

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

In "The Parable of Jotham" (XXX:4, October-December 2002), I think Michael Livni may have missed a lot of the point of Jotham's parable. Of course, that depends on the identification of the plant called *atad* in Hebrew. Biblical botany is a fiercely disputed area of science, but there is general agreement among experts that the *atad* cannot be the thorny bush *Lycium europaeum* as supposed by the author and the illustration which closes the article.

The parable would make no sense if that identification were correct; the true bramble (*Rubus sanguineus* – *tsininim* or *tzinim* in Hebrew)¹ is low and thorny and has no shade at all. So the tree of the parable would be making a nonsensical offer. A far better choice for the *atad* is the Christ Thorn, *Zisiphus spina-christi*. This tree is "a stately evergreen up to 10 m. tall"² which, fitting the parable, creates a splendid shade. "When the *atad* is left to grow unimpeded, it develops a wide and 'wild' look, its foliage made up of clumps that seem to hang in air. The *atad* is larger than all the other fruit trees native to Israel, and casts a wide and heavy shadow beneath its boughs."³

Surely the Christ Thorn is, on the face of it, a better candidate for the tree of the parable than a scruffy and thorny bush. But, there is more. The fact is that so profound is the shade of the tree that nothing ever grown underneath it! Which is exactly what Jotham was trying to say.

There is (or was) a perfect specimen of *atad* at the entrance to the National Park at Tel es-Sultan in Jericho, just outside the main gate on the left. Grass and weeds all around, and blank earth in the shadow. That seems to me what Jotham's parable was really about.

One can only hope that we will be able to visit Jericho again in the not too distant future to check this out for ourselves.

1. See Numbers 33:55, Proverbs 22:5.
2. Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge, 1982) pp. 154 -5.
3. Nogah Hareuveni, *Plant and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage* (Neot Kedumim, 1984) pp. 62-3.

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