

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

Fred H. Wight

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN -

Traveling on Land and Sea

CHARACTER AND CONDITIONS OF ORIENTAL TRAVELING

THE EXPENSE, DISCOMFORT, AND DANGER OF TRAVEL. In the Orient, where modern Western customs have not displaced old-time methods, to travel is a great expense, it means much discomfort, and it involves great danger. Therefore it is done only when absolutely necessary. When a traveler sets out on his journey he must "pay all debts, provide for dependents, give parting gifts, return all articles under trust, take money and good temper for the journey, then bid farewell to all, and be merciful to the animal he rides upon."¹

The traveling of the Apostle Paul emphasized the hardships of journeying in the East. "**In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, . . . in perils in the wilderness, . . . in weariness and painfulness, . . . in hunger and thirst, . . . in cold and nakedness**" (II Corinthians 11:26,27).

Wherever it is possible to do so men travel in large groups so that they can help each other in case they meet with robbers or wild animals along the way. A guide or someone who knows the way, and especially one who is acquainted with the locations of wells or springs of water or other watering places, is invaluable to the travelers. Sometimes they depend upon a spring of water and then discover upon arrival that it has dried up. Isaiah spoke of "**a spring of water, whose waters fail not**" (Isaiah 58:11).²

The Psalmist (Psalm 107:4-7) told of a caravan of travelers that lost their way in the desert, running out of food and water. After prayer, the LORD guided them to "**a city of habitation.**"

Methods of travel. Traveling is sometimes done on foot, but more often on the backs of horses, mules, or donkeys, and when traveling in the desert, camels are mostly used. In order to avoid the intense heat, and to escape detection by robber tribes, traveling is often done by night. The guide will get his direction from the stars. Summer is the usual time for traveling in order to avoid the many inconveniences connected with the winter months.³

Food taken by travelers. Travelers going a distance will carry food with them, which will include bread, parched grain, dried olives, dried figs, and dates. Most travelers in the East now, as in the days of JESUS, will not go any distance from home without taking barley bread or meal or parched grain sufficient to last for one or two days. When JESUS performed the miracle of feeding the four thousand, he said, "**I have compassion on the multitude, because they**

continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way" (Matthew 15:32). According to custom, the multitude would have a day or two's supply of food with them when they flocked to hear JESUS. But on the third day, seven loaves and a few small fish was all that was left.⁴

How distances are often measured in the Orient. In traveling in Bible lands, it is often customary to measure distances in units of time rather than in terms of space. One village is said to be three hours distant from another village, because it takes that long to travel from one to the other. In Old Testament days distance in traveling was similarly noted. It was "**three days' journey**," "**seven days' journey**," etc. (Genesis 30:36; 31:23).

In New Testament times, "**a day's journey**" is mentioned, and also "**a sabbath day's journey**" (Luke 2:44; Acts 1:12). {Among the Jews a day's journey was twenty to thirty miles, but when there was a large company it would be only ten miles! A sabbath day's journey would be a little less than two miles.⁵

NATURE OF EASTERN INNS

Old Testament Inns. The inns of Old Testament days were merely stopping places for travelers overnight. The word refers only to a resting-place for the night, and a tent or perhaps a cave would most likely serve the purpose.⁶

New Testament Inns. The inns of New Testament times were not like Western hotels. It was because hospitality was considered to be a religious duty that therefore the modern type of hotel was unknown in olden days, and also does not exist today in many sections of Bible lands. If parties of travelers are not too many in number, they will be entertained at a Bedouin tent encampment, or in a village guest room. When Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem, Luke says: "**There was no room for them in the inn**" (Luke 2:7). Some Bible scholars have thought that this inn was actually a guestchamber, because the same word is used for such a place on another occasion (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11). But surely, with so many out-of-town visitors in the village, the guest room would long ago have been utilized. This inn was most probably a place where travelers might camp overnight, and so would have to provide their own food, cooking utensils, and other provisions. There might or might not have been an innkeeper. But there was simply no space left for Mary and Joseph at this inn. (See also "Bethlehem house and manger," Chapter Two).

Sometimes the inn had an *innkeeper*. Luke tells us how the Good Samaritan brought the poor man he was helping "**to an inn, and took care of him.**" In this case a "host" or "innkeeper" is mentioned (Luke 10:34,35). It would be the duty of this man to supply a few of the necessary provisions for the travelers who spent the night there.

The Oriental "caravan" or "khan." is probably the equivalent of at least some of the "inns" of New Testament times. The "caravansary" is a large building and is usually located in a city, although sometimes it serves as a shelter in the desert. The courtyard of these buildings serves as a place to unmount and unload the animals, and the ground floor becomes a place for the beasts to be cared for, while the travelers themselves are put upstairs.

The "khan" is a smaller building which serves the same purpose, but is located in a village. Most of these are but one-story buildings, where travelers sleep close to their animals. Many of these Eastern "inns" are without any furniture, innkeeper, or food for either man or animal. The traveler under these conditions is provided shelter only, and he himself must provide everything else. When the inn does have an "innkeeper," he will sell to the travelers coffee or other provisions, and furnish fire and the means by which they may cook their own meals. He may also provide food for the animals.

Where the inn is located at a strategic center, such as where caravan routes intersect each other, it may become a public gathering-place on account of bazaars and markets being held there. Animals are sometimes killed and the meat sold at these places, and often travelers can purchase many other things at the inn.⁷

ORIENTAL SALUTATIONS AMONG TRAVELERS

When travelers in the Orient meet each other on the way, they love to engage in salutations that to the Westerner seem complicated, tedious, and time-consuming. Wordy questions will be asked each other seeking such information as this: From where have you come? Where are you going? What is your name? How many children have you? How many men belong to your clan? What enemies does your clan have? etc., etc. While such salutations are entered into, business and everything else can wait. For this reason, when JESUS sent the seventy disciples on a healing and preaching mission, he said to them: "**Salute no man by the way**" (Luke 10:4). To engage in such extensive salutations as were customary would have interfered with the urgent business of the LORD.⁸

TRAVELING BY SEA IN ANCIENT TIMES

The attitude of the ancients toward the sea. Ancient people had a great fear of the ocean and truly there was a reason for this dread, since the mariners had no chart of the seas or compass to guide them. Travel by ship was usually inconvenient, and windstorms often necessitated great delay in arrival at the desired port. Ordinarily the Mediterranean Sea was closed to sea travel during the winter months.⁹

The ship in which Paul was to sail for Rome got into difficulties because those in charge risked getting the ship to another harbor before winter set in. "**And because the haven was not commodious to winter in, the more part advised to depart thence also, if by any means they might attain to Phenice, and there to winter**" (Acts 27:12). The Psalmist has given us a graphic description of a storm at sea and GOD's deliverance from it (Psalm 107:25-30).

The Apostle John's inspired description of Heaven was originally given to men who greatly feared the grave dangers and horrors of sea-experiences, and to them he wrote concerning the new earth: "**And there was no more sea**" (Revelation 21:1). Travel by sea in early days was undertaken only when absolutely necessary.

Ship routes. It is important to remember that in Bible times, vessels that traveled in the Mediterranean Sea kept as close as possible to land. Thus the trade routes were along the coast or from one headland to another one.¹⁰

When the Apostle Paul was returning from one of his missionary journeys, he traveled by ship from Ephesus to Caesarea. His ship would keep near the coast going from city to city, and Paul sometimes stopped off and visited friends (Acts 21:1-8). In those days the small size of the ships often made it necessary for passengers to go ashore for the night, and finding a place there to sleep, join the ship the next day.¹¹

Shipping nations. Egyptian ships early plied the Mediterranean Sea, and light-weight "**vessels of bulrushes** [papyrus]" (Isaiah 18:1, 2), were piloted by both Egyptians and Ethiopians on the Nile River. The Phoenicians were the most famous sea-merchants and travelers of ancient times. The ship in which Jonah took his voyage was no doubt navigated by these seamen (Jonah 1). The Islands of Crete and Cyprus became famous shipping centers, and the Philistines of old had their ships upon the waters of the Mediterranean. In New Testament times it was the Greeks and Romans who were especially noted for their shipping activities.¹²

But what about the Hebrews? Were they seamen? The patriarch Jacob made this prediction concerning the tribe of Zebulun: "**He shall be for an haven of ships**" (Genesis 49:13). But the Palestine seacoast was not occupied at all times by the Hebrew people.

Other nations became navigators, and for the most part the Jews probably contented themselves with occasionally hiring out to these foreign sea captains as sailors. The Psalmist says:

"They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters" (Psalm 107:23).

Israel did have one great experience with ships during the reign of King Solomon. David had conquered the Edomites and so came into possession of the two ports of Elath and Ezion-geber on the Red Sea. Thus Solomon inherited good harbors for ships. Arrangements were made for Hiram, King of Tyre, to send carpenters to build ships for Solomon, "**and Hiram sent in the navy his servants, shipment that had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon. And they came to Ophir, and fetched from thence gold. . . and brought it to king Solomon**" (I Kings 9:27, 28).

A few years later King Jehoshaphat of Judah joined with King Ahaziah of Israel on a similar shipping expedition, but the LORD did not approve of this alliance, and so "**the ships were broken at Eziongeber**" (I Kings 22:48). While King Jehoram, Jehoshaphat's successor, was reigning, the Edomites freed themselves from the Hebrew yoke, and came into possession of their Red Sea ports.¹³

This ended Israel's shipping experience in ocean waters for many generations to come, although Elath has become an important port for the modern nation of Israel. In New Testament times boats were used to cross the waters of the Sea of Galilee.

How ships were propelled. Two methods were used. Ships of war, although furnished with sails were propelled mainly by means of oars. Merchant vessels depended for the most part on sails, but many of the navigators resorted to oars when it became necessary.¹⁴

Thus the men who piloted Jonah's ship, which was a merchant ship, "**rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not**" (Jonah 1:13). The storm was too great for them. The ship that

Paul was in when the storm broke on the Mediterranean Sea was a sailing ship without oars for men to row (Acts 27).

The Phoenician ship in which Jonah sailed. The first chapter of the book of Jonah gives interesting information about ancient ships. This ship was traveling from Joppa to Tarshish as a merchant ship, for when the storm came, the men "**cast forth the wares that were in the ship**" (verse 5). Exclusively passenger ships were little known in those days, most traveling, if not all, being done on merchant ships. Passengers, of course, paid a fare for their trips, as did Jonah (verse 3). When the storm arose, the sailors discovered that "**Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship**" (verse 5). This means he had gone "**below deck**," into the lower room of the ship.

The word "**shipmaster**" used in verse 6 means the chief of the sailors, or as we would say, the captain of the ship. Verse 13 mentions the use of oars when the ship was in the storm, in a futile effort to bring it to shore.

Luke's account of Paul's voyage to Rome. Luke's report of Paul's sea journey in Acts 27 and 28 is the most accurate account of a sea voyage that has come to us from olden times. We gain more knowledge of these ships from this story than from any other source.¹⁵

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Mr. James Smith made a detailed study of Paul's voyage, traveling by ship himself where Paul's trip took him. By means of admiralty charts and a study of the tides, etc., he was able to prove how remarkably accurate Luke was in what he wrote.¹⁶

Lieutenant Edwin Smith of Canada was in the Mediterranean waters in 1918-1919 in command of a ship on special service. He also had opportunity to test out Luke's accuracy and make a study of shipping in Paul's day.¹⁷

What were these ancient ships like? Lieutenant Smith makes this answer:

"In general outline they did not differ so much from sailing ships of fifty years ago, especially in their under-water parts, with the exception that the bow and stern were very much alike . . . Perhaps the greatest difference between these ancient ships and all classes of modern ships, is in the steering arrangements. The ancient ships were not steered as those in modern times, by a single rudder hinged to the stern post, but by two great oars or paddles, one on each side of the stern; hence the mention of them in the plural number by St. Luke (Acts 27:40). They were operated through two hawse holes, one on either side, which were used also for the cables when the ships were anchored by the stern."¹⁸

James speaks of only one rudder on a ship (James 3:4), but this is because the pilot would only make use of one of the two rudders at a time.¹⁹

In Acts 27:17, Luke tells us that the sailors lowered the sail in the storm, and in verse 40, he informs us that they hoisted up the foresail. This latter was a small sail which the seamen were in the habit of substituting for the mainsail in storms.²⁰

Verse 17 also says: "**They used helps, undergirding the ship.**" When it became necessary, chains or cables were placed around the hull at right angles to the length of the ship, and then pulled tight. The English navy calls this process "frapping."²¹

Luke gives us the names of the officers on board Paul's ship (verse 11). The Roman centurion was in chief command of the ship. Then came the pilot and captain.²²

Ancient ships as now had their own individual ensign. Thus the ship on which Paul took the final stage of his journey to Rome was called Castor and Pollux which means, "The Twin Brothers" (cf. Acts 28:11). Ancient ships were personified, and thus grew the custom of painting an eye on each side of the ship's bow. This custom has persisted down to modern times among Mediterranean ships. Luke evidently was referring to this custom when he wrote: "**And when the ship was caught, and could not bear up into the wind, we let her drive**" (Acts 27:15). Literally paraphrased it would be, "could not look the wind in the face."²³

1. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 146.
2. Cf. Abraham M. Ribhany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, pp. 247-249.
3. Mackie, op. cit., pp. 147, 148.
4. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, p. 198.
5. "Day's Journey," and "Sabbath Day's Journey," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 711.
6. "Inn," *ibid.*, p. 529.
7. See Rice, op. cit., pp. 90-91; E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 466; "Inn," *Encyclopedia*, pp. 529-530.
8. For detailed examples of such salutations see: Ribhany, op. cit., pp. 255, 256; or Mackie, op. cit., pp. 149, 150.
9. A. T. Robertson, *Luke the Historian in the Light of Research*, pp. 207, 208.
10. Barrows, op. cit., p. 464.
11. Miller, *Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, p. 374; "Paul's Sea Way."
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 372-374; also Robertson, op. cit., p. 207.
13. Thomas H. Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, Vol. II, pp. 187, 188.
14. Barrows, op. cit., p. 464.
15. Robertson, op. cit., pp. 206, 207.
16. Camden Cobern, *The New Archaeological Discoveries and Their Bearing Upon the New Testament*, p. 557.
17. Lieutenant Edwin Smith, "The Last Voyage and Shipwreck of Saint Paul," *The Homiletic Review*, August, 1919, pp. 101 f.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 103.
19. "Ship-Steering," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 1024.
20. Robertson, op. cit., p. 214.
21. "Ship-Undergirders," *Encyclopedia*, loco cit.
22. For comment about names of these officers see: Robertson, op. cit., p. 210.
23. "Ship-Construction and Equipment," *Encyclopedia*, loco cit.

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