

Strange Scriptures

That Perplex the Western Mind

Clarified in the Light of Customs and Conditions in Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

FEASTS

“Use Hospitality One to Another” (Genesis 18:1-8).

“BE not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Genesis 19:1-3; Judges 6:11-19; Hebrews 13:2; I Peter 4:9).

We are reminded of Abraham, who entertained the three angels at his tent door; — of Lot, who prepared a feast for the two angels in Sodom; — and of Gideon, who made ready the kid and the unleavened cakes for the angel of the Lord at Ophrah. Such instances also give point to the Apostle's exhortation, **“Use hospitality one to another, without grudging.”**

Dipping the Sop (Matthew 26:23).

“He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish.”

Oriental sit on the deewan around a small circular table or a tray made of heavy metal. The food is all placed in this tray or dish, and all dip into it in common. They break off a small piece of bread, fold it up to act as a spoon, and with this and their fingers they convey the food to the mouth. To eat with a person in the East implies a much closer bond of friendship than it ever does in our country. To break such a bond is almost unthinkable. The greatest mark of esteem a host can pay his guest is to select a choice morsel out of the common dish and place it in his guest's mouth.

The sop which our Lord gave to Judas was the greatest expression of love that He could show him, and no doubt, a last attempt to call Judas to a sense of the awful sin he was soon to commit.

Calling to a Feast (Luke 14:17).

When a sheikh invites to a feast, he always sends a servant to call his guest at the proper time, **“Come, for the supper is now ready.”**

This custom is confined to the wealthy. It is true now, as then, that to refuse the invitation is a high insult to the maker of the feast. The poor, the maimed, the halt and the blind, are on all the streets and what the man in the parable did, to call in these people when the first called refused, is just what would happen today, to show the extent of their benevolence, the depth of their humility. This parable in all its details is in close conformity to the customs of the East.

Table or Scamba (John 13:23).

The Hebrews in the time of Christ had adopted the custom of reclining at the table on cushioned divans, resting themselves on the left arm. The tables were in three sections, forming three sides of a square, the seats being placed along the outer sides, — the servant waiting on the inside. Generally, though not invariably, each table held three persons only.

The seat of honor was that on the right side of the host, who sat in the center of the cross-table; the honored guest thus reclined, as it were, on the bosom of his host.

John 13:23, **“Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved.”**

The general custom then and today is to bring a stool about fourteen inches high into the common sitting-room. On this is placed a tray of metal, usually copper, upon which the food is arranged. The bread is placed on a straw mat beneath the tray, and a cruse of water stands close by, from which all drink as they need. Around this stool and tray the guests gather, sitting on the floor while eating.

The dishes are generally stews of rice, cracked wheat (burgul) or beans, with plenty of sauce or soup with it. It is served in a deep dish or large bowl. They double up bits of thin bread, spoon fashion, and dip them into the dish.

There is frequent reference to this custom in the Bible. They have neither knives nor forks, and they would not know how to use them. This is a very simple way to live; but they will tell you that is all they desire, and is much more convenient than our custom, and certainly less expensive.

High tables and chairs would be out of place and surely in the way. They do not have separate rooms in which to eat, hence they want a table that can easily be brought in and then removed.

They all eat out of the same dish and say to you, “Why not?”

As their meat, when they have any, is always cooked up into stews, or else cooked until it is ready to fall to pieces, knives and forks are not needed; and when they have chicken or sheep, the flesh is easily torn to pieces with their fingers.

If you are a guest in their home, the polite Oriental will tear up the best bits and put them into your mouth. I have had this done for me by hands none too clean. Once my hostess placed some bits of meat in her own mouth and evidently found the taste extra fine, so she immediately removed the choice morsel and placed it in my mouth . . . Well, you must look pleased and honored.

In their own way their cooking is good and their set-out respectable. The poorer people have no table, just a grass mat which they place on the earth floor, all sitting around the mat eating from the common dish.

“If His Son Asked Bread, Will He Give Him a Stone?” (Matthew 7:9).

There are round flat stones in the wadies and brooks and other places which look so much like the Easterner's loaves of bread that no one could tell one from the other without touching them. That was likely why the Lord said, **“If his son ask bread will he give him a stone?”**

“Go Ye Into the City, and There Shall Meet You a Man With a Pitcher” (Mark 14:13; Luke 22:10).

This does not seem like a very good description of the identity of the Lord's host, but when we remember that a man never, or at least rarely, carries water in a pitcher, we understand more clearly.

It is the women who carry all the water supply for the house. It is never a man's work, though he may carry a water-skin through the streets selling water, but never in an earthen vessel or pitcher for home use.

“So Shall He Sprinkle Many Nations” (Isaiah 52:15).

When a feast is given, a servant stands at the door with perfumed liquids such as rose water or orange blossom water, and sprinkles the guests as they enter.

This sprinkling is understood to fit them for the presence of the entertainer, to declare them his guests, and, as such, to place them under his favor and protection.

I knew nothing of this custom and when entering a home to attend a wedding, was somewhat startled when a shower of rosewater went over my head, face and clothing.

Then a friend explained that the perfuming fitted me for the marriage feast and made me a guest.

The prophet Isaiah no doubt had this in mind, when he said, **“So shall he sprinkle many nations.”**

Arab Hospitality “Peace Be Between Us.”

Hospitality of the Arab tribes is remarkable.

An Arab, on arriving at a strange camp, goes to the first tent that is convenient. He does not wait to be invited in, but without any ceremony, makes his camel lie down, unloads at the entrance, and entering the tent with the salutation of “Peace be between us,” seats himself down by the fire, no matter whether the host be at home or not.

Should the host be present, he will put fresh wood on the fire and begin to burn and grind coffee, offering his pipe to the guest. His wife, or wives, after spreading mats on the ground, if they have any mats, for the stranger to sit on retire to the woman's part of the tent, which is divided in the center by sacks of corn, and whatever other effects they have.

The women prepare the dinner or supper, without any order being given by the master, but as a matter of course. The coffee being ready, the host pours out for everyone. As soon as the meal is ready, he pours water alternately for his guests, who therewith wash the right hand; beginning with one, and going regularly round the circle. The ablution finished, everyone begins to eat. The host retires, not eating with his guests, but welcoming them with frequent repetition of “Coula, coula” (eat it all, eat it all).

The supper being finished, the master washes the hands of his party, and then eats what remains.

We know people who arrived at an Arab camp late at night when it was bitterly cold. The owner, his wife and children were all in bed. With the greatest of good humor everyone arose, kindled a fire. The wife kneaded the dough and prepared a supper. They all seemed to take everything as a matter of course and appeared to enjoy it. Such is Bedouin hospitality, and very different from that of the townsmen.

He who first sees a stranger from afar, and exclaims, “There comes my guest,” has the right to entertain him, whatever tent he may alight at. We have had a lamb killed for us, which was an act of very great hospitality; for these people are poor.

Eaters of Barley Bread (Judges 7:13, 14).

The common bread—such as was used by the very poor and unfortunate, or in times of famine—was made of barley.

The Lord fed the hungry multitude with five barley loaves which belonged to a small boy. The sons of the prophets in the days of Elisha ate barley bread. Nothing was more common than for the people to complain that their oppressors had left them nothing but barley bread to eat.

The Bedouins often called their enemies “eaters of barley bread.”

The diet of the East has always been light and simple. The chief points of contrast between their diet and ours are the very small amount of animal food consumed and the variety of articles used with bread; but the chief point of agreement is the huge consumption of bread.

The preparations of bread were various and simple. Sometimes the fresh grains, after being carefully picked, were roasted in a pan over a fire, and eaten as “parched corn” in which form it was and is an ordinary article of diet.

I have watched women in Syria make bread a great many times. First they made a fire of dried dung and withered vine branches, which were laid upon the hearth; and the bread, being spread out with the hands like a pancake, was baked over this. Each cake was exceedingly thin, and could be rolled up and placed in the mouth at once.

Sometimes they made unleavened wafers, anointed with oil, which were baked in a plate or pan; and likely the cakes which Sarah made upon the hearth for the three angels, were of this kind (Genesis 18:6). Sometimes the grain was bruised and dried in the sun; then eaten, either mixed with oil, or made into soft cakes (the “dough” of the Old Testament).

The common people have little other food than durra bread, which consists of a sort of coarse millet, kneaded with camel's milk, oil, butter, or grease.

The best bread—such as was used in the sacred offering —was always made of wheat, and then ground and sifted formed the “**fine flour**” used in the offering. The ground but unsifted wheat would answer to the “**flour**” and “**meal**” of Judges 6:19.

In villages the bread is either baked on cakes of dried dung, or by means of clay ovens, built on the floor of the house.

Each household possessed such an article except the very poor, when one oven sufficed for several families. It was heated with dried twigs and grass and thorns. The bread to be baked was placed both inside and out.

“And They Sighed for the Cucumbers” (Numbers 11:5).

The Israelites, when in the wilderness, **“sighed for the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic, which they had eaten in Egypt.”**

On the monuments in Egypt you find vegetables presented to the gods, especially leeks and onions, which were tied up in fancy shapes. Among the gifts of Rameses III to his gods, are “onions, 180 ropes, 50 sacks,” with two other measures unknown. In Herodotus we read that the cost of radishes, onions, and garlic, for the workmen engaged upon one of the pyramids of Cheops, was 1600 silver talents.

Sometimes the food of the natives consists only of stewed vegetables, such as onions, lettuce, cucumbers, with parched corn. These onions are not like ours at all, but are exceedingly mild and delicious, said to be superior to any in the world. They are not covered with skins, but every part of them is soft and digestible. Lentils are also much eaten; melons, gourds, beans, pulse, lupines, cucumbers and dates as well.

“His Birthright for a Mess of Pottage” (Genesis 25:29-34).

Pottage is another very common dish in the Bible Lands. The people call it kool. It is much like gruel and is made of various kinds of grain, which have been beaten in a mortar. The red pottage is made of kurakan and other grains, but it is not superior to the other.

For such a mess Esau sold his birthright!

When a man has sold his fields for an insignificant sum, the people say, the fellow sold his land for pottage.” Does a father give his daughter in marriage to a low-caste? “He has given her for pottage.” Has a learned man stooped from what was expected of him? — “He has fallen into the pottage-pot.” Of a man in great poverty, they say, “Alas! he cannot get pottage.” And Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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