

Manners And Customs of Bible Lands

by
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CHAPTER TWO - Houses of One Room

AFTER ISRAEL had been in the land of Canaan many years and had settled down from the nomadic life to the more stable agricultural pursuits, houses began to take the place of tents as places of abode. The average home of the common people was a one-room dwelling dwelling.¹

Dr. Thomson thinks that because the poor widow who entertained Elijah had an upper room in her house, it indicates she was not of the poorer class but was in straits only because of the terrible famine.² (cf. I Kings 17:8-19).

PURPOSES OF THE HOUSE

In Bible times men did not build houses with the idea in mind that most of their daily living would be spent inside them. Their first interest was in spending as much time as possible in GOD's out-of-doors. The house served as a place of retirement. For this reason the outside walls of the humble house were not inviting. There was no effort to attract attention to this place of retirement.³

The purpose of these dwellings is borne out by the meaning of the Hebrew and Arabic words for "house." Abraham Rihbany, who was born in Syria and spent his early life there, has made a very illuminative statement about the meaning and purpose of the Palestinian house: The Hebrew word *bavith* and the Arabic word *bait* mean primarily a "shelter." The English equivalent is the word "house." The richer term, "home," has never been invented by the son of Palestine because he has always considered himself "a sojourner in the earth." His tent and his little house, therefore, were sufficient for a shelter for him and his dear ones during the earthly pilgrimage.⁴

Because the Palestinians lived out-of-doors so much, the sacred writers were fond of referring to GOD as a "shelter" or as a "refuge," rather than as a "home." Such expressions in connection with Deity are numerous in the Book of Psalm and also in the prophetic writings⁵ (cf. Psalm 61:3; Isaiah 4:6).

FLOOR AND WALLS OF THE HOUSE

Concerning the nature of the floor of these Oriental houses, Dr. George A. Barton says:

"The houses generally had no floor except the earth, which was smoothed off and packed hard. Sometimes this was varied by mixing lime with the mud and letting it harden, and sometimes floors of cobblestones or stone chippings mixed with lime were found. In the Roman period mosaic floors, made by embedding small smoothly cut squares of stone in the earth, were introduced."⁶

The walls of the houses were often made of bricks, but these were not ordinarily burned, but were composed of mud dried in the sun.⁷ Job speaks of these kinds of dwelling as "**houses of clay**" (Job 4:19). They are similar to the adobe houses so common in Mexico today, and often seen in the southwestern states of America, where the Spanish influence of the past is still felt.

But sometimes the walls were made of rough sandstones, so common in the land. These were of varying sizes and were set in mud. The joints between them were apt to be wide and irregular.⁸ It was only the palaces or houses of the wealthy that were constructed of hewn stones, like the palaces of Solomon (I Kings 7:9), and the rich of Isaiah's day, who boasted they would replace fallen down brick walls with walls of hewn stones (Isaiah 9:8-10).

CONSTRUCTION OF THE ROOF

The roof of these humble Palestinian houses is made by laying beams across from wall to wall, then putting on a mat of reeds, or perhaps thorn bushes, and over it a coating of clay or earth; sand and pebbles are scattered over this, and a stone roller is used to make it smooth and able to shed rain. This roller is usually left on the house top and the roof is rolled again several times, especially after the first rain in order to keep it from leaking.⁹

A low parapet or wall, with spaces to allow the rain water to flow off, was expected to be built on these houses in Bible times, in order to prevent people from falling off. The failure to build such a wall in modern times has often caused accidents.¹⁰

The law of Moses was very definite in commanding the erection of such. Its regulation says: "**When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thine house, if any man fall from thence**" (Deuteronomy 22:8). The common use of the houseroof for so many purposes, as shall be seen, made this law essential.

ITEMS OF INTEREST GROWING OUT OF THE CHARACTER OF THE ROOF AND WALLS

Grass on the housetops. With the roofs of the houses made largely of dirt or clay, one can easily imagine how grass could grow on the tops of the houses as Bible references indicate. "**Let them be as the grass upon the housetops, which withereth afore it growth up**" (Psalm 129:6; see also II Kings 19:26, and Isaiah 37:27).

Examples of this in connection with similarly built roofs in modern times have often been seen. One book published in the latter part of the nineteenth century carries a picture of a Palestinian roof all covered with growing grass. The notation beneath the picture says: "This is a good example of the appearance of '**grass upon the housetops.**' After the winter rains, every flat and mud-roofed building is overgrown with grass and weeds, which soon perish."¹¹

Leaky roofs. With a dirt roof it can be understood how natural it would be for a heavy rainfall to produce a leak, which would make it quite inconvenient for those inhabiting the house at the time. Travelers who stop for the night at one of these dwellings, have sometimes had to change their sleeping quarters, because of the dripping of the rain water.¹²

The Book of Proverbs compares this dropping to a contentious woman (Proverbs 19:13; 27:15).

Digging through of thieves. Since the walls of the houses are so often built of clay or dirt, or of stones with mud between them, it makes it an easy task for a robber to dig through and get into the house.¹³ Job referred to this: "**In the dark they dig through houses**" (Job 24:16). JESUS also spoke of the same thing in His great Sermon on the Mount: "**Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal**" (Matthew 6:19; cf. Matthew 24:43).

Snakes in house walls. Because the walls of the stone houses were built so that the joints between the stones were wide and irregular, therefore a snake might readily crawl into the crevices and unexpectedly come in contact with an inhabitant.¹⁴ Concerning this kind of house the prophet Amos said that a man "**leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him**" (Amos 5:19).

WINDOWS AND DOORS

Windows. The Oriental has few windows that open on the street side of the house, and those that do are usually high. As a rule the window has wooden bars serving as a protection against robbers, while the lower half of the window is screened by a framework of latticework. The Book of Proverbs speaks of such a window: "**For at the window of my house I looked through my casement [lattice]**" (Proverbs 7:6). Wooden shutters close the windows at night. When the window is open, those inside may see out without themselves being seen.¹⁵

Doors. The doors as well as windows were ordinarily built of sycamore wood. It was only for ornamental purposes of the wealthy that cedar wood was used¹⁶ (cf. Isaiah 9:10). These doors turned on hinges, as the familiar proverb about the sluggard makes mention of the turning of a door upon its hinges (Proverbs 26:14). If the doors were fastened when shut, bars were usually used for this purpose (Proverbs 18:19).

The door of the peasant's one-room house is opened before sunrise in the morning, and stays open all day long as an invitation to hospitality. The Book of Revelation speaks thus: "**Behold, I have set before thee an open door**" (Revelation 3:8). For such a door to be shut would indicate the inhabitants had done that of which they were ashamed (cf. John 3:19). At sunset the door is shut and remains shut during the night (cf. Luke 11:7). The rule about the open door for the simple house does not hold for the city houses of more than one room. The reference to the Master knocking at the door has to do with such a door (Revelation 3:20; cf. Chapter 3). The distinction between the house of the villager and of the city dweller must always be made, in order to understand the scriptural references to houses.¹⁷

FURNISHINGS OF THE HOUSE

The furnishings of a one-room Palestinian house were and still are very simple. Mats and cushions are in use to sit on by day, and carpets or mats are slept on at night. There will be vessels of clay for household needs, with perhaps some cooking utensils of metal. There will be a chest for storing bedding, a lamp either placed on a lampstand or a bushel, a broom for house

cleaning, and a handmill for grinding the grain, and the goatskin bottles in which liquids are kept. The fireplace would be on the floor often in the middle of the room. This gives a general picture of the furnishings of the average Palestinian home.¹⁸

More details regarding some of these items will be given as the study proceeds.

SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

The Parable of the Importunate Friend which JESUS told, if understood in the light of an Oriental one-room house, will give information about sleeping arrangements.

"And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? and he from within shall answer and say. Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee (Luke 11:5-7).

Among the common folks of the Holy Land individual beds in separate bedrooms have been unknown. Instead the arrangements for sleeping in the parable, and today in Syria and Palestine among the peasants, have been thus described:

The cushion-mattresses are spread side by side in the living room, in a line as long as the members of the family, sleeping close together, require. The father sleeps at one end of the line, and the mother at the other end, "to keep the children from rolling from under the cover." So the man was absolutely truthful when he said by way of excuse, "**My children are with me in bed.**"¹⁹

LIGHTING OF THE HOUSE

Biblical use of the word candle. The use of the word "*candle*" does not carry the meaning of the word as we would be familiar with it, but rather with lamps.²⁰

Character of the lamp. When the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land they adopted the lamp used by the Canaanites, which was *an earthenware saucer to hold the olive oil, and a pinched lip to hold the wick*. A thousand years later a Mesopotamian lamp was imported and used in some sections. This lamp had a closed tube for the wick, and thus could be carried about without spilling the oil so readily. In the fifth century B.C. Greek lamps of a beautiful black glazed variety were imported and became popular. By the third century B.C. the old saucer-type lamp had all but disappeared, but in the second century, the Maccabeans revived the use of that type of lamp, as being more in line with the old Jewish traditions. But when the Roman Empire began to dominate the land of Palestine, the lamps in use were either imported, or made under foreign models. The Virgin's Lamp in use in the time of CHRIST was an improvement over the old saucer type, having sufficient covering to keep the oil from spilling.²¹

The lampstand. In early Bible times, lampstands were not in common use, and the lamps would be put on a place such as a stone projecting from the wall. In the days of CHRIST lampstands were in quite general use. They were tall and were usually placed on the ground. Archaeologists

have unearthed some bronze lampstands fourteen inches high that had been used in palaces. They were made for holding bowls or lamps. The poor no doubt had a less expensive type.²²

If the family had no separate lampstand, the bushel placed on the ground upside down would serve for a lampstand, as well as a table from which the meal would be served. The lamp was to be put on the bushel and not under it²³ (Matthew 5:15).

The prophet's reference to smoking flax. Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Messiah was that "**the smoking flax shall he not quench**" (Isaiah 42:3). Dr. Thomson tells of seeing ancient clay lamps in use illustrating this text. The wick was often made of a twisted strand of flax, and this was put into the olive oil in the shallow cup of the lamp. When the oil was almost used up it would give forth an offensive smoke. This was an indication it was time to replenish the supply of oil. The implication was that the quenching of the fire was sometimes done purposely. If the wick was well worn, the housewife would quench the fire, and then put a new wick in to take its place. GOD's servant would not thus treat the poor, weak, and despairing specimens of humanity. He would replenish the oil, trim the wick, and make the dimly burning flame to burn brightly. What a picture this is of our Saviour's desire to help the helpless and lift the fallen and save the lost.²⁴

Using the lamp to find the lost coin. The Saviour's Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15) *needs to be understood from the Oriental point of view.* Abraham Rihbany as a boy often held an Oriental earthen lamp while his mother hunted for a lost coin or some other object of value. The house had one door and one or two small windows having wooden shutters. For this reason the house was always dimly lighted, and especially so in winter. The mats, cushions, and sheepskins covering the floor would be turned over, and the floor swept. When the lost coin was found, the women neighbors and friends would be called in to rejoice with her, because the loss of a coin would bring down upon the woman the wrath of her husband, and her women neighbors and friends would have a fellowfeeling for her, and would keep what had happened as a secret from the men folks.²⁵ (See also reference to the lost coin," in chapter 9, *The headgear of Bethlehem women.*)

The significance of light in a Palestinian house. A lamp is considered to be the Palestinian peasant's one luxury that is a necessity. When the sun sets in the West, the door of his house is shut, and then the lamp is lit. To sleep without a light is considered by most villagers to be a sign of extreme poverty. The Bible makes synonymous such terms as lamp, light, and life. A late traveler looks to see a light in a house, and then he knows there is life there. To wish that a man's light be put out would be to wish him a terrible curse.²⁶ Concerning the wicked man, Bildad in the Book of Job said: "**The light shall be dark in his tabernacle, and his candle [lamp] shall be put out with him**" (Job 18:6). But the psalmist considered himself blessed of the LORD when he said of himself in relation to GOD, "**For thou wilt light my candle [lamp]**" (Psalm 18:28). It was to Orientals who appreciated the value of even a humble earthenware lamp in the dark of night, or even in the obscurity of a darksome house, that JESUS originally said, "**Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven**" (Matthew 5:16).

COOKING ARRANGEMENTS

The stove or fireplace. Like the Nomads who live in tents, the peasants who live in one-room houses, carry on as much of their meal-cooking outside as the weather will permit. These operations are transferred inside only when the cold winter weather makes it desirable. The Occidental would hardly call what they use in cooking their meals either a stove or a fireplace, but it serves the purpose. Often the place for the fire is on the floor in the middle of the room. A small open clay-baked box, or else a thick jar with holes at the sides, is what usually serves as a stove.²⁷

The fuel used. The peasant often uses dried dung as fuel for his fire. Some of the poorer classes use this themselves, and sell the sticks they find to those who can afford to buy them.²⁸

A reference in the prophecy of Ezekiel indicates this use of fuel was common in Bible times (see Ezekiel 4:15).

In the Orient fuel is usually so scarce that dried grass and withered flowers are apt to be carefully gathered into bundles and used for making a fire.²⁹ There are Bible indications that this was often done in those days of old. JESUS said: "**The grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven**" (Matthew 6:30; Luke 12:28).

Another popular fuel for fires in Palestine is thorns. There are many kinds of thorny shrubs that grow there, and the people gather them and make good use of them. Bible passages indicating such use of them are numerous (II Samuel 23:6, 7; Psalm 118:12; Ecclesiastes 7:6; Isaiah 9:18; Isaiah 10:17; Isaiah 33:12; Nahum 1:10).

The widow of Zarephath was gathering sticks to build a fire (I Kings 17:10), but the fire built in the courtyard of the high priest's house, where Simon Peter warmed himself, was built of charcoal (John 18:18). JESUS cooked breakfast for His disciples on a charcoal fire (John 21:9).

The chimney. The Fellabin Arabs have various ways of taking care of smoke from the interior fires. Sometimes they have an opening in the ceiling that serves as a chimney, or an aperture in the side of the house will serve the purpose. Often, when the fireplace is in the corner of the room, there is a hood over it with an outlet for the smoke. Frequently, charcoal fires are started in a brazier outdoors, and when most of the smoking is over, and the coals are red hot, then it is taken indoors.³⁰

The prophet Hosea refers to "**smoke out of the chimney**" (Hosea 13:3). A high latticed opening in the wall of the house would serve both as window and chimney in certain of the peasant homes. But no doubt, most of the chimney arrangements used by the Arabs as mentioned above, were also in use in Bible times. The Psalmist's comparison of himself with "**a bottle in the smoke**" (Psalm 119:83), could be an indoor figure; other scriptural references to smoke, that are often spoken of as being indoors, could just as well be outdoors (Proverbs 10:26; Isaiah 65:5, etc.). It can safely be assumed that Bible houses were not always as full of smoke as many have assumed to be the case.

Kindling a flame. The method used in early Old Testament times to produce a fire was to make sparks by the striking of stone and flint, or by the friction of pieces of wood, afterwards igniting a blaze. There are indications that Israel in later times produced fire by striking steel against

flint.³¹ In Isaiah 50:11, where it speaks of kindling a fire, the Hebrew word '*Kindle*' means "to strike," and evidently refers to the striking of flint on steel.³²

USES MADE OF THE ROOF OF THE HOUSE

The roof of an Oriental house is used today for a great variety of purposes, much like it was used in the days of the prophets and of the apostles.

Used as a place to sleep. The roof is a popular place for the Oriental to sleep.

For a great part of the year the roof, or "housetop," is the most agreeable place about the house, especially in the morning and evening. There many sleep during the summer, both in the city and the country, and in all places where malaria does not render it dangerous. The custom is very ancient.³³

An example in the Bible of this practice, is the incident of Samuel calling Saul, who had slept on the house-top (I Samuel 9:26).

Used as a place for storage. The flat Oriental roofs so exposed to the air and sunshine are well suited for storing grain or fruit to be ripened or dried. This custom is a common one in the East.³⁴ Rahab hid the spies with the stalks of flax which she had on her roof (Joshua 2:6).

Used as a gathering place in times of excitement. In Isaiah 22:1 the prophet says: "**What aileth thee now, that thou art wholly gone up to the housetops?**" Thus is described a typical Oriental city in the midst of a time of great commotion. Just as the Westerner at such a time gathers in the streets, so the Easterner goes to the housetops, where he can see down the streets, and discover what is happening.³⁵

Used as a place for public proclamations. In the days of JESUS as well as in modern times the villages of the Holy Land have had town criers. The orders of local governors are thus proclaimed from the top of the highest house available. Such a proclamation is usually made in the evening, after the men have returned from their work in the field. The long drawn out call becomes familiar to the residents, and they learn to listen for what follows.³⁶

The call of the town crier is said to resemble a distant, prolonged railroad whistle.³⁷ JESUS must have often heard the call of the town crier. To his disciples he said: "**what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops**" (Matthew 10:27). As a warning against the impossibility of hiding our sins in the day of judgment, he said, "**That which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops**" (Luke 12:3).

Used as a place of worship and prayer. The Scriptures indicate that roofs of houses were used for true worship of GOD, and also for idolatrous worship. The prophet Zephaniah speaks of "**them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops**" (Zephaniah 1:5). And Luke tells us that Peter at Joppa "**went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour**" (Acts 10:9). It would be natural for those worshipping the heavenly bodies to do so on the roof, and no doubt Peter retired to the housetop where he could be alone with GOD.³⁸

Used as a way of escape in time of evil. In a day when escape from evil was necessary, the inhabitants of villages in CHRIST's time could do so by going from roof to roof, because the houses were located so close to each other. Dr. Edersheim describes the situation thus:

From roof to roof there might be regular communication, called by the Rabbis "the road of the roofs." Thus a person could make his escape, passing from roof to roof, till at the last house he would descend the stairs that led down its outside, without having entered any dwelling. To this "road of the roofs" our LORD no doubt referred in His warning to His followers (Matthew 24:17; Mark 13:15; Luke 17:31), intended to apply to the last siege of Jerusalem, "**And let him that is on the housetop not go down into the house, neither enter therein.**"³⁹

BETHLEHEM HOUSE AND MANGER

The humble scene of the birthplace of the Baby JESUS is so often interpreted with Occidental instead of Oriental flavor that it would be well for Westerners to have the description of the kind of a Bethlehem house in which the Saviour was doubtless born, as given by John D. Whiting.⁴⁰

Entering the door of this one-room Bethlehem dwelling one sees that two-thirds of the space is given over to a "raised masonry platform, some eight to ten feet above the ground and supported by low-domed arches."⁴¹

This space that is raised is occupied by the members of the family, and the lower part of the house is for the cattle and flocks. Narrow stone steps lead up to where the family lives, and there are only two small windows in the room and these are high up from the ground. In winter weather the sheep and goats are kept inside the house, also a few work cattle, and perhaps a donkey. Primitive mangers for the cattle are to be seen around the walls, and these are built of rough slabs of stone placed on edge and plastered up with mortar."⁴²

The owner of the animals often sleeps on a small raised place, where he can keep watch over newly born lambs.

To know the heart of the land, to have learned the hospitality of its people, which is always offered, no matter how primitive or simple, makes it easy to picture Mary and Joseph returning from the inn, already filled with guests, and turning aside into a home such as we have described, the regular dwelling portion of which may have been none too large for the family which occupied it. It may have been crowded with other guests, but they find a welcome and a resting-place for the babe in a manger.⁴³

1. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. I, pp. 98, 99.
2. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 634.
3. Max Radin, *The Life of People in Biblical Times*, pp. 175, 176.
4. Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST* p. 243.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
6. George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*, p. 126.
7. "House," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, Charles R. Barnes, ed., p. 505.
8. Barton, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
9. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 389, also Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms*

in Bible Lands, p. 249.

10. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 92.
11. Col. Wilson, *Picturesque Palestine, Sinai, and Egypt*, Volume I, p. 300. 12. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 240.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
14. Barton, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
15. Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 123; also Mackie, *op. dt.*, p. 95.
16. Carl F. Keil, *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, Vol. II, p. 106.
17. G. Robinson Lees, *Village Life in Palestine*, pp. 89, 90.
18. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of CHRIST*, pp. 179, 180; also James Neil, *Pictured Palestine*, p. 123.
19. Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, p. 216.
20. See "Candle," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 183.
21. G. E. Wright, "Lamps, Politics, and the Jewish Religion," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, May, 1939, pp. 22-24; also Elisabeth Fletcher, "Archaeology Comes Down to Earth," *Christian Life*, December, 1950, p. 14.
22. George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*, p. 151.
23. Stapfer, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
24. Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 472, 473.
25. Rihbany, *op. cit.*, pp. 153, 154.
26. Lees, *op. cit.*, pp. 88, 89.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 2B. *Loc. cit.*
29. Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 341.
30. Information received by consultation with Dr. G. Frederick Owen, and Mr. G. Eric Matson, both of whom have had prolonged residence in Palestine.
31. Concerning early practice, see Thomas Upham, *John's Biblical Archaeology*, pp. 147-148. Concerning later practice, see II Maccabees 10:3.
32. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecy of Isaiah*, Volume II, p. 257. (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1890.)
33. Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 54, 55.
34. Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 25B.
36. Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 56.
37. Rihbany, *op. cit.*, pp. 273, 274.
38. Thomson. *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 57.
39. Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of CHRIST*, pp. 93, 94.
40. John D. Whiting, "Village Life in the Holy Land," *The National Geographic Magazine*, March, 1914, pp. 249-253.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 251. See also photograph, p. 310.
42. *Loc. cit.*
43. *Ibid.*, p. 253

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