

Manners And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT -

Daily Program of Activities

EARLY RISING

CONCERNING THE HOUR OF RISING, one writer has summed up the matter thus:

The habit of early rising is all but universal in Palestine. The climate makes this a necessity for the greater part of the year, the heat being so great that hard labor is oppressive a few hours after sunrise. At early dawn laborers go to their work and travelers start on their journeys.¹

Many Bible passages indicate that the custom of early rising was practiced in those days. The Genesis account mentions an occasion when "**Abraham rose up early in the morning**" (Genesis 22:3). The Book of Exodus tells that "**Moses rose up early in the morning**" (Exodus 34:4). And Scripture says that on a certain day "**Job... rose up early in the morning**" (Job 1:5). Concerning the people who wished to hear CHRIST's teachings, Luke says, "**And all the people came early in the morning to him in the temple, for to hear him**" (Luke 21:38). And Mark says of JESUS, "**And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed**" (Mark 1:35). Other such examples of early rising in Scripture times could be added.

GRINDING OF THE GRAIN BY THE WOMEN

The first sound to greet the ear in the early morning in many a Palestinian village will be the sound of the grinding of the grain. Today, as in the long ago, many of these people resort to the handmill for this purpose. A traveler passing by these humble homes will hear the hum of the handmill morning or evening and sometimes after dark. This sound of the grinding is not exactly musical, and yet many love to go to sleep under it. In the mind of those who live in the East this sound is associated with home, and comfort, and plenty. The women are the ones who engage in this task, and they begin it early in the morning, and it often requires half a day to complete.²

When Jeremiah foretold judgment upon Israel for her sins, he said concerning what GOD would take from her: "**I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle**" (Jeremiah 25:10). From this it can be seen that the sound of these handmills is an indication of life and activity, and the absence of them would be a sign of utter desolation.

The Bible references to the grinding mills are true to Oriental customs. The task is for servants if

the family has them, and if not the women do the job, but the men would consider it beneath them to engage in such a menial task. Part of the judgment upon Israel at the destruction of Jerusalem was that the enemy "**took the young men to grind**" (Lamentations 5:13).

And the Philistines punished Samson in this way, for it says of him, "**and he did grind in the prison house**" (Judges 16:21).

Although there are simple handmills made for the use of one person, more often two women operate one together. The mill is composed of two stones eighteen to twenty-four inches in diameter. The two women sit at these stones facing each other. The upper stone turns upon the lower one by means of an upright handle which the women alternately pull and push.³

Here is how the process works:

The upper stone rotates about a wooden pivot fixed in the center of the lower. The opening in the upper stone for the pivot is funnel-shaped to receive the corn, which each woman throws in as required with her disengaged hand. The flour issuing from between the stones is usually caught on a sheepskin placed under the mill.⁴

Job speaks of a heart being as "**hard as a piece of the nether millstone**" (Job 41:24). Thomson says that the lower millstone is not always harder than the upper, but he had seen the nether made of a very compact and thick sandstone, while the upper was of lava no doubt because being lighter it would be easier to drive it around with the hand.⁵

TIME OF MEALS

Meals are not always served at the same time in the Orient today, and the nature of the meals varies in different sections.⁶

The same was also true in Biblical times. In the main it may be said that the Hebrews had only two meals a day, breakfast, and dinner. The time for breakfast varied all the way from early morning to noon.⁷

JESUS served breakfast to a group of hungry fishermen early in the morning (John 21:12). In commenting on the negligence of the guards of King Eglon (Judges 3:24), the Jewish historian Josephus says: "It was then summer time, and the middle of the day, when the guards were not strictly on their watch, both because of the heat, and because they were gone to dinner."⁸

Attention is called to the fact that the word Josephus uses for "dinner" is the word meaning "breakfast" as used in the New Testament.⁹

It would appear from this that the Jewish historian was indicating that sometimes breakfast was served as late as noon in his day. No doubt it was more often served in the middle of the morning.

In the Parable of the Wedding of the King's Son, the message went forth to the invited guests, "**I have prepared my dinner** [the word for 'breakfast']" (Matthew 22:4). The marriage feast here

would be similar then to the English "wedding breakfast."

Both meals of the Jews are mentioned by JESUS in an exhortation he gave his host, "**When thou makest a dinner or a supper**" (Luke 14:12). The evening meal would in most cases be the main meal, but not always, depending on the nature and place of the men's work. The custom in some modern cities of having breakfast anywhere from nine to twelve o'clock, and dinner in the evening, would correspond quite closely with the two meals of the Jews of Bible times.¹⁰

WEAVING CLOTH AND MAKING CLOTHES

The Jewish women were responsible for making the clothing for the family. The wool which was used came from their flocks. It had to be spun into yarn without the use of modern spinning wheels. Concerning this process, the Book of Proverbs in its tribute to the ideal mother, describes it thus: "**She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff**" (Proverbs 31:19). The ancient Egyptians and Babylonians, being experts in weaving, had large looms, but for the most part the common people of Palestine used a very primitive loom and the weaving process was of necessity a slow and tedious one. Of course there were no sewing machines or steel needles. Their needles were coarse ones made of bronze or sometimes of splinters of bone that had been sharpened at one end, and with a hole through the other end.¹¹

It is said that today most of the spinning in Syria is done by the older women. It gives occasion for these spinners to get together. And they spin while they talk, or even sometimes while they are eating in an informal way. When Scripture says, "**She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff**" (Proverbs 31:19), it is the same way as saying, "She is never idle," or as the Syrians would say, "Her spindle is never out of her hands."¹²

WASHING CLOTHES

The Arab women in washing their clothes today usually go to nearby sources of water such as streams, pools, or watering troughs. They will dip their clothes in and out of the water, and then placing them upon flat stones which abound in Palestine, they will beat them with a club which is about a foot and a half long. They carry the water in goatskins and have a vessel for rinsing purposes.¹³

That this sort of process was used in the time of David is indicated by the prayer of his penitential psalm: "**Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity**" (Psalm 51:2). His picture here comes from the process of washing clothes. Alexander Maclaren says concerning it:

"The word employed is significant, in that it probably means washing by kneading or beating, not by simple rinsing. The psalmist is ready to submit to any painful discipline, if only he may be cleansed. "Wash me, beat me, tread me down, hammer me with mallets, dash me against the stones. do anything with me, if only these foul stains are melted from the texture of my soul."¹⁴

That soap was used in washing is clear from the Scriptures. The word occurs in The common translation of the books of Jeremiah and Malachi (Jeremiah 2:22 and Malachi 3:2). This form of soap was doubtless a vegetable alkali. Job said: "**If I wash myself with snow water . . .**" (Job 9:30). This was a vegetable alkali. There are two references in the Bible to mineral alkali which

was called nitre (Proverbs 25:20 and Jeremiah 2:22). This was probably the "natron" used so largely in Egypt.¹⁵

CARING FOR THE GOATS BY THE GIRLS

Among the Beduin Arabs where camels engage the attention of the men folks, the task of caring for the goats is assigned to the young women of the home. These shepherdesses sometimes have a difficult time in watering their flocks, if perchance the camel herders come in from one of their five-day waterless periods of grazing. These girls are not apt to get much consideration from these men. The Sacred Record tells how Moses befriended Jethro's daughters when they had to fight for an opportunity to give water to their flocks. One of these girls afterwards became the wife of Moses (Exodus 2:15-21).¹⁶

THE MIDDAY SIESTA

In Palestine during the summer season the time of greatest heat is from noon to three o' clock in the afternoon. There is cessation of most activity during that time in many parts of the land. They rest at home or wherever they may be and can find a suitable place. A laundry or shop will often be discovered to be closed during those hours.¹⁷

This midday time of rest was common in Old Testament days. Genesis says that Abraham "**sat in the tent-door in the heat of the day**" (Genesis 18:1). Ishbosheth, Saul's son, was sleeping at midday. "**Who lay on a bed at noon**" (II Samuel 4:5). And when Saul entered the cave where David and his men were located, he no doubt did so in order to have his middle-of-the-day nap. "**And Saul went in to cover his feet**" (I Samuel 24:3).

DAILY CONVERSATION

Use of GOD's name in conversation. In Anglo-Saxon lands the name of GOD is seldom mentioned in daily conversation except by those who are profane. But among the Arabs of Bible lands, GOD's name is constantly on the lips of these people. An astonished person will exclaim, "*Mashallah*," i.e., "What hath GOD wrought!" which is the very expression used by Balaam centuries ago (Numbers 23:23). If a man is asked if he expects to do a certain thing, he will make answer, "If GOD wills." And this is the kind of answer recommended by James in his Epistle (James 4:15). If a baby is held up that you may admire it, the grandmother will say, "Behold the gift of GOD," words which are reminiscent of the Psalmist's declaration, "**Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord**" (Psalm 127:3). When a farmer greets his workers he says to them, "**The LORD be with you.**" And they will answer him, "**The LORD bless thee.**" These are the same greetings used centuries ago when Boaz came to his workers (Ruth 2:4). Such pious expressions, of course, could be used so constantly that they become meaningless, and on the lips of insincere people would soon lose their value. But such conversation is a great contrast to what is heard in the West.¹⁸

From the days of the patriarchs to the times of the Apostles, daily conversation among the Jews included many references to Deity. No doubt there were insincere lips that spoke the name of GOD carelessly, but when this custom was carried out by godly people, how beautiful it was! The Book of Ruth has a number of examples of such conversation, as for example, when Naomi's women friends exclaimed: "**Blessed be the Lord!**" (Ruth 4:14). It would be well if

modern Christians had more of GOD in their daily conversation.

Use of figurative language and exaggerated expressions. Often the oriental manner of speech is to picture what is meant, or perhaps to demonstrate it. A good example of this is given us by Luke in his account of Paul's experiences:

"There came down from Judea a certain prophet, named Agabus. And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle" (Acts 21:10-11).

If John the Baptist had spoken like some speakers in the West, he would have said, "Your pretensions to virtue and good birth far exceed your actual practice of virtue."¹⁹

Being a real Oriental he actually said:

"O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance, And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Matthew 3:7-9).

The large use of figures of speech in its teaching and conversation make the Book a typical Oriental book.²⁰

The Oriental frequently makes statements that to the Westerner sound like uncalled-for exaggeration. One man will say to another, "What I say to you is truth, and if it is not, I will cut off my right arm." Or he will say, "I promise you this, and if I fail in fulfilling my promise, I will pluck out my right eye." In those lands nobody would ever dream that such a resolution would be carried out. The statement simply means that the speaker is in earnest.²¹

An Oriental can fully appreciate what JESUS meant when he said, **"If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee... If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee"** (Matthew 5:29, 30). Many expressions of JESUS need to be understood in the light of daily conversation of His day. Here are examples of a few. **"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of GOD"** (Matthew 19:24). **"Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel"** (Matthew 23:24). **"And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?"** (Matthew 7:3). When reading such passages of Scripture, men from the Occident must remember the fondness of the Oriental for the hyperbole.

Dealing with delicate subjects in mixed company. Visitors to Palestine from other parts of the world are often embarrassed by the way the daily conversation of the natives may include matters never spoken of in polite circles in the West. The Oriental considers it to be perfectly proper to talk about anything that is natural in the presence of men, women, and children. And this is done in refined circles. A respectable woman from the Holy Land cannot understand why some critics of the Bible have condemned the Scriptural mention of certain matters deemed wrong for Westerners to talk about. The story told in Genesis of the details concerning the birth

of twin boys, Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:23-26), would be told in a public gathering in the East, with even more details, without a blush coming to any face. Several hundred years ago this same thing was true in England.²²

GOING OF THE WOMEN FOR WATER

It is the task of the women to go for the household water to the well or spring. And they do it today in many places in the East just like it was done when the Genesis account speaks of it being "**the time of the evening, even the time that women go out to draw water**" (Genesis 24:11). The women are trained to do this from girlhood, for Saul and his servant "**found young maidens going out to draw water**" (I Samuel 9:11). The chief time for doing this is in the late afternoon or evening, although it is often done early in the morning. Earthenware pitchers (Lamentations 4:2) are used for the purpose, and they have one and sometimes two handles.²³

It has been customary for Syrian women to carry the pitcher of water on their shoulder, although sometimes it is carried on the hip. Most Arabs of Palestine carry it upon their head.²⁴

Scripture says that Rebekah carried her pitcher on her shoulder (Genesis 24:15). Carrying a pitcher of water was all but universally done by women. It must have been a picturesque sight to see them going and coming with the pitcher poised gracefully upon the head or shoulder. When JESUS instructed two of his disciples, "**Go ye into the city, and there shall meet you a man bearing a pitcher of water: follow him**" (Mark 14:13), that would be an easy way of identifying the person, for it is exceedingly uncommon to see a man carrying a pitcher of water, which is a woman's task.

When larger supplies of water are needed, men use large skins of sheep or goats for carrying the supply. The pitchers are reserved for the use of the women.²⁵

There is nothing left at the well that may be used for drawing water from a depth. Each woman who comes for water brings with her, in addition to the pitcher in which to carry the water, a hard leather portable bucket with a rope, in order to let it down to the level of the water.²⁶

The Samaritan woman whom JESUS met at Jacob's well had brought all this with her, but JESUS did not have such equipment with him. Hence she said to him: "**Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep**" (John 4:11). In response to his request for a drink, she drew from the well and gave to Him.

1. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 22.
2. Anis C. Haddad, *Palestine Speaks*, pp. 54, 55.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
4. Anis C. Haddad, *Palestine Speaks*, p. 56 (Anderson, Ind.: The Warner Press, 1936).
5. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. I, p. 108.
6. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, p. 101.
7. John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (vol. 1, *An American Commentary on the New Testament*), p. 446. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886.)
8. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, (Vol. I, Complete Works), p. 331.
9. Broadus, *loco cit.*

10. Broadus, loco cit.
11. Harold B. Hunting, *Hebrew Life and Times*, pp. 17-19.
12. Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, pp. 360, 361.
13. Information received during personal interview with Mr. G. Eric Matson, photographer, and long time resident of Palestine.
14. Alexander Maclaren, *The Psalms (The Expositor's Bible)*, Vol. II, p. 130. (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1892.)
15. Thomson, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 130.
16. John D. Whiting, "Bedouin Life in Bible Lands," *The National Geographic Magazine*, January, 1937, pp. 61-63.
17. From class notes in course: "*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*," Pasadena College, June, 1950, taught by Dr. G. Frederick Owen.
18. James Neil, *Pictured Palestine*, pp. 81-87.
19. Rihbany, op. cit., p. 117.
20. Ibid., pp. 115-118.
21. Ibid. pp. 118, 119.
22. Neil, op. cit., pp. 90, 91.
23. Freeman, op. cit., pp. 26-29.
24. See Thomson, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 261.
25. A. Goodrich-Freer, *Things Seen in Palestine*, p. 72.
26. Neil, op. cit., p. 155.

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