

## **Manner And Customs of Bible Lands**

by

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### **CHAPTER ELEVEN -**

#### **Birth and Care of Children**

#### **DESIRE OF JEWISH WOMEN FOR CHILDREN**

THERE WAS AMONG the Jewish wives a universal longing for, and joy in, the giving birth to children.<sup>1</sup>

That longing was well expressed in the words of Rachel to Jacob, "**Give me children, or else I die**" (Genesis 30:1). the LORD had originally said to Adam and Eve, "**Be fruitful and multiply**" (Genesis 1:28). And the promise to Abraham was, "**I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth**" (Genesis 13:16).

The law of GOD taught that children were a sign of GOD's blessing: "**Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body**" (Deuteronomy 28:4).

The Psalmist pictured a man blessed of the LORD, and says of him, "**Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house**" (Psalm 128:3).

Sterility in marriage was considered to be a divine visitation or curse. Hannah's barrenness was "**because the LORD had shut up her womb**" (I Samuel 1:6). To have a child after being a long time barren, as was the case of Elisabeth, meant that the LORD had taken away her reproach among men (Luke 1:25).

#### **PREFERENCE FOR BOY BABIES**

Among the Palestine Arabs there is always a desire on the part of the mothers and fathers that the baby shall be a boy rather than a girl. A parting blessing often used by the Arabs is:

May the blessings of Allah be upon thee, May your shadow never grow less, May all your children be boys and no girls.<sup>2</sup>

Boys are wanted because they tend to increase the size, wealth, and importance of the family group or clan. When they grow up and marry, they bring home with them their wives, and children of such unions perpetuate the father's house. If boys increase the house, girls are thought of as decreasing it. When they marry they usually go to live in the house of their husbands.<sup>3</sup>

This attitude among present-day Arabs, was also the attitude of the Hebrew people in Old and

New Testament times. Except among the Christian Jews, there was an added reason why every Hebrew expectant woman wanted a boy. She always hoped that her son should be the Messiah. The Messianic promises of Holy Writ, no doubt, were often on the lips of Hebrew women. "**The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come**" (Genesis 49:10). "**There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel**" (Numbers 24:17). These kept alive the hope of a coming Messiah, and caused the Hebrew mother to desire at each birth a boy baby, that perhaps she might be the mother of Shiloh.

### CARE OF INFANT CHILD

For years the Orientals of Bible lands have cared for an infant child much as it was done when JESUS was born. Instead of allowing the young baby the free use of its limbs, it is bound hand and foot by swaddling bands, and thus made into a helpless bundle like a mummy. At birth the child is washed and rubbed with salt, and then with its legs together, and its arms at its side, it is wound around tightly with linen or cotton bandages, four to five inches wide, and five to six yards long. The band is also placed under the chin and over the forehead.<sup>4</sup>

The prophet Ezekiel indicated that these same customs at a child's birth were practiced in his day. "**And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to supple thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all**" (Ezekiel 16:4). And we are all familiar with the words of Luke, as to how they cared for the baby JESUS: "**Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger**" (Luke 2:12).

### JEWISH RITES AND OFFERINGS AT BIRTH OF A CHILD

Jewish boys were circumcised eight days after birth. The one who Circumcised the child spoke the following words: "Blessed be the LORD our GOD, who has sanctified us by His precepts, and given us circumcision." Then the father of the boy would go on with these words: "Who has sanctified us by His precepts, and has granted us to introduce our child into the covenant of Abraham our father." Because it was said that GOD changed the names of Abraham and Sarah, at the time He gave the covenant of circumcision, therefore they would name the boy on the day he was circumcised. After doing this they had a family meal.<sup>5</sup>

The rite of circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. GOD had said to Abraham, "**This is my covenant, which ye shall keep between me and you, and thy seed after thee**" (Genesis 17:10). JESUS was circumcised the eighth day after birth and he was named "JESUS" at that time (Luke 2:21).

After childbirth, the Jewish mother passed through a period of purification of seven days for a boy and fourteen days for a girl, and then she still remained at home thirty-three days for a boy, and sixty-six days for a girl. Then she was to go up to the Temple to make her childbirth offerings. If she was rich she would bring a lamb to be offered, but if she was poor then she was allowed to present two young pigeons or a pair of turtledoves (Luke 2:21; cf. Leviticus 12).<sup>6</sup>

### NAMING OF CHILDREN

The Arabs are fond of compounding the name of Allah into the name given their children. It was a very common custom for the Hebrews to include a name for GOD as a part of their children's names.<sup>7</sup>

A few samples of such Hebrew names are here given together with their meanings:

Abijah - "Whose father GOD is"  
Ahaziah - "Held by JEHOVAH"  
Azariah - "Helped by JEHOVAH"  
Obadiah - "Servant of JEHOVAH"  
Daniel - "GOD is my Judge"  
Elijah - "My GOD is JEHOVAH"  
Elkanah - "Whom GOD created"  
Ezekiel - "GOD will strengthen" <sup>8</sup>

Another custom was practiced by Jews in naming their sons. After the birth of the first son, the father and mother were known as the father of so-and-so, and the mother of so-and-so. And the son added the father's first name after his own. Thus JESUS spoke of Peter as, "**Simon Bar-jona**" (Matthew 16:17), which means, "Simon, son of Jona." The Arabs giving such a name today would simply omit the word "son" and call the child "Simon Jona."<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes Jews had double names in CHRIST's time. This was true of Thomas. John's Gospel refers to him as, "**Thomas, which is called Didymus**" (John 11:16). Both of these names mean "a twin." The name "Thomas" was Aramaic, and the name "Didymus" was Greek. When traveling in foreign countries, Jews often assumed a Greek, or Latin, or other name, which had a meaning similar to their own.<sup>10</sup>

Jewish names given to girls, were often taken from beautiful objects in nature, or pleasant graces of character were used. "Bible examples are Jemima (dove), Tabitha or Dorcas (gazelle), Rhoda (rose), Rachel (lamb), Salome (peace), Deborah (bee), Esther (star)."<sup>11</sup>

Naomi told the Bethlehem women, "**Call me not Naomi, call me Marah.**" Our Bible margins give the meanings of these names thus: "Call me not, Pleasant, call me Bitter" (Ruth 1:20).

## **DUTY OF PARENTS IN TRAINING OF CHILDREN**

It is quite clear from the Scriptures that the mother did most of the training of the children in their earlier years. The Book of Proverbs speaks of "**The words of King Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him**" (Proverbs 31:1). And concerning Timothy, Paul said, "**From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures**" (II Timothy 3:15). Earlier in the Epistle, Paul refers to the faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother (II Timothy 1:5). Young children then were taught by their mothers.

The daughters, doubtless remained under the guidance and oversight of their mothers until their marriage. As the boys grew up, they were more and more taught by their fathers, although they would never get away from the mother's training altogether. Proverbs often refers to a father's

instruction of his son. "**My son, hear the instruction of thy father**" (Proverbs 1:8). "**My son, keep thy father's commandment**" (Proverbs 6:20). Only in well-to-do families was instruction turned over to tutors. King Ahab had tutors for his many sons (II Kings 10:1, 5}. Schools for training boys were not in operation until comparatively a late date for Jewish youth in the land.<sup>12</sup>

1. Carl F. Keil, *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, Vol. II, p. 175.
2. From class notes in course: "*Manners and Customs of Bible Land*" Pasadena College, June 1950, taught by Dr. G. Frederick Owen.
3. Elihu Grant, *The People of Palestine*, pp. 64, 65.
4. James Neil, *Pictured Palestine*, p. 83.
5. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of CHRIST*, p. 140.
6. Ibid.. pp. 140, 141.
7. Edwin W. Rice, Orientalisms in Bible Lands, p. 279.
8. Meanings given under each separate name in, *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*.
9. Grant, op. cit., p. 66.
10. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 430.
11. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, pp. 120, 121.
12. Kiel, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 176.

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