

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

Fred H. Wight

Copyright @ 1953

CHAPTER TEN -

Parental Position in the Home

POSITION OF THE FATHER

ORIENTAL MEANING attached to the word, "father." The Oriental idea of the family is a little kingdom within itself, over which the father is supreme ruler. Every company of travelers, every tribe, every community, every family, must have "a father," who is the head of the group. A man is said to be "the father" of what he invents. Jubal **"was the father of all such as handle the harp and pipe."** Jabal was the father of such as dwell in tents and have cattle" (Genesis 4:20, 21). Because he was a preserver and protector, Joseph said that GOD made him **"a father to Pharaoh"** (Genesis 45:8). The Oriental mind cannot conceive of any band or group without somebody being "the father" of it.¹

Supremacy of the father under the patriarchal system. Under the patriarchal administration, the father is supreme in command. This authority which the father has, extends to his wife, to his children, his children's children, his servants, and to all his household, and if he is the sheik, it extends to all the tribe. Many of the Bedouin Arabs of today are under no government except this patriarchal rule.

When Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived in tents in the Land of Promise, they were ruled by this same system. And when the law of Moses was given to Israel, the authority of the parents, and especially the father, was still recognized. One of the Ten Commandments is **"Honor thy father and thy mother"** (Exodus 20:12). In many ways the father was the supreme court of appeal in domestic matters.²

Succession of authority. In a majority of cases, the great authority which the father had, was handed down to his eldest son, who took over the position of leadership upon the death of the father. Thus Isaac became the new "sheik" over his father's household upon the death of Abraham. He and Rebekah had been living in that household under his father's authority; but the succession of authority passed on to him as the son. Ishmael, being son of the handmaid, did not succeed to the place (Genesis 25). In some cases, the father bestowed the succession of authority on other than the eldest son, as when Isaac bestowed it upon Jacob instead of Esau (Genesis 27).

Reverence of the children for the father. Reverence of children for their parents, and especially the father, is well-nigh universal in the East down to modern times. Among the Arabs, it is very seldom that a son is heard of as being undutiful. It is quite customary for the child to greet the

father in the morning by the kissing of his hand, and following this, to stand before him in an attitude of humility, ready to receive any order, or waiting for permission to depart. Following this, the child is often taken upon the lap of the father.³

Obedience to parents was demanded by the Mosaic Law, and a rebellious and disobedient child be punished by death (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). The Apostle Paul reiterated the injunction that children must obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1; Col. 3:20).

POSITION OF THE MOTHER

Position of the wife in relation to the husband. The wife held a subordinate position to that of her husband, at least in office, if not in nature. The ancient Hebrew women did not have unrestrained freedom as the modern women of the Occident have. In the Orient, social intercourse between the sexes is marked by a degree of reserve that is unknown elsewhere. Dr. Thomson says, "Oriental women are never regarded or treated as equals by the men." They never eat with the men, but the husband and brothers are first served, and the wife, mother, and sisters wait and take what is left; in a walk the women never go arm in arm with the men, but follow at a respectful distance; the woman is, as a rule, kept closely confined, and watched with jealousy; when she goes out she is closely veiled from head to foot.⁴

This attitude toward women can be illustrated from the Bible. Notice how Jacob's wives when traveling were given places by themselves, and not with him (Genesis 32). And nothing is said about the prodigal's mother being present at the feast which the father served his son (Luke 15:11-32). All this is in keeping with Oriental custom.

But while these things are true, it must be understood that the Old Testament does not picture the wife as a mere slave of her husband. She is seen to exert tremendous influence for good or ill over her husband. And he showed great respect for her in most cases. Sarah was treated by Abraham as a queen, and in matters of the household: she ruled in many ways. Abraham said to her, concerning Hagar, who had given birth to Ishmael, "**Behold thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee**" (Genesis 16:6). The tribute to a Hebrew wife and mother in the Book of Proverbs indicates she was a person of great influence with her husband: "**The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her**" (Proverbs 31:11). "**She openeth her mouth with wisdom**" (Proverbs 31:26). "**Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also; and he praiseth her**" (Proverbs 31:28).

Position of the mother in relation to the children. Children in the East show nearly the same respect toward the mother as they do toward the father. The mother is believed to be entitled to honor and to have authority from GOD. Actually, the father and mother are looked at, as being the representatives of GOD in the matter of authority. They are considered as having this position no matter how poorly they fulfill their obligations.⁵

Hebrew children in general held their mothers in great respect, even when they became adults. This may be illustrated by the great influence exerted by queen mothers on the kings of Judah and Israel (I Kings 2:19; II Kings 11:1; 24:12, etc.).

Position of Jewish women superior to that of heathen women. The degradation of women in the

Orient is a matter of common knowledge. In many cases she is more like a drudge, or a slave, or a plaything for the man, than she is the man's companion, as in the West. This situation has been in existence for centuries. But the position of Hebrew women was far superior to that of heathen women, long before Christianity had its origin among them.

Concerning this superiority in relation to the Arabs, Dr. Thomson testifies: The position of women among them was far higher than with the Arabs, and the character of Hebrew women must have been, on the whole, such as to command and sustain this higher position. The Arabs can show no list of pious and illustrious ladies like those who adorn the history of the Hebrews. No Bedouin mother ever taught, or could teach, such a "prophecy" as King Lemuel learned from his; nor could the picture of "**a virtuous woman**," given in the last chapter of Proverbs, have been copied by an Arab. The conception by him of such a character was a moral impossibility.⁶

1. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, pp. 12. 13.
2. Thomas Upham, *Jahn's Biblical Archaeology*, pp. 176, 177.
3. H. Clay Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life*, pp. 249. 250.
4. W. M. Thomson, in early edition of *The Land and the Book*, quoted and paraphrased by E. P. Barrows in *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 438.
5. Trumbull. op. cit., pp. 250-252.
6. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. II, pp. 12, 13.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
