

Strange Scriptures

That Perplex the Western Mind

Clarified in the Light of Customs and Conditions in Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER ONE

PERPLEXING SCRIPTURES

“Salute No Man by the Way” (Luke 10:4).

JESUS is sending out the seventy, two by two, into every city and place where He himself would come. He tells them that the harvest is very great but there are few laborers. He tells them to carry neither purse, nor scrip, nor shoes; and to salute no man by the way.

This sounds to our ears rather impolite and not like Jesus, who was kind and friendly. We are accustomed only to the manners of the Western world and we think merely of a nod of the head, a smile, or a grasp of the hand, which takes very little time.

Why did Christ command the seventy to salute no man by the way? They were on very important business, going out as messengers for their King and they must not loiter in idle conversation with the people they would meet on the way.

If a peasant from the Bible Lands should come to our country and watch us hurrying to catch a train and see us nod to a friend as a salutation, he certainly would consider us extremely impolite. No peasant would ever be so rude. When he walks through a town or village and meets an acquaintance, he rushes up to him and falls on his neck and kisses him on both cheeks, as the father of the prodigal son did. Then they each lay the right hand over the heart, then on their lips, and then slowly raise it to the forehead; and after that clasp each other's hands.

- Placing the hand over the heart is saying, “With my heart I love you”;
- Placing the hand on the lips is saying, “With my lips I give you the kiss of friendship”;
- Raising the hand to the forehead signifies, “I esteem and respect you.”

Next they exchange greetings and inquire after each other's welfare. Then they question each other with complimentary speeches which would take, at the very least, another half hour, and they embrace again and depart.

Time is of no importance to these villagers and you never saw one hurry. They frequently stand by the hour repeating over and over the same words, such as, “Is there peace with thee? Is there peace with thy house?”

When we read in the Bible, “**Is it well?**” the meaning is, “**Is there peace?**” (Genesis 37:14). “**And he said to him, Go I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks.**” This is also found in many other places in the Bible.

Because of this very common custom of such long greetings, Elisha said to his servant Gehazi, “**If thou meet any man, salute him not**” (II Kings 4:29).

Salutations today are just as lovely as in Old Testament days. When you meet a friend in any of the Bible Lands, he exclaims, “Peace be unto you.” When he leaves you he will say, “God go with you” — “Mar salaam,” to a man; “Mar salaami,” to a woman. You reply, “Peace remain with you” — “Allah selmack,” to a man; “Allah selmick,” to a woman.

A native may be just longing to kill you, and yet when you meet him on the street, he will stop and greet you thus: “May your days be blessed! God give you health and smooth your path! Peace to your lives. Go in peace.”

The Bible has many salutations which are common today in Bible Lands. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in Nazareth to announce to her that she was to be the mother of the Messiah, Mary was troubled in her mind to know what manner of salutation the angel used — was it the usual form, was it flattery, or had it a real meaning?

There is scarcely a salutation found in the Bible that may not be heard spoken every day in the villages of Palestine. All this helps us better to understand why Christ said to the disciples, “**Salute no man by the way.**”

“**Go Not From House to House**” (Luke 10:4-7).

“**And whatsoever house ye enter into, there abide.**”

Christ sends out the seventy helpers with these instructions: “**Carry neither purse nor scrip nor shoes: and salute no man by the way. And into whatsoever house ye enter . . . in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the labourer is worthy of his hire.**”

This sounds strange to our ears, but remember there were many people to carry the Good News to, and not much time left in which to accomplish this work.

When a stranger arrived in a village or an encampment, the people, one after another, must invite him to eat with them. There is a very strict custom about it, involving much hypocrisy; and any failure to observe this law of hospitality is violently resented by all the neighborhood, and often leads to feuds.

This hospitality consumes an enormous amount of time, leads to levity and gossip, and in every way would counteract the success of the spiritual mission on which the disciples were sent.

On account of all these obstacles, the helpers were instructed to avoid all these feasts.

Christ was sending them out, not to be honored and feasted, but to call men to repentance. They were, therefore, first to find a suitable place to lodge in, and to remain there until their work for the Lord in that village was accomplished.

“Go not from house to house, carry no scrip.”

The scrip is the whole skin of a kid, dried. It is fastened to the belt or a cord, and is thrown over the shoulder under the outer garment. The traveler will carry in this scrip bread, figs and olives, enough to last on his journey. The disciples were told not to take scrip or food with them (Luke 9:3).

“Suffer Me First to Bury My Father” (Matthew 8:21; Luke 9:59).

“And Jesus said to a man, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. And the Lord replied, Let the dead bury their dead.”

This answer appears to us very harsh and unsympathetic. We see in our mind a young man grieving for a dead father and wishing naturally to remain near him, and Jesus calls him, and the young man refuses the call.

The Palestinian understands this as being nothing in the world but an excuse, and an exceedingly common one in that country. No doubt the father was perfectly well and strong, but the son did not want to follow Christ, and as was the common custom, he answered, “No, I cannot, my father is dead and I must bury him.”

If you ask some natives even today to do anything they do not want to do, they will not answer that they do not feel well, or haven't the time, but they will instantly say to you, “No, I cannot, my father is dead.”

“The Lord Hath Made Bare His Arm” (Isaiah 52:10).

“The Lord hath made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

The meaning of this Scripture is clear, but the vividness of it is hidden unless one has seen the women of the Bible Lands taking their long flowing sleeves, tying the ends in a knot, and throwing them over their shoulders to leave the arms bare so they can work unhindered.

The men will do the same with the long sleeves of their *kamise*, tie the ends together and throw them over their heads, so that they can go out to fight and not be hindered by long pointed sleeves.

“The Lord hath made bare his arm.”

“He Shall Dwell Between His Shoulders” (Deuteronomy 33:12).

“The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between his shoulders.”

This Scripture refers to the Bible Lands' hammock or cradle, made of camel's hair, and used by the village mothers and the mothers of the tent dwellers. It is a hammock about two by two and a half feet, with a strong cord at either end, so that it may be carried on the mother's shoulders, with the cords passing across her forehead.

In the field the mother suspends the little hammock from the limb of a tree, or if there is no tree, she erects a tripod of sticks from which the hammock hangs, covering the baby's face with one of her own garments to protect the child from the sun and flies.

How often we have seen a small hammock on the shoulders of a young mother, with a tiny face peeking out, or more often with a sleeping baby and a little foot or a small hand showing at the side of the hammock.

When the mother carries the child, she will draw a part of her large white veil over the hammock as a protection against the hot sun, either partly or completely covering it.

This is the common picture referred to in Deuteronomy 36:12: **“The beloved of the Lord shall dwell safely by him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between his shoulders.”**

“Thy Youth Renewed Like the Eagle's” (Psalm 103:5).

“Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed as the eagle's.”

This fact in the life of the eagle is given as a promise to the righteous.

The eagle lives to a very great age. As he grows old his beak becomes so long that he can no longer eat; then he flies away by himself to the top of a cliff and pecks and pecks on a rock until his bill falls off, after which a new bill grows in its place.

While without the use of his bill, the bird also loses his feathers because of fasting.

After the new bill grows and he again takes food, new feathers start growing, so that he looks and appears like a young eagle, going forth in a new covering with youthful beauty and strength.

“Thy youth is renewed as the eagle's.”

“The Eagle Stirreth Up Her Nest” (Deuteronomy 32:11).

“As the eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings.”

Moses is telling the people how God deals with his children.

The mother eagle watches her baby eaglets carefully; as they grow, she stirs them up a bit so they will not be contented to lie in the nest: she then flutters over them to make them want to use their wings as she does; then she pushes them out of the nest and flies down beneath, carefully watching them so no harm will come to her children. When her mother eye sees the little wings growing weary, she spreads out her great strong wings; catches them and bears them back to the nest for rest.

The nest is always very high.

A fall would mean the end of flying, but the mother eagle knows when it is time to shake the young out of the nest and when to fly down to bring them back.

That is what God does for us, bears us on eagle's wings.

“And David Danced Before the Lord”

(II Samuel 6:14).

“And David danced before the Lord with all his might: and David was girded with a linen ephod.”

At the head of a great procession there would frequently be seen a half naked buffoon dancing, going through gesticulations usual on such occasions. It was all done in honor of the person to whom the procession was made, and was the office of a slave only.

King David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting and with trumpets; and David danced before the Lord, he took the place of a slave at the head of the procession to do honor to the Lord.

Michal, King David's wife, not understanding her husband's motive, and thinking he had lowered himself before the people, reproached him bitterly, and despised him in her heart.

“Bathed His Feet With Tears” (Luke 7:38).

“She began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head.”

We find reference in many old books to the custom of collecting the tears of the whole family and preserving them in bottles. Thus King David prays, **“Put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?”**

Tear bottles have been found in very large numbers on opening ancient tombs. They are made of thin glass usually, although the very poor sometimes had just simple pottery bottles, not even baked or glazed. They were all made with a slender body, broad at the base, with a funnel-shaped top. Every member of the family owned a tear bottle and they collected the tears of the whole family.

When serious trouble or a death occurred in the home, all the relatives came and each one brought his tear bottle with him. As they wept and wailed, the tears rolling down their cheeks, each person took his or her tear bottle and gathered tears from the faces of all present.

This bottle was exceedingly sacred to them. It represented all the heartaches, sorrows and bereavements from the grandparents down to the small child. When a person died, his tear bottle was buried with him, as one of his most sacred possessions.

This helps us to a better understanding of what the woman did for her Master. She noticed the very discourteous way in which Christ was treated as a guest in the house of Simon the Pharisee. He provided no water to wash the Lord's feet and no oil to anoint his head; so this poor, sinful woman, longing for forgiveness and a new life, took her tear bottle, poured the tears over his tired, dusty feet and wiped them with her long hair. A great sacrifice indeed, done in love and gratitude to the Saviour. They could not be replaced and she might die without a bottle of tears to be buried with her in her tomb.

“She bathed his feet with tears.”

“Water on the Hands of Elijah” (II Kings 3:11).

“Here is Elisha, who poured water on the hands of Elijah.”

The same practice prevails to this day. Nowhere is water poured into a basin, but the servant pours water from a pitcher on the hands of his master. Washing of feet was very common, and, in a hot country where sandals were worn, would be essential to comfort.

“Moab is my washpot” (Psalm 60:8).

Moab was doomed to the most abject and degrading servitude.

In the practice of washing the feet there was the combination of humility with affectionate attention; and the Saviour washed his disciples' feet, designing by a symbolic action to teach an important truth.

If the Master had performed an office so needful and yet so lowly, how much more were the disciples themselves bound to consider any Christian service whatever as a duty, which each was to perform for the other! Love dignifies any service.

Cursing the Fig Tree (Mark 11:12-14; 20-23).

While Jesus was on earth He was constantly teaching His disciples by parables.

One strange thing about the fig tree is that the fruit appears before the leaves. If the first fruit did not appear, there would be no other figs on the tree.

Christ and the disciples were passing and looked for some of the small but sweet first fruit. It was a tree with leaves, it looked well and useful, but it was a useless tree, and not only that, it led the passerby to believe it was a good tree, when it was of no value.

It was a type of profession without productiveness. Our Lord could not endure hypocrisy in anyone or anything, and condemned it more than any other sin. Here Christ is giving His disciples an illustration they would not easily forget.

A person might say this fig tree did not belong to our Saviour, and therefore He had no right to take the fruit. We can answer this by reference to the Mosaic Law in such cases. *“You are not to prohibit those that pass by, when your fruits are ripe, to touch them, but to give them leave to fill themselves full of what you have.”*

And the custom of plucking ripe figs as you pass by the orchards is still universal in the Bible lands, especially from trees not enclosed. After the feast in September, the figs which remain on the trees are common property and the poor may enter the orchards and take all they want.

Lying at the Feet (Ruth 3:7-14).

Ruth, when reaping in the field of Boaz, went to the resting place of Boaz, uncovered his feet, and lying crosswise, covered herself with his cloak or skirt, a custom common all over the East.

By doing so, Ruth just placed herself under the protection of Boaz; later she asked Boaz to spread his skirt over her. She only asked him to acknowledge her right to his protection.

Boaz replied, **“I will do to thee all that thou requirest, for all the city doth know that thou art a virtuous woman. If thy kinsman will not take thee to wife, I will.”**

This same custom is referred to in Ezekiel 16:8: **“I will spread my skirt over thee, and thou becomest mine.”**

“Bring the Veil Which Thou Hast Upon Thee” (Ruth 3:15).

“Boaz said, Bring the veil that thou hast upon thee, and hold it . . . he measured six measures of barley, and laid it on her: and she went into the city.”

Whenever a woman of the Bible Lands today lacks a basket or bag, the veil comes into use. She places what she has to carry in one end of her long veil, gathers and ties it around with one corner, and places it on the top of her head. Veils have always been used by the women to carry burdens in.

People unacquainted with the ancient customs of these lands may wonder how Ruth's veil could hold so much grain.

We think of a veil as being small and made of gauze or net, but not so in Palestine. The *khirka*, as the veil is called, is made of very strong material, six feet or more in length and all of four feet wide. The woman places it over her cap, covering her entire headgear, except the coins in front. It is considered very immodest for a woman to have her head or hair exposed in public. When at home where she is seen only by her family, the veil is removed.

Usually veils are made of very heavy white linen, embroidered in colors on the ends, while in the district north of Jerusalem each girl makes a veil for herself almost covered with beautiful needlework, so that it will correspond with the white embroidered *tobe*, or dress for her marriage.

“The Wringing of Milk Bringeth Forth Butter” (Proverbs 30:33).

“Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood; so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife.”

The word for **“churning”** and **“wringing”** is the same in Hebrew.

It is the wringing of milk that bringeth forth butter, just as these women are squeezing and wringing this milk in the “bottle.”

There is no analogy between our mode of churning and pulling a man's nose until the blood comes, but in the Arab operation the comparison is quite natural and emphatic.

What are these women kneading and shaking in that large black bag, suspended from this three-legged crotch? That is a bottle, not a bag, made by stripping off the entire skin of a young fuffalo. It is full of milk, and that is their way of churning. When the butter “has come,” they take it out, boil or melt it, and then put it into bottles made of goats' skins. In winter it resembles candied honey, in summer it is mere oil.

Quails (Numbers 11:31, 32).

“And there went forth a wind from the Lord, and brought forth quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits high upon the face of the earth.”

Commentators tell us that these quail flew *“about two cubits above the face of the earth,”* that is within reach of the people that might slay them for food. The statement is not that the quails were piled up from the face of the earth two cubits deep. The level of their flight was two cubits above the earth.

“And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host.”

The quail is a bird of the grouse family. They are abundant in all the temperate regions of Europe and western Asia, migrating to and from Africa at the proper season.

In the spring they are found in great numbers in the Syrian deserts and Arabia. An immense supply was furnished the Israelites on two occasions (Exodus 16:13; Numbers 11:31, 32). Both were at the season of migration, and the birds were caught in such quantities as to suffice for a million people for a month. They were dried in the sun, and preserved with salt.

Bosom (Isaiah 40:11).

In the East people usually carry within a fold of their robe things that could not be carried in the hand. Isaiah tells us that the Saviour will carry the lambs in His bosom. Lazarus is spoken of as in Abraham's bosom. We get the idea of a banquet.

Lazarus, an ulcerated and crippled beggar, who had lain at the rich man's gate, contented with the scraps thrown out to him, was translated to a feast, and he had the most intimate place among all the guests, reclining on the host's bosom. Christ is in the bosom of the Father; that is, He possesses the closest intimacy with the Father.

The Jews reclined at meals. By this arrangement, the head of one person was brought almost into the bosom of the person who lay above him, and the guests were arranged so as to bring the most honored nearest to the host.

The dinner bed was used by the Romans as well as by Jews. It had couches built around it. Each man, in order to feed himself, lay nearly flat on his breast, and stretched out his hands toward the table; but afterwards, when his hunger was satisfied, he turned on his left side, leaning on his elbow.

Each person was provided with a cushion or bolster on which to support the upper part of his body on a raised position; as the left arm soon became weary. The lower part of his body was extended diagonally, with the feet outwards. We can see how the woman who was a sinner might come behind Christ and bathe his feet with tears and anoint them. (Luke 7:37, 38).

Anointing (Psalm 104:15).

“Oil to make the face to shine.”

The earliest use of anointing of which we know is told us in Genesis 28:18. Also we read in (Genesis 31:13: **“I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointest the pillar.”**)

The pouring of oil on the stone which had been Jacob's pillow was for the purpose of consecration to the service of God. High priests and sacred vessels were anointed for the same reason. The king was called **“the Lord's anointed,”** anointed for the service of God.

The oil was carefully prepared for all such purposes and could not be used for any ordinary occasion. Directions for making this oil are found in Exodus 30:23-33. It was composed of myrrh, sweet cinnamon and sweet calamus and of olive oil.

Anointing was also used on festive occasions. It was the mark of attention paid to guests, here we have the phrase **“anointed with the oil of gladness.”**

In Egypt it was customary for a servant to anoint the head of every guest and the omission was considered a sign of mourning.

In Luke 7:38, 46, the host neglected to anoint the head of Jesus and provided no water for His feet. Not only was oil used for the head, but also for the skin. In many countries the use of oil for the body is believed to strengthen it and to protect it from the heat of the sun. The bodies of the dead were often anointed to preserve them.

Ashes (Genesis 18:27).

Ashes, in the symbolic language of Scripture, denotes human frailty, as in Genesis 18:27: **“I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, who am but dust and ashes;”** *deep humiliation,* as in Esther 4:1: **“Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes.”**

To sit in ashes was a token of mourning, as in Job 2:8: **“And he sat down among the ashes.”**

Feeding on ashes appears to express grief. Psalm 102:9: **“For I have eaten ashes like bread and mingled my bread with weeping.”**

There was a sort of lustral water, made with the ashes of the heifer sacrificed on the great day of expiation.

These ashes were distributed to the people, and the water as well as the ashes used in purification for sin, and running water shall be put thereto in a vessel:

“And a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon the persons that were there, and upon him that touched a bone, or one slain, or one dead, or a grave.”

Whited Sepulchres (Matthew 23:27).

As in ancient times, so today white-washed tombs mark the place of the dead. They all receive a new whitening before days or seasons of feasting and worship. The people believed that to touch or come in contact with a tomb was to defile oneself. Death was the result of sin, and, therefore caused contamination. Therefore sepulchres were always whitewashed. That made them to be easily seen and avoided.

Christ made reference to this practice in an address to the scribes and Pharisees.

Whitewashing a tombstone did not change the nature of the grave itself, it still contained dead man's bones. The thing might be made attractive without, but there was no difference within.

Christ insisted that religion was not to be an outward decoration merely, just for special occasions; it was to be a life principle, giving reality to all we do.

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye are like whited sepulchres.”

Coals of Fire (Romans 12:20).

The Scriptures have much to say about forgiving our enemies.

Paul says that if we give food and drink to our enemies, **“we shall be heaping coals of fire on their heads.”**

To us this doesn't sound like forgiveness, but like taking vengeance.

In the Bible lands almost everything is carried on the head—water jars, baskets of fruit, vegetables, fish or any other article. Those carrying the burden rarely touch it with the hands, and they walk through crowded streets and lanes with perfect ease. In many homes the only fire they have is kept in a brazier which they use for simple cooking as well as for warmth.

They plan to always keep it burning. If it should go out, some member of the family will take the brazier to a neighbor's house to borrow fire. Then she will lift the brazier to her head and start for home.

If her neighbor is a generous woman, she will heap the brazier full of coals.

To feed an enemy and give him drink was like heaping the empty brazier with live coals,— which meant food, warmth, and almost life itself to the person or home needing it and was the symbol of finest generosity.

“Thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.”

“Selah”

This word occurs seventy-five times in the Psalms and three times in Habakkuk.

It is derived from a Hebrew word which means to be silent, and signifies to pause in the singing.

It is to direct the singer to pause or be silent while the instruments played interlude.

A Covenant of Salt (Numbers 18:19).

“It is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord unto thee and to thy seed with thee.”

This act of eating another's salt has always been regarded as a token of fidelity and friendship.

Sometimes bread and salt are eaten together, making a covenant. **“There is bread and salt between us, we are brothers.”**

The custom came down from the remotest antiquity. The covenant can never be forgotten nor renounced.

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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