

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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MANNA

Recent press reports of a shower of manna in Natal, South Africa, may refer to the edible lichen *Lecanora* (or *Sphaerothallia*) *esculenta*, the winged granules of which are sometimes blown up to considerable heights from desert lands and fall in veritable showers. Some authorities have identified the biblical manna with this lichen, but *Lecanora* is unknown today in the Sinai peninsula, the scene of the biblical narrative. On the other hand an edible sugary substance is now found in considerable abundance on the ground in this region, though it does not fall from the sky. It is sometimes called "tamarisk manna," and it was formerly thought to be an exudation from tamarisk bushes, caused by the punctures of insects. A few years ago, however, an expedition from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem made a careful study of this manna and found that it was not directly exuded by the plants but was a secretion of insects living on them; i.e., a kind of honeydew. The chief manna-producers are two species belonging to the large family of "scale insects," which produce a variety of secretions useful to mankind. Manna is ejected as a clear juice, which falls to the ground in drops. In a favorable state of the atmosphere these harden quickly into white sugar grains of various sizes, which are gathered and eaten by the Bedouins.

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