

## Manners And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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### CHAPTER FOUR -

#### Foods and Their Preparation for Eating

WHAT KINDS OF FOOD did the ancient Jews eat? "The ordinary food of the average Hebrew of Bible times was bread, olives, oil, buttermilk and cheese from their flocks; fruits and vegetables from their orchards and gardens; and meat on rare occasions."<sup>1</sup> Only a few more varieties would have to be added to make this a complete list of foods eaten in those days.

#### THE USE OF RAW GRAIN AND PARCHED GRAIN

The eating of *raw grain* is a modern custom in Palestine that dates back to very ancient days. (See also "eating grain in the field." Chapter 19). The Arabs today often pluck the ears of grain and rubbing them in their hands, eat them. The Mosaic Law said: "**Ye shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that ye have brought an offering unto your GOD**" (Leviticus 23:14; cf. Deuteronomy 23:25; II Kings 4:42). The disciples of JESUS ate raw grain in the fields. "**His disciples plucked the ears of corn, and did eat, rubbing them in their hands**" Luke 6:1; cf. Matthew 12:1, Mark 2:23). So it can be readily seen that this custom of eating raw grain has prevailed for thousands of years.<sup>2</sup>

Another food common in the Orient today and in use in Bible times is parched grain. This is prepared from the grains of wheat that are not fully ripe. They are roasted in a pan or on an iron plate. Such grain is eaten either with or without bread. Jesse sent some of it to his sons in the army by the hand of David (I Samuel 17:17). Abigail included some of it in her present to David (I Samuel 25:18). And David received some of it from friends at the time he had fled from Absalom (II Samuel 17:28). These Scriptures show that parched grain has been in use for centuries.<sup>3</sup>

#### BREAD

Bread the principal food. In the Orient it has been estimated that three-fourths of the people live entirely upon either bread or upon that which is made from wheat or barley flour. It is unquestionably the principal food of the East.<sup>4</sup>

In the Bible such an expression as "eating bread" is often used when Occidentals would say: "eating a meal." When the Bible says, "**The Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews**" (Genesis 43:31, 32), it means that they could not eat a meal with them (See also Genesis 37:25; Exodus 2:20; I Samuel 28:22-25).

Sacredness of bread. The Palestinians are brought up to think of bread as having a mystic sacred meaning. In some places they have such a reverence for bread that they will not arise to salute a guest, if they are in the midst of breaking bread together, but will wait till they are finished. Such is their attitude toward bread.<sup>5</sup>

It may be said that this attitude of the people toward bread is essentially religious. Everything about bread from the sowing of the seed to the baking of the loaves is done in the name of GOD. These Orientals sense the importance of the petition in the disciple's prayer: "**Give us this day our daily bread**" (Matthew 6:11). It was to men who really appreciate the value of bread, that JESUS first said, "**I am the bread of life**" (John 6:35).<sup>6</sup>

Since there is this attitude of sacredness in relation to "the staff of life," there grows out of it the universal Eastern custom of breaking bread and not cutting it. One who has lived in Palestine says about the natives of the country: "They never put a knife to bread, holding it to be absolutely wicked to cut it, but always break it into pieces with their fingers."<sup>7</sup>

To cut bread would be thought of as cutting life itself. This custom of breaking bread rather than cutting it, is found throughout the Scriptures. In Lamentations 4:4 we read: "**The young children ask bread, and no man breaketh it unto them.**" Thus the expression "breaking of bread" came to mean the taking of a meal whatever was included in the meal. Because CHRIST broke bread when He instituted the ordinance of the LORD's Supper, the expression came to refer to that ordinance. Matthew 26:26: "**Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to his disciples.**"

Thus we read in Acts 20:7: "**And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them.**"

Kinds of bread used. Two kinds of bread were in use in the days when Bible events were being enacted: wheat bread, and barley bread. Both of these are in use in Palestine today. There is this distinction between them: *barley bread is used by the poorer classes, whereas if a family is able to have wheat bread, it is considered to have arrived at a place well up in the comfort scale.*<sup>8</sup>

This same distinction was true in the Old Testament days and also New Testament times. When the "**cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian**" in the dream of the Midianite soldier (Judges 7:13), it was an indication that the enemy despised Israel, as a more favored people eating wheat bread would despise eaters of barley bread, and yet GOD was to use the despised Israelites of Gideon's army to overpower those proud Midianites.<sup>9</sup>

The lad who had his five barley loaves and gave them to Jesus, and saw Him multiply them to feed five thousand (John 6:9), must have come from the poorer class, but his humble contribution made possible a great miracle, and the crowd was satisfied with that kind of bread.

Form of loaves. In the Holy Land where the old customs prevail, bread takes three forms:

First, there are the small loaves which somewhat resemble the light bread biscuits of this country. It was this kind the lad had and gave to Jesus.

Second, there are the larger loaves, nearly as heavy as the modern loaves of the West, but round instead of rectangular. The ten loaves which Jesse sent by David to the camp of Israel were probably of this form (I Samuel 17:17).

Third, there are the flat loaves which are thin like paper. These are something like American hot cakes only bigger around and much thinner. When served some of these, one man from the West thought they were napkins and started to use them as such.

This kind of bread is used to take the place of the knife, fork, or spoon of the Occidental; Easterners "cup it up" and use it to dip into the food sauces (see Chapter 6). It is quite pliable; and the men fold it up and put it in their srip, and take it with them, so they can eat it as needed.<sup>10</sup>

Baking of bread. The most primitive method of baking bread was the laying of cakes of dough on heated stones.<sup>11</sup>

A Scriptural example of this is from the experience of Elijah. (I Kings 19:6): "**And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head.**"

Another simple method of baking is the digging in the ground of a hole four or five feet deep, and three feet in diameter, and after this oven is heated, the dough is rolled out until it is no thicker than a person's finger, and then it is struck against the oven's sides where it instantly bakes.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes a great stone pitcher is used as an oven. In the bottom of it a fire is made among small flints that retain the heat. The dough is placed on these and is quickly baked. Sometimes the dough is rolled out quite thin and is stuck on the outside of the hot pitcher where it bakes. Some have thought that it was this pitcher-oven that was meant in Leviticus 2:4, where two types of unleavened bread were to be baked. The cakes of fine flour would be baked inside the pitcher-oven, and the wafers would be baked on the outside of it.<sup>13</sup>

Another type of simple oven is a large earthenware jar, into which the fuel is placed, and when the jar is hot enough the thin cakes are laid on the outside to cook.<sup>14</sup> When bread was baked individually by each family in Bible days, some such method as has been described was probably used by the ordinary homes.

But often today, as in the days of Sacred Writ, bread was and is baked in either a semipublic oven, or in the oven of a public baker. Sometimes each town might have several of these ovens. One type of such an oven consists of a big earthen tube, some three feet in diameter, and about five feet long. It is sunk in the ground inside a hut. The women take their turn in baking their bread. The fuel is thrown into the tube, and when the fire gets hot, and billows of smoke and tongues of flame come from the deep hole, the hut, without any chimney in it, begins to resemble an active crater. Malachi must have seen such an oven when he wrote the words, "**For behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven: and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble**" (Malachi 4:1).<sup>15</sup>

Another type of Oriental oven "is a long, low, stonebuilt vault, like half a railway-engine's boiler,

with a stone pavement down the middle, and a long narrow strip at each side for the firewood."<sup>16</sup> Each night the ashes are taken out, and often the children of poor families will bring a piece of tin, or of a broken water jar, and carry home on this some of the embers of the fire with which to start the fire at home for the evening meal.<sup>17</sup>

Hosea makes mention of "**an oven heated by the baker**" (Hosea 7:4). This would indicate that some of the people brought their bread to a baker to do the baking. The city of Jerusalem had its Baker's Street in the time of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 37:21).

## VEGETABLES

The two most widely used vegetables in Bible times were beans and lentils. The prophecy of Ezekiel mentions both of these in one verse (Ezekiel 4:9). Beans are included in the articles of food which David's friends brought to him when he was in flight from Jerusalem, because of Absalom's rebellion (II Samuel 17:28). The most famous Biblical use of lentils was of course, the selling of Esau's birthright for a meal including lentils with bread (Genesis 25:33, 34).

Thomson tells of being invited to a meal of lentils which he found to be very savory with its "appetizing fragrance and substantial taste, that to a hungry man must have been very tempting. In eating this dish, he did as his hosts did, doubled "some of their bread spoon-fashion," and then dipped it into the saucepan. He suggests that Esau no doubt used the same kind of spoon of bread in eating the pottage of lentils.<sup>18</sup>

The Israelites' Egyptian diet included the vegetables: leeks, onions, and garlic (Numbers 11:5). Most of these were probably used sometimes in Palestine. The prophet Isaiah mentions a "**garden of cucumbers**" (Isaiah 1:8). Gourds were also used, as suggested by two Scripture passages (Jonah 4:6-10; II Kings 4:39). The "**pulse**" which Daniel and his companions wanted as their diet, when they were captives, was probably vegetables (Daniel 1:12). The word means primarily, "something sown," and therefore would include edible seeds that are cooked, such as lentils, beans, peas, etc. It was a simple vegetable diet that was wanted instead of the rich, unwholesome food of the king's table.<sup>19</sup>

## DAIRY PRODUCTS

Milk. Milk in Bible times was considered, not simply as something that was added to their food in cooking, but was regarded as a substantial food for all ages. Babies were fed mother's milk (Isaiah 28:9). The Hebrews not only used cow's milk, but also sheep's milk (Deuteronomy 32:14), goat's milk (Proverbs 27:27), and, no doubt, camel's milk (Genesis 32:15). The Promised Land was often called "**a land flowing with milk and honey**" (Exodus 3:8; 13:5; Joshua 5:6; Jeremiah 11:5). This would indicate that Palestine's broad pasture lands would produce an abundance of milk.<sup>20</sup>

A form of milk that is in common use among the Arabs today is called by them "*leben*," which means, "white." It is like our sour milk curds. In order to make it, they pour milk in a dish and then put yeast in it, which starts it to working. They cover it over with a warm cloth, and after it sets for about a day it is ready to serve. The Arabs are very fond of it. They say of it, "It makes a sick man well." If they have money for only one dish, they would usually ask for leben.<sup>21</sup>

It was probably this "leben" that Abraham gave to his guests (Genesis 18:8), and also that Jael gave to Sisera (Judges 4:19; 5:25).

Butter. It is generally agreed among Bible scholars, that in most of the cases where the word "butter" appears in our generally used translation, it does not mean the kind of butter known by the Westerner, but rather curdled milk or "leben." There are two passages that do refer to butter, but even that is in a different form from that used by those people who live outside the Orient.<sup>22</sup>

The first passage mentions "butter of kine" (Deuteronomy 32:14), and the second refers to the process of making butter, "**the churning of milk bringeth forth butter**" (Proverbs 30:33). The Bible-time method of making butter was doubtless the same as used by the Arab Bedouins of today.

Thomson describes the process and the resulting butter thus:

What are those women kneading and shaking so zealously in that large black bag suspended from that tripod? That is a bottle not a bag, made by stripping off the skin of a young buffalo. It is full of milk and that is their method of churning. When the butter has come they take it out, and boil it, and then put it in bottles made of goatskins. In winter it resembles candied honey, in summer it is like oil. That is the only kind of butter they have in this country.<sup>23</sup>

Concerning the passage in Proverbs (30:33), "**Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood,**" Thomson calls attention to the fact, that the word churning, and the word for wringing are the same word in the Hebrew. He says:

It is the wringing of milk that bringeth forth butter, just as these women are squeezing and wringing the milk in that skin bottle. There is no analogy between our mode of churning, and pulling a man's nose until the blood comes, but in this native operation the comparison is quite natural and emphatic.<sup>24</sup>

Buttermilk is not itself mentioned in the Bible, but it was without doubt used, because the process of churning, as has already been referred to, is mentioned.

Cheese. In Palestine the Arabs are fond of cheese. It is convenient for them to take cheese along with them. Their cheese is somewhat like Western slices, only larger and thicker. They are about as thick as a man's hand. They are found stacked up in the markets.<sup>25</sup>

David's father gave him ten cheeses to take to the army captain (I Samuel 17:18). Also Barzillai brought cheese to King David (II Samuel 17:29).

## MEAT

When meat was eaten and what kinds. As a rule, Bible characters, like Orientals in modern times, have not eaten meat, except on special occasions. When a stranger or guest was entertained, or when a feast was made, then meat would be served.<sup>26</sup>

Kings and other wealthy men had meat often. The daily provision of meat for King Solomon's court is given in Scripture. Four kinds of meat for the king's daily menu are mentioned: beef, mutton, game, and fowl (I Kings 4:23). Abraham served veal to his guests (Genesis 18:7). Gideon's guest was provided with a kid (Judges 6:19). On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, fish was a common article of food in the days of JESUS. CHRIST referred to this when he spoke of a son begging his father for a fish (Luke 11:11). This Scripture might imply that these dwellers near the lake lived mostly on fish.<sup>27</sup>

How meat was cooked and served. The method of preparing meat has thus been described:

Roasting on a spit was perhaps the oldest way of cooking flesh, but less common among the Israelites than boiling, roast flesh being used as a rule only by the rich and better classes, as is still the case in the East.<sup>28</sup>

The servants of Eli's sons said to those bringing offerings, "**Give flesh to roast for the priest; for he will not have sodden flesh of thee, but raw**" (I Samuel 2:15). After the meat was cooked it was divided up into small pieces, and a broth was prepared to serve with it, and this would often have vegetables in it.<sup>29</sup> Such a broth was used in the days of Gideon and of Isaiah (Judges 6:19,20; Isaiah 65:4).

## EGGS

Sometime between the days of Elijah and the time of CHRIST the domestic fowl and the everyday use of eggs was introduced into Palestine.<sup>30</sup>

There would seem to be one early Old Testament reference to what might be the egg of a hen. It is Job 6:6: "**Is there any taste in the white of an egg?**" We know that the use of eggs, among the Galileans around the lake, was common in CHRIST's time, for JESUS speaks of a son asking for an egg from his father (Luke 11:12).

## HONEY

GOD had promised Israel, "**a land flowing with milk and honey**" (Exodus 3:8; 13:5; Joshua 5:6; Jeremiah 11:5). The numerous references to honey or honeycomb in GOD's Word, are proof that Palestine abounded with the product of the bees. Without doubt, the Jews took care of bees in order to produce honey.<sup>31</sup>

However, many of the Scriptural citations indicate that wild honey was very common. The favorite haunts of the bees were in the cavities of trees, where Jonathan discovered and ate some of the honey (I Samuel 14:25-27); in the holes of the rock, where it was often extracted (Psalm 81:16); and sometimes the dried carcasses of animals, as when Samson ate honey from the carcass of the lion he had slain (Judges 14:8,9).

The poetical books of the Hebrew Bible abound with comparisons to honey.

- The judgments of GOD's Word are compared to it (Psalm 19:10).

- Pleasant words are likened unto it (Proverbs 16:24),
- Knowledge and wisdom to the soul (Proverbs 24:13,14).
- And the bride and bridegroom of Solomon's Song speak of honey (Song of Solomon 4:11; 5:1).

In New Testament times John the Baptist lived on locusts and wild honey from the wilderness (Matthew 3:4). And when JESUS wanted to prove to the disciples that His resurrection body was a real body, He asked for food and was given a piece of broiled fish with some honeycomb (Luke 24:41-43).

Dr. Thomson relates how "in the clefts of a precipice overhanging Wady el Kurn swarms of bees made their home." A man was let down over the rock by ropes, and being protected from assault from the bees, he was able to extract a large quantity of honey.<sup>32</sup>

Such an incident is reminiscent of the expression of Moses in his farewell song: "**He made him to suck honey out of the rock**" (Deuteronomy 32:13).

## FRUIT

Olives and olive oil. Some use is made of the pickled berry of the olive, but the bulk of the fruit is used to make oil. In the Orient, olive oil usually takes the place of butter, and is largely used in cooking meals. A survey of several Scriptures will indicate how important a food olive oil was considered to be. The widow who fed Elijah said to him: "**I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse**" (I Kings 17:12). She had been depending largely on bread and oil for her food, but the supply of both was about gone. The miracle of Elijah was the multiplication of that supply, "**And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Elijah**" (I Kings 17:16). The Meal Offering of the Mosaic law called for unleavened fine flour mingled with oil baked in a pan (Leviticus 2:5). And the prophet Ezekiel in reciting to Jerusalem all its past blessings from JEHOVAH said of her, "**Thou didst eat fine flour, and honey, and oil**" (Ezekiel 16:13). (See also section on "*olive tree*," Chapter 21).

Figs. This fruit was often used in Old Testament times, especially dried figs. Abigail took two hundred cakes of figs to David (I Samuel 25:18). A cake of figs was given the Egyptian to revive him (I Samuel 30:12), and cakes of figs were brought to David at Hebron, at a time of great rejoicing (I Chronicles 12:40). (See also section on "*the fig tree*," Chapter 21).

Grapes and raisins. During the months of September and October, the fresh ripe grapes are eaten along with bread as one of the principal foods.<sup>33</sup> Canaan must have been a land of very fine grapes, for two of the spies brought back a great cluster of grapes on a branch carried on a staff between them, and secured from the Valley of Eshcol (Numbers 13:23). Raisins were widely used in the days when the Jews lived in Palestine. Abigail gave David one hundred clusters of raisins (I Samuel 25:18). Raisins were brought to David at Hebron (I Chronicles 12:40) and again, when he was fleeing from Absalom, he received a quantity of them (II Samuel 16:1). (See also section on "*use of grapes*," Chapter 20).

Pomegranates. There are several varieties of sweet and sour pomegranates in the land. The juice of the sour variety is used in the absence of lemons for the purposes of that fruit. The

pomegranate was greatly esteemed as a fruit in early Bible times, for it was mentioned by Moses as one of the excellencies of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 8:8). The Song of Solomon makes mention of the pomegranate fruit, trees, and spiced wine from its juice (Song of Solomon 4:13; 6:11; 7:12; 8:2).<sup>34</sup>

1. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. I, p. 98.
2. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, p. 94.
3. James Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, pp. 128, 129.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
5. Abraham Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, pp. 193, 194.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 196-198.
7. James Neil, *Pictured Palestine*, p. 78; cf. also Anis C. Haddad, *Palestine Speaks*, pp. 71, 72.
8. Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
9. Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 181, 182.
10. From class notes in course: "*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*," Pasadena College, June, 1950, taught by Dr. G. Frederick Owen.
11. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 99.
12. Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
13. *Loc. cit.*
14. Mackie, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
15. Rihbany, *op. cit.*, pp. 200, 202.
16. Mackie, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
17. *Loc. cit.*
18. Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 252.
19. "*Pulse*," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, Charles R. Barnes, ed., p. 1149.
20. "*Milk*," *ibid.*, p. 724.
21. From class notes in course: "*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*," Pasadena College, June, 1950, taught by Dr. G. Frederick Owen.
22. "*Butter*," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 169.
23. Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 456, 457.
24. *Loc. cit.*
25. From class notes in course: "*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*," Pasadena College, June, 1950, taught by Dr. G. Frederick Owen.
26. Thomas Upham, *Jahn's Biblical Archaeology*, p. 151.
27. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of CHRIST*, pp. 185, 186.
28. "*Food, Preparation of*," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, pp. 378-380.
29. Upham, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
30. W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, p. 217.
31. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 366.
32. Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 259.
33. Mackie, *op. cit.*, p. 4.";
34. Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 284-286.

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