient Egyptian and ancient Mesopotamian plant terms. The *comnus opinio* in both fields of research is rather skeptical about the identification of plant terms with actual plants. In fact, revisions comparable to the comprehensive work of Amar (8) on the Biblical flora are still in process. As for ancient Mesopotamia, identifying language terms in Akkadian, the language in which most of the medical cuneiform texts are written, depends heavily on etymological research. This consists of collecting cognate terms in other Semitic languages such as Aramaic or Hebrew and applying identification of the Aramaic or Hebrew term to the Akkadian name. As a result, learning the identity of Akkadian plants depends basically on studies about the Aramaic and Hebrew terminology of plants (e.g., Löw (3)). These identifications have entered the two basic dictionaries of the Akkadian language (24, 25) but have enjoyed scant discussion and revision.

The use of medicinal plants in the world of the Old Testament

The ample number of medical recipes prescribing various “drug therapies” clearly shows the prominence of ingredients of vegetable origin in ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt (e.g. (26, 27)).

In the Bible, very few cases related to the use of plants for medicine, for example, the use of balm to treat sores (Jeremiah, 8, 22; 46, 11; 51, 8) and how King Hezekiah was treated with a fig (II Kings 20:7). Very rarely ethnobotanical information may help concerning the medicinal Biblical plants. An exception is the use of *Origanum syriacum* by the Samaritans in exactly the same manner as in Biblical times (28:71-2). A few archaeological studies illuminate the use of medicinal plants in the Holy Land in Biblical times and even earlier. Written evidence exists from letters of Tel Al Amarna showing that the King of Gezer (Palestine, 14th BCE) asked for myrrh gum (*Commiphora* sp.) from Egypt for healing (29:29). Langgut et al. (30) found pollen of three medicinal plants (mint, sage type, and myrtle) in human feces from Megiddo (Late Bronze Age, 12–11th centuries BCE). Langgut et al. consider it (30: 382) “the possible use of different types of herbal teas.” Weinstein-Evron (31) found myrtle pollen in a stone mortar from Megiddo (Iron Age 12–11th centuries BCE). Preparation of powder from *Myrtus* leaves for medicine is also a practice still used today in Israel (32:210-211). Koh et al. (33) analyzed the organic residues of wine jars found in a courtyard in the Middle Bronze Age (ca 1900–1600 BCE) in a Canaanite palace at Tel Kabri (13 km north of Haifa, Israel). The additives seem to have included honey, Storax resin (*Liquidambar orientalis*), Terebinth resin (*Pistacia lentiscus*/P. *palaestina*), Cedar oil (*Cedrus libani*), Cyperus (*Cyperus rotundus*) and Juniper (*Juniperus communis*/. *phoenicea*), and perhaps even mint, myrtle, or cinnamon. They concluded that “the plants’ materials were used to preserve wine (as resins), as well as a medicine already known from Ancient Egypt” (34). They also mentioned that “these additives suggest a sophisticated understanding of the botanical landscape and the pharmacopoeic skills necessary to produce a complex beverage that balanced preservation, palatability, and psychoactivity.” Namdar et al. (35) found cinnamon residues in old wine flasks from Tel Dor (30 km south of Haifa, Israel). The flasks, originating in Phoenicia, were from the early Iron Age, namely 11th to mid-9th centuries BCE. Kislev et al. (36) studied the remains of flax (*Linum usitatissimum*) from the early Iron Age (12th
century BCE, late 20th dynasty in Egypt) site of Tel Beth-Shean (70 km SE of Haifa, Israel). Like written sources of its uses, they suggest that part of the flax seeds was intended as a food component or for extracting medicinal oil. Weiss and Kislev [37] found one stone of bay laurel (Laurus nobilis) in Ashkelon (150 km south of Haifa, Israel 17th century BCE). The plant does not grow in that area, so the plant was probably taken for medicinal purposes.

This paper does not aim at a detailed catalogue of specific uses for each plant in each civilization. Our study is limited to re-examining questions arising from the list of actual and potential medicinal plants of the Bible.

Methods
Working assumptions and problems in the identification of Biblical plant names:

1. Some problems regarding the identity of Biblical plant names originated from misunderstandings of the original Hebrew version in which many plant names are not clear. A new study of the flora in the Old Testament [8] provides new scope concerning plants mentioned in the Bible, while assessing the reliability of all previously suggested botanical identifications of plant names. Plant names in the New Testament have been revised in recent dictionaries, e.g., Greek-English Biblical dictionaries [49, 50] and translations [e.g., 51]. Similar problems arose over modern references concerned with plants in the Talmud [18, 52, 53].

2. The same plant may have several names even in the same country [32 passim, 44: 132, 54:43, 55:7, 56:51]. The same name of a plant may refer to more than one botanical species and/or genera [55-58: passim]. Plants that are heavily used in medicine and witchcraft tend to have many local names (e.g., Mandrake [57]). Plant names may change down the generations; some old names may be discarded or forgotten even in the same language [58:520].

3. The old translators of the Bible, e.g., King James Version (1611 and others, see 4:7-11), were not familiar with the original Hebrew, nor with the flora of the Holy Land. So, sometimes, they mentioned names from their local floras; this might also have been done deliberately to make the plants more familiar to their own readers.

4. In general, the Bible does not refer directly to plants, most of which are mentioned in passing. The chances that a specific plant would be connected directly with a medicinal use are even lower. Linguistic remains, ethnobotanical as well as archaeobotanical, may help, but they are not evidence of possible specific medicinal uses.

5. When studying plants not mentioned in the Bible but in the Talmud, in a medicinal context, we have to remember that Talmudic medicine may have Hellenistic and Egyptian influences [59: xiii, 53:29-31]. If these plants are also recorded as medicinal plants from Mesopotamia, this may reduce that kind of bias.

6. New works, especially on the identification of Assyrian plant names [24, 56, 44:129-163, 60]
considerably extend the spectrum of validating plant names and changing previous conceptions. All previous works on Biblical plants [e.g., 2, 4, 6-8, 15, 16] were based solely on Campbell-Thompson [20], who had been highly criticized [61:492, 62:3, 63:326]. Jacob [2] was criticized by Geller [63:326] because he “assumes that the existence of a plant is sufficient to identify it within the Egyptian and Akkadian pharmacopoeia, entirely ignoring the considerable philological problems in such methodology.”

7. It is logical to assume that plants (or their products such as spices and incense), which had medicinal uses in Egypt and Mesopotamia, were also known in the Holy Land in Biblical times, even if these plants are not mentioned directly in the Bible [2:29, 64:69-70]. Cultivated plants (or their products), which are mentioned in the Talmud as medicinal plants and are also documented in Egypt, Mesopotamia and/or from archaeological evidence, are considered to have been present in the Holy Land in Biblical times. This approach is based on the evidence of intensive ancient use of and trade in medicinal plants all over the Fertile Crescent [19:188, 64:69]. Remember too that some medicinal plants were introduced into Egypt by way of Palestine [64:71]. Manniche [65:61] pondered how to decide whether or not a certain Egyptian species was really a “medicinal plant.” She concluded: “The actual remains of a plant...must be supported by some indication of the use of plant—ideally—in the Egyptian texts; in texts from contemporary neighboring civilizations ...” In Palestine, plant remains are quite rare (compared with Egypt); hence, a comparison with other contemporary cultures from the Bible period is of prime importance when considering the medical use of a given plant species”.

Procedures: 1. Checking the validity of the identification of the medicinal plant names in the Bible according to Amar [8] see above). We discard all previous lists of plant names that were supposedly mentioned in the Bible based on old mistranslations [see 66]. Many of these are not indigenous to the Holy Land at all or were never introduced.

2. Reconstruction of the inventory of potential BMPs was attempted, based on comparative data from Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The medicinal plants of Egypt and Mesopotamia were surveyed, keeping with the recent literature, in an attempt to recognize species, or products thereof, related to Biblical times. We limited ourselves to any literary evidence that a certain species had any medicinal use; we did not set out to compare the different regions/cultures on the specific uses among them.

3. We also used complementary data from post-Biblical sources: Mishna (3rd century CE) and the Babylonian Talmud (3rd–5th centuries CE). We considered only plants referred to explicitly for medical uses and already known medicinally from Egypt and/or Mesopotamia, and/or from archaeological evidence. Concerning the identification of plants in the Talmud, in cases of disagreement, we followed the most modern commentary of Steinsaltz [67] (whose botanical advisor is the authoritative archaeobotanist and Talmudist M.E. Kislev). As a result, several of the previous identifications [3, 18] are not recognized today.

4. Technically, we divided the surveyed plants into four classes, according to level of certainty as to their possible use as medicinal plants in Biblical times, based on identification reliability according to [8], as well as on subsidiary evidence: plants used or mentioned explicitly as medicinal in the Bible (Table 1); plants mentioned in the Bible and known as medicinal in Ancient Egypt and in Mesopotamia (Table 2); plants not cited in the Bible but mentioned as medicinal in post-Biblical sources and/or Egypt and/or Mesopotamia (Table 3); and various patterns (Table 4).

Results and discussion

Discussion

Only five species (Table 1) are mentioned explicitly as medicinal plants in the Bible: Fig (Ficus carica), Nard (Nardostachys jatamansi), Hyssop (Origanum syriacum), “Balm of Gilead” (Commiphora sp.) and Mandrake (Mandrage officinarum) (Table 1). Twenty-seven species come under the category “Plants which are mentioned in the Bible and are known as medicinal in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia” (Table 2). Thirteen species are included as “Plants which are not cited in the Bible but mentioned as medicinal in the Talmud and/or Egypt and/or in Mesopotamia” (Table 3). Six plants are classified under various patterns (Table 4).

At least 18 medicinal plants (Tables 2–4), in addition to those in the Bible, are mentioned in the Talmud and/or Mishna, most of which (15) are known also in Egypt and Mesopotamia, while three are only from Egypt. Since most of the post-Biblical citations are from the Babylonian Talmud, one may consider it as having influenced the local medicine of Babylonia (where this Talmud was written) rather than reflecting Biblical reality. The data indicating that all these species were also known from Egypt, strengthen the idea that the post-Biblical literature was not biased to Mesopotamian plants.
Seven of the suggested species (Table 4) are not mentioned in the Bible or in the Talmud but were recorded as medicinal plants from Egypt, as well as from Mesopotamia; it is logical to assume that they can be included as BMPs.

About 60% of our suggested BMPs are foreign species; 40% are indigenous, 60% are imported, 30% are domesticated (each plant can belong to more than one group). The main sources of foreign imported species are East Asia (11%), Southwest Asia (11%), West and South Asia (8%) and Arabia (4%).

The high proportion of imported plants (as medicinal materials) shows indirect evidence of prolific import in Biblical times [101–104]. Our list does not provide any evidence that any species were cultivated/imported solely as medicinal plants; all had some additional use. Most (87%) of the species had at least one additional use: for example, 16 are edible, 8 are used in rituals, 6 serve for perfume and cosmetics, and 5 are used as incense.

Duke [1] enumerated 176 plant species as “Biblical Medicinal Plants,” while Jacob [2] suggested only 55. In our survey, we suggest reducing that number to 45 (Tables 1–4). The overlap between Jacob’s list and ours was 29 species in total. Our contribution is 20 “new” suggested BMPs. It is noteworthy that some Biblical names are related to the genus level (e.g., Artemisia), or also to two genera as in the case of Cupressus/Juniperus.

The discrepancy between Jacob’s list and ours is due to the following: (1) At least 22 species in Jacob’s list are not recognized today as valid “Biblical plants” at all, or they are not related to any specific plant species or genus [8]. (2) Several identifications from Campbell–Thompson [20], the only Mesopotamian source used by Jacob, are no longer recognized by modern Assyriologists. (3) Several Mesopotamian plants were only recently identified in a medical context. (4) New recent palynological as well archaeological data allow us to corroborate the possibility of Biblical medicinal uses of some plants.

### Table 1: Plants used or mentioned explicitly as medicinal in the Bible

| Species /English name | Hebrew name /transcription | Source of evidence | Botanical status/ Origin/ Additional uses: |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Commiphora gileadensis | Tstoi | E: [66:78, 65:102-103, 75:28]; B: II Kings 20:7, 2 Chronicles 38:2; BT: Menachot 64a; M: [44:430,437]. | D / In / EA | In (Exodus 30:31) / O / P |
| (L.) C. Chr. / (or C. katal / (Forsk.) Engl. / (also C. opoponax / (L.) Engl.) | | | | |
| Marjoram / Syrian Feinbrun syriaca (L.) (=Majorana syriacum L. or Origanum Spikenard jatamansi DC. / Nardostachys Mandrake) | | | | |
| Balm of Gilead, Balm of Mecca | | | | |
| Ficus carica L. / Fig | Te’enah | E: [66:78, 65:102-103, 75:28]; B: II Kings 20:7, 2 Chronicles 38:2; BT: Menachot 64a; M: [44:430,437]. | D / In | E |
| Mandragora officinarum Mill. * / Mandrake | Duda’iem | B: Genesis 30:14–17; E: [65:118] (possible); M: [71:19], identification not ascertained. | In | M / A |
| Nardostachys jatamansi DC. / Spikenard | Nerd | NT: Mark 14:3; John 12:3. | EA (76) / Im | O / P |
| Origanum syriacum L. (=Majorana syriaca (L.) Fehrbrun) / Syrian Marjoram / Bible Hyslop | Ezov | B: Leviticus 14:4, Psalms 51:9; BT: Shabbat 159b, Abodah Zara 29a. | In | R / E |

Botanical status: In: Indigenous; Im: Imported; D: Domesticated/cultivated. If there is no specific reference, we followed [143].

Additional uses: Ap: Apotropaic; E: Edible; F: Fibre; I: Incense; M: Magic; P: Perfume/cosmetics; O: Ointment; Oi: Oil; R: Ritual; S: Spice, condiment; Re: Resin; T: Timber; W: Wine

*Included in Jacob’s [2] list (see text). The categories of the reliability levels of the Biblical plants’ identification are according to Amar [8]. See above.
| Species / English name | Hebrew name / Transcription / Level of identification reliability | Source of evidence | Botanical status / Origin | Additional uses |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Acorus calamus L.* / Sweet reed | Kaneh / Kaneh hatov / Kneh Bosem C | E: [65:68], M: [20:10]. | Im / EA [77]. | P |
| Allium cepa L.* / Onion | Batsal B | E: [64:78, 65:69, 70:85], M: Nedarim 9:8, BT: Nedarim 66a. | D (CEA) | E |
| Allium porrum L.* / A. kurrat L. | Khatsir A | E: [65:70, 69:96], BT:Voma 83b, Berachot 44b, Gittin 69ab, Shabbat 110b. | D / M- EWA | E |
| Allium sativum L. / Garlic | Shum A | E: [64:78, 65:70-71, 68:85, 71:38,42,70,80,88, 75:28], BT: Gittin 69a, Abodah Zara 28b. | D (SWA-CA). | E |
| Anethum graveolens* Dill | NT. (Matthew 23:23. = Anise (Pimpinella anisum L. in King James Version. Dill (Anethum graveolens L) in modern translation [51:108]). | E: [64:71, 68:85, 70:99,372,373,375]. | D / E | E |
| Artemisia sp. | La’anah C | E: [65:80] (A. absinthium). M: [78 passim] (as "wormwood") BT: Abodah Zara 29a. | I | |
| Boswellia* sp. / Frankincense | Levonah A | E: [68:85], 70,69,373,375 (B. olibanum). BT: Sanhedrin 43a. M: [20:344, 82:251] (identification not ascertained). | Im (EA) | I |
| Capparis spinosa L. | Tsalaf C | E: [65:83]. BT: Shabbat 110a M: [71:191]. | In | E |
| Cedrus libani A. Rich. / Cedar / | Erez A | E: [64:6, 69:88 AR. [33]. M: [81:124] (oil); [71:191,193, 72:89, 73:52, 78:52, 78:233,235, 81:121, 83:124] (resin). | Im (Lebanon; B: II Samuel 5:11). | Re |
| Cinnamomum zeylanicum Nees* and C. cassia Blume | Kinnamon C | E: [65: 88-91]. AR. [35, 33]. M: [20:189-190]. | Im (EA). | S |
| Citrullus colocynthis (L.) Schrad. / Coccymth, | Pqq’u A | E: [65:91,68:85]. M: [81:122,124, 125]. | In | Oil (BT: Sabbath 71:26) |
| Species / English name | Hebrew name / Transcription / Level of identification reliability | Source of evidence | Botanical status / Origin | Additional uses |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Bitter gourd           |                                                              |                     |                          |                |
| Citrus medica L.* / Citron | Pri Ets Hadar A                                              | BT: Shabbat 109b, | Im (EA)                  | R              |
|                        |                                                              | AR: 5th - 4th centuries BCE, [84, 85]. |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | M: [203312] (Identification not ascertained). |                          |                |
| Commiphora sp. / Myrrha / Myrrh | Mor B                                                   | E: King of Gezer (Palestine, 14th BCE) asked for myrrh gum from Egypt for Healing [29,29]. |                          | I / R / O / P |
|                        |                                                              | M: [86:156-157]. |                          |                |
| Coriandrum sativum L. / Coriander | Gad A                                                    | E: [64:71, 65:94-95, 69:42,82]. |                          | S              |
|                        |                                                              | M: [2066, 71:192, 73:52, 78:283]. |                          |                |
| Crocus sativus* L. / Saffron | Karkom A                                                  | E: [75:30, 69:42]. |                          | S / I          |
|                        |                                                              | BT: Shabbat 110a, b, Gittin 69a. |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | M: [73:52, 71:191]. |                          |                |
| Cuminum cyminum L. / Cumin | Kammon A                                                  | E: [64:71, 65:96-98]. |                          | S              |
|                        |                                                              | BT: Shabbat 110a, b, 133a, Gittin 69a, Abodah Zara 29a. |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | M: [80:234, 78: Passim, 81:123]. |                          |                |
| Cupressus Sempervirens L. * / Cypress | Brosh C                                               | Juniperus: E [64:2572, 69:42,71,70,72,81, 88:80, 75:28] (bursa); |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | AR: [31] (J. phoenicea / communis) |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | M: [80:233,234,235, 87:28, (wood)] [73:52, 53, 83:120], (bursu); 68:19, 87:26,27. |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | Cupressus: M: [80:235] (oil) [68: 191,193,] |                          |                |
| Hordeum* sp. / Barley | Se’orah B                                                 | E: [70:140ff, 372, 375]. |                          | E              |
|                        |                                                              | BT: Gittin 69b, Shabbat 110b, Pesachim 42b, Yoma 83b. |                          |                |
| Linum usitatissimum L. * / Flax | Pihshta A                                                 | E: [65:116, 75:28, 70: 57- 62]. |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | AR: [37] (7). |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | M: [20113]. |                          |                |
| Mentha* spp. Mint | NT: Matthew 23:23. | E: [65:120, 75:28,29, 68:85, 69:66,86]. |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | AR: [30 (7); 33(7)]. |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | BT: Shabbath 140a, Gittin 69b, Abodah Zara 29a (as 'Ninia'). |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | M: [81:120,126, 78 passim, 89:50]. |                          |                |
| Myrtus communis L. * / Myrtle | Hadías A                                                  | AR: 12-11th century BCE, [30]. |                          | R / Ap         |
|                        |                                                              | 12th-6th centuries BCE [31]. |                          |                |
|                        |                                                              | M: [20:300, 73:52, 80:233, 87:26]. |                          |                |
Table 2: Plants mentioned in the Bible and known as medicinal in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (Continued)

| Species / English name | Hebrew name / Transcription / Level of identification reliability | Source of evidence | Botanical status / Origin | Additional uses |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------|
| Nigella sativa L* / Black cumin | Ketsakh K | M [90: 268, 91:223] | D / SWA | S |
| Olea europaea L. / Olive | Zay'it A | E [65:128-129], BT: Gittin 86a; Shabbat 134a; Abodah Zara 28a, Berachot 36a. M [79:18] | In. | E / Oil |
| Phoenix dactylifera L. / Date Palm | Tamar A | E [68:83,84, 69:141, 71:81] | In (SWA) / D | E |
| Punica granatum L* / Pomegranate | Rimmon A | E [64:77, 65:183-141, 75:29]. M [78 passim, 80:235] | D (SWA-SEE) | E / R |
| Ricinus communis L.* / Castor Bean | Kikkayyon C | E [64:79, 65:142-143, 69:141,70:71, 70:119,122,333, 373, 375]. BT: Gittin 69b (as "Akika"). M [20:130] | D / EAF [92] / BT: Cultivated at the Talmud period: Sabbath 21/21 | Oi |
| Sinapis alba L. Mustard (Could be also Brassica nigra L.) / Mustard | Khardal | E [65:148, 68:85(7)]. BT: Berachot 40a M [70:90, 78:367.368, 93-142] | In / D | E / S |
| Vitis vinifera L. * / Grape | Geffen A | E: Fruit [70: 85,372,374]; BT: Wine [70:91]. BT: Wine: Shabbat 78a, 109ab,110b, Gittin 67b; Krubot 65b. Vinegar Enuvin 29a; BT: Shabbat 109a M [79: 28] | D / EM-WA | E / W |

Botanical status: In: Indigenous; Im: Imported; D: Domesticated/cultivated. BT: Botanical status. If there is no specific reference, we followed [143].

Origin: A: Arabia; CEA: Central East Asia; E: Europe; EAR: East Arabia; EA: East Asia; EAF: East Africa; M: Mediterranean; EM: East Mediterranean; NE: Near East; SEA: Southeast Asia; SEE: Southeast Europe; SWA: Southwest Asia. If there is no specific reference, we followed [143].

Additional uses: Ap: Apotropaic; E: Edible; F: Fibre; I: Incense; M: Magic; P: Perfume/cosmetics; O: Ointment; R: Ritual; S: Spice, condiment; Re: Resin; T: Timber; W: Wine

*Included in Jacob’s [2] list (see text). The categories of the reliability levels of the Biblical plants’ identification are according to Amar [8]. See above

We excluded about 24 plant species from Jacob’s list [2] for the following reasons: they are no longer recognized by Amar [8] as plants, or the reliability of identification level is below “low probability of identification” or is an “aggregate name” and not a species-specific plant name (hence, indicated as NR); the identification by Campbell–Thompson is no longer recognized today or cannot be confirmed by any further evidence (NC-P); the plant is unknown to the flora of the Holy Land (NF); no evidence exists of international trading in the plant (NT); identification is obscure and/or non-specific (OB); they are recorded only from Egypt, with no further evidence related to the Holy Land (OE); they are found only in Mesopotamia (OM), with no data from Egypt and/or Mesopotamia on any medicinal use (EM).

These plants are (1) Zizyphus vulgaris Lam. [20: 319: ff; NF], Z. spina christi (L.) Wild. 65:158 (OE); (2) Pappaver rhoeas L. (based on [70:327]). While Manniche [65: 130-132] and Aboelsoud [68:85] mentioned that P. somniferum L. was used medicinally in Egypt, Bisset et al. [105] could not corroborate this information. It is also debatable whether P. somniferum was known at all in the Holy Land in Biblical times [106-108]. (3) Nymphaea coerulca (sic!), Lotus L (sic!), based on Germer [70:26, 373, 375] (NF). Lotus sp. (NF, NT) appears in Manniche [65: 126-7] under Nymphaea lotus (L.) Willd. (See 70:64, 26: 373, 375), (NF, R, NT). (4) Anemone coronaria L.
Additional uses: Southeast Asia; L. / Safflowers Carthamus tinctorius [111]; (8) Anemomis nobilis (NR); (5) included in Jacob Timber; Botanical status: In Aloe Aloe vera name Species / English Table 3 Dafni and Böck Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine (2019) 15:57 Page 9 of 14 Aloe vera L. * Aloe Additional uses: Apotropaic; E: Southeast Europe; E: Edible; I: Incense; M: Magic; P. Black pepper Piper spp./ Black pepper Piper nigrum (Batsch (=Piper nigrum L.) var. chate (Hasselq.) Sageret (OE, NF); (24) Cuminum cyminum L. (under Helbena) M: [20:355, 73:52, 83:11]. (OE). 20:129, 94:533]. (OE, NT); (20) Thymus vulgaris L. known from Egypt [70:17] (NR); Thymus sp. in [65:150] (NR, OE, NF); (22) Citrullus vulgaris Schrad. [70:266] (OE); (23) Salix sasaf Forssk. ex Trautv. [70:106,237,373; 65:145-76; 75:30; 69:42]; willow buds (OE, NF); (24) Ficus sycomorus L. [75: 30; 69:41,79, 82] (OE). The following additional medicinal plant species are known only from Ancient Egypt; at the moment, no sufficient supporting data exist to consider them BMP’s: Glycyrrhiza glabra L. [65:106]; Portulaca oleracea L. [65: 13 7-138]; Raphanus sativus L. [65:141-142]; Rubia tinctoria L. [65:144]; Acacia nilotica (L.) Delile [68:84; 65:65-67; 69:79, 88, 91, 92, 95, 97]; Acacia sp. [69: 39, 41, 42 gum, 88]. Ocimum basilicum L. [65:128; 70:84]; Cannabis sativa L. [65:82]. Debatable species: “Ohalim / Ohalot”. In the Bible “Ohalot” and “Ohalim” are mentioned four times—three of them in relation to perfumes (Proverbs 7:17; Psalms 45: 9 and Song of Songs 4: 14). Amar [8: 156-7] concludes that the old Jewish interpreters agree only on the identification of “Ohalim” cited in Songs of Songs as

(9) Cannabis sativa L. [70:30, 69:41, 79, 82] (OE). The following additional medicinal plant species are known only from Ancient Egypt; at the moment, no sufficient supporting data exist to consider them BMP’s: Glycyrrhiza glabra L. [65:106]; Portulaca oleracea L. [65:13 7-138]; Raphanus sativus L. [65:141-142]; Rubia tinctoria L. [65:144]; Acacia nilotica (L.) Delile [68:84; 65:65-67; 69:79, 88, 91, 92, 95, 97]; Acacia sp. [69: 39, 41, 42 gum, 88]. Ocimum basilicum L. [65:128; 70:84]; Cannabis sativa L. [65:82]. Debatable species: “Ohalim / Ohalot”. In the Bible “Ohalot” and “Ohalim” are mentioned four times—three of them in relation to perfumes (Proverbs 7:17; Psalms 45: 9 and Song of Songs 4: 14). Amar [8: 156-7] concludes that the old Jewish interpreters agree only on the identification of “Ohalim” cited in Songs of Songs as

| Species / English name | Source of evidence | Botanical status / origin/ | Additional uses |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| Aloe vera L. * Aloe     | E: [65:72, 75:25-26, 68:82,83,84,85]. BT: Gittin 69b. M: [20:129, 94:533]. | D / Ar [99]. | C |
| Carthamus tinctorius L. / Safflowers | E: [64:79, 65:83-84, 69:79]. BT: Gittin 70a (? As ‘Morka”) M: [96: 544-545]. | D / NE [97]. | E / Oi |
| Ferula asa-foetida L. / Asafoetida | E: [65:101-102]. MI: Shabbat 203. BT: Shabbat 140a; Gittin 69a (under Helbena) M: [20:355, 73:52, 83:11]. | CA [98] | In |
| Lawsonia inermis L. Henna | Koffer A E: [65:114, 68:85]. | Im / EA | D: BT Shevi’it 7:6. P: B. Song of Songs 4:13. |
| Lepidium sativum L. / Cress | E: [64:71, 65:115]. BT: Gittin 69a. M: [72:9,90,91 73:52,53, 1]. | D / SA (perhaps Iran, [99]). E | |
| Piper spp./ Black pepper | E: [64:71, 65:136]. (Piper nigrum). BT: Shabbat, 65a, 90a, 140a. M: [83:120]. | Im / EA [99]. | S |

Botanical status: In Indigenous; Im: Imported; D: Domesticated/cultivated. If there is no specific reference, we followed [143]. Origin: A: Arabia; CEA: Central East Asia; E: Europe; EAR: East Arabia; EA: East Africa; EM: Mediterranean; EM: East Mediterranean; NE: Near East; S: SEA: Southeast Asia; SWA: Southeast Asia. If there is no specific reference, we followed [143]. Additional uses: Ap: Apotropaic; E: Edible; F: Fibre; I: Incense; M: Magic; P: Perfume/cosmetics; O: Ointment; Oi: Oil; R: Ritual; S: Spice, condiment; Re: Resin; T: Timber; W: Wine.

*Included in Jacob’s [2] list (see text). The categories of the reliability levels of the Biblical plants’ identification are according to Amar [8]. See above.
Aquilaria agallocha Roxb. (= A. malaccensis Lam.). According to Amar [8:156], this identification is on a level of “high probability but not certain.” Felix [6:255] considers all the citations related to “Aquilaria agallocha.” But Zohary [7:204] considers only the Psalms citations, as well as John (19:309-40), as related to Aquilaria agallocha /Aloe vera. In the Talmud (Gittin 69b), “Ilava” is mentioned as a medicinal plant. It is held to be Aloe vera by most of the old Jewish commentaries [4, I:150].

“Oren”—Pinus or Laurus nobilis? Amar [8:158] takes “Oren” (Isa. 44:14-15) to be Pinus halepensis Mill., under “A high level of the identification reliability but not sure.” Cedar in Akkadian is “Erenu” [112: 181-182]. In Campbell–Thompson’s view [20:282], “erini” or “erina” is used as a general term for the coniferous tree, a view not accepted today. In the Talmud (Gittin 69b), there is a remedy called *Atarafa d’ara’a* (אטרפא עара) against stomach worms; “tarfa” means a leaf and “de’ara’a” is translated by A. Steinsaltz [67] (in his commentary to Gittin 69b) as Laurus nobilis, based on the name of this species in other Semitic languages as “ar.”

Campbell–Thompson [20:298] mentions “ēru” (which he identifies as *L. nobilis*) against “anus troubles”, which he identifies cannot be confirmed or denied because of the lack of sufficient cuneiform evidence. Therefore, Feliks’s [6:92] and Zohary’s [7:120] acceptance of “Oren” as Laurus has no solid evidence. It is worth mentioning that, as a rule that Campbell–Thompson’s [20] identification is based mainly on Aramaic and Hebrew terms. So, following Campbell–Thompson, to clarify the Biblical plant terms, this might end in a vicious circle!

*Ceratonia siliqua*. Despite the debate over whether *Ceratonia* is mentioned in the Bible [3, I: 393-407, 4:72-73; 113:passim, 114: passim], the plant clearly was widely distributed in the Holy Land as an indigenous species [115]. The few archaeological findings of *Ceratonia* as: phytolites [116:1259]; wood [113:85; 117:112]; seed and fruits [118:101; 37:4] as well as pollen [119:12:18] indicate its presence in the Holy Land in the Bible period and earlier. All of the authorities agree that it was present here naturally, even if it is not mentioned directly in the Old Testament [113, 114, 116, 117 and references therein]. There is a debate [120: specimen No. 41; 4:72-73; 7:63 and reference therein] if the “Locust” cited in Matthew 3:4 and the “pods” of Luke 15:16 are really *Ceratonia*. The many Jewish post-Biblical references indicate its high importance as a food plant in the Holy Land [121:203-204; 3, II: 393-407]. Indeed, the presence of the carob in the Holy Land during the Bible period is
quite certain; it is a common medicinal plant in the region [rev. 122].

“Brosh”– Cupressus/Juniperus: Amar [8:159-161] discusses in detail the different Jewish historical suggestions for the identification of “brosh,” and summarizes: “it seems that we are speaking on an aggregate name for both genera Cupressus and especially Juniperus.” Notably, Löw (Cupressus—[3, II:26-33] Juniperus—[3, II: 33-38]) and Felix [6: 79-80] have the same view. According to Zohary [7:106], “It probably refers to Abies ciliicica (Antoine & Kotschy) Carrière. Today, there is general agreement that the Akkadian word “burashu” denotes Juniper [112: 180-181]. The Akkadian term for Cypress is “šurmenū” [112: 184]. Some of the previous ideas on this issue [123-125] are not accepted today.

“Kikkayyon”–Ricinus/Lagenaria: Amar [8: 178-179] following [126: 352-354] suggests that the identification of the Hebrew “Kikkayyon” as Ricinus communis is of a “high but not sure level of identification’s reliability” and that it could also be Lagenaria vulgaris Ser. (= L. siceraria (Molina) Standl.). Although Lagenaria is known as a medicinal plant [127], it is not as common a medicinal plant as Ricinus. Felix [6:136] mentions the possibility of Lagenaria being included, based on some old Jewish sources. He states that “the Talmudic tradition identifies ‘Kikkayyon’ as Ricinus based on philology and the Geonom (the presidents of the great Babylonian Talmudic schools) evidence that this plant is common in Babylonia.” Zohary [7:193] did not mention the possibility of Lagenaria at all. We prefer to relate “Kikkayyon” to Ricinus because of its wide use as an important medicinal plant in the ancient world since ancient times [rev.128], including the Talmudic period (Shabbat 21a).

“La’ana”– Artemisia: According to Amar [8:163], the identification of the Biblical La’ana (נהנה) is of “a low probability”. He also noted several other candidates: Ecballium elaterium (L.) A. Rich., Citrullus colocynthis L., and Balanites aegyptiaca (L.) Del.. All of these species are known as important medicinal plants in the ancient Fertile Crescent (Artemisia spp., especially A. herba alba Asso, but “La’ana” appears in at least six more citations (Deutonomy 29:18, Job 30:4, Proverbs 5:4, Lamentations 3:15 and 19, Hosea 10:4, Amos 6:12). The wormwood mentioned in Revelations 8:11 appears as “Apsinthos” in the Greek version. Padosch et al. [133] commented: “The Greek equivalent to “Apsinthos” is used as a name for a star that fell into the waters and turned them bitter. The Greek word “Apsinthion”—undrinkable—is most probably the ancestor of the word “absinthe.” The Talmud (Abodah Zara 30a) mentions preparing a special “Apsintin wine,” which is still produced today [133]. Thus, we prefer to treat “La’ana” as Artemisia spp., especially A. herba alba, which is known as a common medicinal plant in the Middle East and North Africa [134–136]. A. absinthium L. is also well known as a medicinal plant [139] and the wide use of A. absinthium in Egypt and Mesopotamia (Table 1). B. aegyptiaca seems confined to rare oases [137] and E. elaterium is rarely mentioned in ancient sources from the Holy Land [58].

Conclusions
All our suggested BMPs are known as such also in Ancient Egypt and/or Mesopotamia (Tables 1–4). Explicit evidence for use of medicinal plants is very rare in the Bible as well as in the Jewish post-Biblical writings. The comparison to adjacent ancient civilizations (in time and space) enables us to reconstruct the suggested list of BMP’s. Examination of our list shows that all the plants in our suggested list are in continuous medicinal use in the Middle East down generations [138–139] and are used in the Holy Land today [138–141].

Shakya [142] published a review, “Medicinal plants: future source of new drugs.” His “top 25 bioactive compounds of medicinal plants” include Ricinus communis, Piper nigrum, Aloe vera, Nigella sativa, Artemisia absinthium, and Allium sativum. This list accounts for 24% of our suggested list of Biblical Medicinal Plants. As once spoken by King Solomon, “That which has been is what will be, That which is done is what will be done, And there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

Abbreviations
AR: Archaeological evidence from the Holy Land; B: Old Testament; BT: Egypt; M: Mishna; NT: New Testament

Acknowledgements
The authors thank Peter Raven, Peter Bernhardt and Efrain Lev for their good advice and continuous encouragement.

Ethics approval and consent of participant
Not applicable

Consent for publication.
Not applicable

Author’s contributions
BB conducted the literature search of Egypt and Mesopotamia. AD did likewise for the Jewish sources. The paper was written jointly. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding
BB research was funded by the research project PGC2018-097821-B-100.

Availability of data and materials
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
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