

## Mysterious Manna - The super food of ancient Israel

What did Israelites eat during their great exodus from Egypt to Mount Sinai? How did they survive? Leaving behind the chains of slavery and breathing the air of freedom was not too sweat for them since there was every chance of starving to death in the new wilderness. But they got going. What was the underlying secret? How did they manage to obtain their required energy? What could be their food, gathered or grown?

Historical texts may have an answer but clouded by myths. Many such texts suggest the God-sent bread showered from the heaven survived them for forty years. And that is the so-called alluring and mythical food of Israelites, Biblical Manna or Mana.

The obvious next question is: what was this Manna? Literature is abounding with debates among commentators. Now, keeping away from the supernatural origin hypothesis, there are stories with real flesh and bones. Some say, it may not be a single food but a suite of various types of food. One of these, is a swift-growing algae (*Nostoc spp*) known to grow in the Mountain Sinai. The other candidates are a number of native lichen species (*Lecanora affinus*, *L. esculenta*, and *L. fruticulosa*) that curl up and move in a tumbleweed-like manner. These lichens are a raw material for bread widely used among nomadic pastoralists and *L.*

*esculenta* is also used by Arabs for its medicinal value. There are other propositions as well. Manna could be, according to recent studies, a sticky exudes from the desert plants. It is formed when certain species of scale insects and plant lice rest on the bark of certain shrubs and leave a substance that solidifies into sweet honeydew. So, more such uncertainties surround the identity of Manna; some scholars attempted to bust the myth, saying manna of commerce collected from saccharine sap from flowering-ash trees (*Fraxinus ornus*) whereas Jewish manna came from the soft twigs of the of tamarisk (*Tamarix gallica*) on the Sinaitic peninsula.

Thus, the mystery around superfood Manna lingers....



**Manna described as a) coriander seed like, b) oleo-gum resin from *Commiphora* spp, c) honey-dew on pine branch; d) artists' impression of gathering Manna**

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