

Manners And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER SIX -

Special Suppers and Banquets

SINCE THE DAILY MENU of the ordinary Oriental meal is and always has been very simple, something needs to be said about those special occasions when a more elaborate and expensive meal is served. The Scriptures abound in accounts of these formal occasions, such as weddings, birthdays, or other times when special guests are invited and a sumptuous meal is served.

BANQUET INVITATIONS

In some parts of the East a custom of double invitations to an entertainment has been observed. Some time before the feast is to be served, an invitation is sent forth; and then, when the appointed time draws near, a servant is sent again, this time to announce that everything is ready.¹

There are several examples of this custom in the Bible. Ahasuerus and Haman were invited by Esther to a feast, and then when it was ready the king's chamberlains went to get Haman (Esther 5:8; 6:14). Another example is in the Parable of the Wedding of the King's Son. **"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding"** (Matthew 22:2, 3).

Again, the Parable of the Great Supper has this double invitation in it: **"A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: and sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready"** (Luke 14:16,17).

"COMPELLING" GUESTS TO ATTEND

The following words of CHRIST's parable need to be understood from an Oriental point of view: **"And the Lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled"** (Luke 14:23).

The usual brief invitation in America, and the ready acceptance of it would be considered in the East entirely undignified. In the East the one invited must not at first accept, but is expected rather to reject the invitation. He must be urged to accept. Although all the time he expects to accept, he must allow the one inviting him the privilege of "compelling him" to accept.²

It was thus that Lydia must have extended, and Paul and his companions must have finally accepted hospitality. **"If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house,**

and abide there. And she constrained us" (Acts 16:15). When one of the Pharisees invited JESUS to a meal, the Saviour did not at first accept the invitation, although He did go finally: "**And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him**" (Luke 7:36).

All of this was in keeping with Oriental customs.

WHY EXCLUSION FROM A FEAST WAS CONSIDERED TO BE SO TERRIBLE

Ancient banquets were usually held at night in rooms which were brilliantly lighted, and anybody who was excluded from the feast was said to be cast out of the lighted room into the "**outer darkness**" of the night.³

In the teachings of JESUS, such exclusion is likened unto the day of judgment. "**The children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness**" (Matthew 8:12). "**Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness**" (Matthew 22:13). "**And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth**" (Matthew 25:30). This expression "**outer darkness**" takes on new meaning, when it is realized what a dread the Oriental has for the darkness of the night. In the East a lamp is usually kept burning all night. To sleep in the dark as the Westerner usually does would be a terrible experience to the Oriental. Because of this fear of the darkness, the Saviour could have chosen no more appropriate words than "**outer darkness**" to represent the future punishment of the unrighteous.⁴

POSTURE WHILE EATING AT FEASTS

It has already been observed that on ordinary occasions the people of the Bible age mostly sat or squatted on the floor around a low table at mealtime. In the king's circle, or at other times of special ceremony, seats were sometimes provided. The prophet Amos is the first sacred writer to refer to the custom of "**[stretching] themselves upon their couches**" when eating (Amos 6:4).

By the time of JESUS, the Roman custom of reclining on couches at supper had been adopted in some Jewish circles. The Roman table and couches combined was called a triclinium. There were three couches which were located on the three sides of a square, the fourth side being left open, so that a servant could get on the inside to assist in serving the meal. The guest's position was to recline with the body's upper part resting on the left arm, and the head raised, and a cushion at the back, and the lower part of the body stretched out. The head of the second guest was opposite the breast of the first guest, so that if he wanted to speak to him in secret he would lean upon his breast.⁵

This custom at a banquet table throws light on several passages from the four gospels. The Apostle John asked JESUS a question while in this position at supper (John 13:23-25). In the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, when JESUS said that "**the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom**" (Luke 16:22), he doubtless meant to imply that he was reclining at a heavenly table next to Abraham where he could lean upon his breast. This is clear in the light of CHRIST's description of that heavenly feast: "**Many shall come from the east and the west; and shall sit down [recline] with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven**" (Matthew 8:11). Also this position of reclining at table explains how the

woman could come during a dinner and take her position behind at the feet of JESUS and wash them (Luke 7:38).

PLACES OF HONOR AT THE TABLE

When the Pharisees were invited to a banquet, they were very covetous of having the highest places of distinction at the table. JESUS condemned them for this proud spirit. He said concerning them: They " . . . **love the uttermost rooms at feasts**" (Matthew 23:6). When JESUS was guest at a meal in a Pharisee's house, He gave the guests a parable, when He noticed how they sought the chief places at the table. (Luke 14:8-10):

"When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say unto thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee."

In many native homes one room has a higher floor, and in this room the guests of honor are assigned places, and those of less honor on the lower floor or level.⁶ A place of special honor would be on the right of the host, and the next highest place on his left. James and John asked for such positions in CHRIST's kingdom (Mark 10:37). But JESUS advised guests to take the last place. Where was this place located? It was on the lower level and nearest the door.⁷ The guest who would take this humble place might be invited by the master of the house to take a place on a higher plane and farther from the door.

FOOD AND ENTERTAINMENT AT BANQUETS

The prophet Amos, although he denounced extravagant luxuries and sinful excesses, nevertheless has given us a description of the eating, drinking, and other customs at an Oriental banquet. This is the way he describes it:

"And stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; that chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of music, like David; that drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments" (Amos 6:4-6).

The meat eaten at these suppers included the best lambs from the flock and calves that had been stall-fed. The drinking of wine at the feast was considered an important feature. Playing on stringed instruments was another activity and the guests evidently vied with one another in anointing their bodies with very costly ointments.

Dancing was often a part of the entertainment at these feasts. When the Prodigal Son returned home, and his father celebrated with a feast, there was music and dancing (Luke 15:24, 25). Dancing was a social diversion of the Hebrew women and girls, especially when they made merry. Men did sometimes engage in it, as when David danced when the ark was brought to Jerusalem (II Samuel 6:14). But more often, it was the activity of the fair sex (cf. Jeremiah 31:4).

But there is no Scriptural record that the Jewish men danced with the women, as is the modern custom of the West. Neither is there indication that there were public female dancers, as is true in some Eastern places today. The dancing of the daughter of Herodias (Matthew 14:6) before men at a sensual banquet was the kind introduced among the Jews by corrupt Greek influence.⁸

DIPPING INTO THE DISH AND GIVING THE SOP

Oriental customs of eating must be kept in mind in order to understand the meaning of the words and action of JESUS, in relation to Judas Iscariot at the last supper. Mark's account reads:

"Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, One of you which eateth with me shall betray me. And they began to be sorrowful, and to say unto him one by one, Is it I? and another said, Is it I? And he answered and said unto them, It is one of the twelve, that dippeth with me in the dish" (Mark 14:18-20).

Some have supposed that Judas was in the position where he would be dipping at the same time with JESUS into the dish, and that he was thus singled out as the betrayer. But this could hardly be, since the other disciples did not discover who the betrayer was from these words of JESUS. Since they all had been eating from the same large dish, these words of JESUS, he **"that dippeth with me in the dish,"** did not identify anyone of them. All of them, as well as Judas, had been dipping into the dish with Jesus. JESUS was simply informing them that one of them now eating with Him would become His betrayer.⁹

Again, CHRIST's giving of the "sop" to Judas was in accordance with certain Eastern custom still observed in modern times. John reports what was done and said:

"He then lying on Jesus' breast said unto him, Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot" (John 13:25, 26).

What is meant by the "sop"? It is the most tasty morsel of food being served at the feast. It may be served in the "bread spoon," but is more often picked up by the host with his thumb and finger, and handed directly to one of the guests.¹⁰

But why is a sop given to one of the guests? A native and resident of Bible lands says that certain villagers there have this custom of giving the sop today, and he describes the purpose of the act thus:

It is with them a mark of special respect for the master of the feast to hand to a guest portions of what is before him, or to insist on putting morsels or sops into his mouth with his own hand. I have had this done to me several times, when the intention was certainly to honor and manifest good will.¹¹

The meaning of what CHRIST did then was most certainly to extend love and friendship to the very one who was going to betray Him. The act has been described as if the LORD were saying to the traitor:

Judas, my disciple, I have infinite pity for you. You have proved false, you have forsaken me in your heart; but I will not treat you as an enemy, for I have come not to destroy, but to fulfill. Here is my sop of friendship, and "**that thou doest, do quickly.**"¹²

1. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 363.
2. Abraham Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, pp. 208-210.
3. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 416.
4. Freeman, op. cit., pp. 210, 211.
5. Barrows, op. cit., pp. 413, 414.
6. Information received by personal consultation with Dr. G. Frederick Owen.
7. Milton Lindberg, *A Guest in a Palestinian Home*, a pamphlet, p. 6.
8. Carl F. Keil, *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, Vol. II, p. 282.
9. See Rihbany, op. cit., pp. 60, 61.
10. "Sop," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, Charles R. Bames, ed., p. 1047.
11. Anis C. Haddad, *Palestine Speaks*, p. 74 (Anderson, Ind.: The Warner Press, 1936).
12. Rihbany, op. cit., p. 69.

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