

What Does ‘Wormwood’ Mean in the Bible?

A great star from heaven, burning like a torch, fell on one-third of the rivers and on the springs of waters. The name of this star is Wormwood. One-third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the waters, because they were made bitter (Rev. 8:10-11).

A common mistake many make in approaching a prophetic topic is to skip straight past the relevant etymology (the study of the origins of words). Doing so holds the potential to lead to mass misinterpretation, and this has never been truer than with Scripture.

Today, wormwood is most popularly known as a main herbal ingredient in the alcoholic beverage absinthe. But the wormwood herb first known to the biblical prophets and writers of Scripture would have been *Artemisia herba-alba* (also called white wormwood), a small, heavily branched shrub with hairy, gray even in dry, desolate areas—as opposed to *Artemisia absinthium*. Therefore, it probably has nothing to do with the traditional absinthe drink ingredient.

Second, although etymologists acknowledge that all *Artemisia* plant classes were named after the Greek goddess Artemis, they have never truly agreed on how worm and wood were later put together in English to describe the herb. Sometimes a foreign word is respelled to match what it seems to be, resulting in a faulty and confusing history of origins (usually called “folk etymology” or “pseudo etymology”).

As far back as we can trace it, our English wormwood, from the Old English *werwōd*, compares with the German *wormut*, meaning vermouth (an herb-infused wine). So, other than to assign a proper name to the destructive star, the English word wormwood

holds no relevance to Revelation's star of destruction or to the herb.

Third, though it would be interesting to suggest that the Greek word for the plant family Artemisia connects our poisoning star Wormwood to an official pagan entity/deity (Artemis), there is no legitimate prophetic link here. Artemis is pictured in classical mythology to be the goddess of the wilderness and beasts, which relates to her role as goddess of the hunt, while just as much (if not more) ancient imagery depicts her as the many-breasted goddess of fertility, long life, sexual fulfillment, and protection during pregnancy and childbirth.

The Artemisia herb was once thought to be a painkiller in childbirth. While there is no evidence remaining to indicate whether this was effective, in ancient times women on the brink of delivering a child would be praying to Artemis for protection while being given the herb Artemisia to ease that pain. Whereas this certainly may account for why the Greek name for wormwood involves this pagan deity, quite simply the Greeks renamed the herb after their pet goddess subsequent to wormwood's being a recognized medicinal plant as far back as Deuteronomy.

Making any claim that the capitalized, proper-noun Wormwood star is the goddess Artemis (or that it is in any way connected with her) perpetuates an anachronistic, folk-etymology error.

Suffice it to say that the falling star of Revelation 8:10-11 is not related to absinthe, wood, worms or the goddess Artemis.

Connections to Keep

Before there was ever a "wormwood," there was an Old Testament Hebrew metonymy. A metonymy (from Greek *meta*, change, and *onoma*, name) replaces one name for another that closely

associates with it, and the Bible is packed with occasions of this literary device.

In the case of wormwood, translated from the Hebrew *la'anah*, not one reference in Scripture is ever talking about the herb. Although there is an obvious metaphorical connection to the herb's effects known to people of that time, *la'anah* (sometimes translated "gall"), according to The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, is "always used figuratively for bitterness and sorrow." This source goes on to explain:

Deuteronomy 29:18 warns against the fruit of idolatry which is gall and wormwood (RSV: poisonous and bitter fruit). The prophet Amos describes perverted justice and righteousness as wormwood (5:7; 6:12). Jeremiah declares the judgment of God against the people of Judah, saying, "Behold, I will feed this people with wormwood, and give them poisonous water to drink" (9:15; cf. 23:15). The author of Lamentations compares his distress over the destruction of Jerusalem to being filled with bitterness and wormwood (3:15, 19). In Proverbs the loose woman is portrayed as a deceiver whose lips drip honey, but who in reality "is bitter as wormwood" (5:3-4).

When you see the name of the herb, understand that you are reading a metonymy referring to a bitter curse.

Therefore, wormwood in the biblical sense could be alternatively read: "And the name of the star is called Curse: and the third part of the waters became accursed, and many men died of the waters because they were poisoned." {eo}

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