

Strange Scriptures

That Perplex the Western Mind

Clarified in the Light of Customs and Conditions in Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

FIELDS

“The Grass of the Field” (Matthew 6:30).

“IF God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven . . .”

Before the rains come the whole mountain sides are covered with thorns which look like grass, and the natives call it so. The women gather these thorns for fuel. In many villages it is the only fuel they have. The women place it under their **“fire pot”** made of clay, and place on that the clay dish in which they cook their food.

“While Men Slept, the Enemy Sowed Tares” (Matthew 13:25).

“Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.”

The tare or darnel abounds all over the East, and is a great trial to the farmer.

The grain is small and is arranged along the upper part of the stalk, which stands perfectly erect. The taste of the grain is bitter and if mixed with wheat in bread causes dizziness, and often acts as a violent emetic. It is a poison and must be carefully winnowed and picked out of the wheat or the flour is not fit for food. The tares can hardly be distinguished from the wheat until the heads appear at harvest time, — even the farmer cannot tell them apart. As harvest approaches the wheat grows heavy and bends over more and more, but the tares or darnel are so light-headed they stand very straight. At harvest time the farmer cuts the heads off the tares and puts them in a pile until he has harvested the wheat; then the tares are burned.

Bread in Bible Lands (John 6:35).

Our Lord's frequent references to Himself as the Bread of Life were full of meaning to the people to whom He spoke. Bread is sacred in Palestine, as the main article of food. An Arab would stop in the road to pick up a bit of bread that had fallen there, touch his forehead with it in token of respect, and carefully place it in a cleft of the wall or a rock, so that it would be safe from passing feet.

Native bread is usually a round, flat cake, from a quarter of an inch to an inch thick. Leavened bread is very little used among the peasants. The women cook the bread fresh for each meal. The oven is often a piece of sheet iron, slightly convex. It is upheld on three stones and a fire burns underneath. The woman puts a very thin, large piece of unleavened dough on the oven and after being cooked it looks much like a huge pancake. Sometimes they build a fire in a hole in the floor of their tent and fill the hole with small stones. The bread is placed on the hot pebbles. Sarah baked her bread on hot stones on the hearth in her tent.

Parched Pulse (II Samuel 17:28).

The word pulse is found in Daniel 1:12, 16. It is very much cultivated in Palestine, and the whole plant being roasted, is sold in small bunches on the street as the peasants are very fond of it. It has a very large amount of concentrated nutriment, so that the Bedouin sometimes goes on a several days' journey with only a handful of pulse in his scrip for food.

When King David fled from Absalom to Mahanaim, the people gave him as a present, "**parched corn, beans, lentils, and parched pulse**" (II Samuel 17:28).

Daniel 1:12 says, "**Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.**"

Pulse looks something like very large peas.

Ruth Gleaning (Ruth 2:5).

"Then said Boaz unto his servant that was set over the reapers, Whose damsel is this?"

This scene could easily be enacted at the present day by the people of Bethlehem.

The salutations are the same between the owner and his servants, "The Lord be with you" is merely the "Allah m'akum," heard every day, and the reply, "The Lord bless thee."

The reapers are apt to be rude to defenseless women, hence Boaz commanded them to be respectful to Ruth. The reapers come from all parts of the country, and largely from the lower class. Being far from home they throw off all restraint and do somewhat as they please.

The meals too, are the same today; the dipping the morsel in vinegar, and the parched corn — not like our corn or maize, but more like wheat or barley. A quantity is plucked with the stalks attached, they are tied into small parcels, a blazing fire is kindled with thorn bushes, and the corn heads are held in it until the chaff is burned off. The grain is then eaten and people all over the country are exceedingly fond of it.

Nor is the gathering of this corn for parching ever considered stealing.

After roasting, the kernels are rubbed out in the hand and eaten. Parched corn is often referred to in the Bible. You often see people as they pass along the wheat fields, pluck off some corn, rub the heads in their hands, and eat the grains unroasted, just as the apostles did.

The owners often sleep on the summer threshing floors, just as the wealthy Boaz did when Ruth came to him. Though it is not allowable that a woman in general should sleep on these floors, and to do so would produce the same bad impression which Boaz feared, yet it is not unusual for husband, wife and children to encamp on the threshing-floor until the harvest is over. Doubtful characters come to the floors today, and did three thousand years ago in Bethlehem.

Because it was improper for single women to stay on the floors at night, why did Boaz say to Ruth, **“All the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman?”**

Boaz knew her character and that she was guided in her actions by her mother-in-law, who taught her that she had a right to Boaz for her husband, and that the law of God forbade her to marry anyone else.

We again hear Boaz saying to Ruth, **“When thou art athirst, go unto the vessels and drink, . . . At meal time . . . eat of the bread, and dip thy morsel in the vinegar . . . and he reached her parched corn, and she did eat.”**

This is a picture we saw in Palestine many times. Water is always present in large jars. The natives are fond of acids, and while usually they are satisfied with bread alone or a few olives or an onion, at harvest time they have a better meal. Tomatoes cut up with oil to dip and moisten their morsel in, or leban, a sour, clabbered milk, are favorites. Then they sit on the ground around a common bowl and dip in.

During barley harvest the wheat is still in the milk, and “freaky” (meaning rubbed wheat), is made extensively. This freaky is the parched corn of the Bible, in Hebrew “gali.”

The green wheat is cut and mixed with a pile of dry barley straw, which when set ablaze, is of sufficient quantity to roast the green wheat. They then rub these ears of wheat together in their hands and winnow out the dross.

The reapers still, as in the days of Boaz, make parched corn a part of their meal, for it is very delicious when eaten fresh.

It is still a very common sight to see wayfarers stopping along the road, cutting a handful of wheat from someone's patch, making a little parched corn for a meal, or just rubbing out the green ears in the hand to eat the soft kernels. (Deuteronomy 23:25):

“When thou comest to the standing corn of thy neighbor, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand, but thou mayest not move a sickle in thy neighbor's standing corn.”

“Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungered, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat.” This was a legitimate practice; the Pharisees were complaining only of the disciples breaking the sabbath (Matthew 12:12).

“Thou Shalt Not Remove Thy Neighbor's Landmark” (Deuteronomy 27:17).

There are certain parts of Palestine held in permanent ownership, but in the northern part of the country each farmer has his land assigned to him for one or two years, the amount being measured by a cord of a certain length, which is according to the number of members in his family, and his ability to cultivate it. This must be a very old custom, for the land was distributed in this manner among the Hebrews in the days of Joshua, their inheritance being divided to them **“by line.”**

In Psalm 78:55 we read, **“He divided them an inheritance by line, and made the tribes of Israel to dwell in their tents.”**

Among the Assyrians, in the days of Judah, we find these fatal words, **“Thou shalt have none that shall cast a cord by lot in the congregation of the Lord”** (Micah 2:5).

When the time of the year for the “lot” is due; all the men who desire to take part meet on the threshing floor, where the chief man of the town or village awaits them with a bag of small stones. On each stone he has written the name of a field or portion of a field, the “lot.”

Many of the fields now have names similar to those in use during the time of our Lord. There is the “Field of Blood,” “Field of the Fight,” “Field of the Rocks,” and many others.

After all the men arrive, the Chief calls a small boy, far too young to know what it all means. The lad takes a pebble out of the bag and hands it to one of the men, and continues doing so until are supplied. Not one of the men can read, he does not understand where his lot is situated, but when he receives the stone from the child he says, “This is my lot, may God maintain it.”

A thought something like this is found in the sixteenth psalm, and the fifth verse, **“Thou maintainest my lot.”**

The Chief then reads the name of the field which is written on each stone, so that every man knows the portion of land assigned to him for the coming year.

The lot may be a long way from his dwelling, so that it will take him hours to reach it each morning and make him very late arriving home at night. The lot may be exceedingly rocky, barren and unproductive, where, work as hard as he is able, there will be but little raised. The lot may be the very last thing and place he would desire, but he takes it quietly. If unlucky one year he looks forward to something more favorable next year.

David is no doubt thinking of these people when he rejoices that his **“lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage”** (Psalm 16:6).

In some places the land is divided in a very strange way. Facing the road would naturally be the most desirable for a lot, so the Chief would divide the lots so that only a very small breadth of the land would be allowed each man: one half line or perhaps up to two lines facing the road would run back almost indefinitely, so that a farm may be but a rod or two wide, and very, very long.

Then to make sure that each man knows the size of his land, the old landmarks are looked over and marked by a double furrow, one furrow twice the width of the others; and to make it doubly sure, they place at each end a heap of stones which they call the *“stones of the boundary.”* Later on, if the furrow should disappear, the landmark of stones is still there.

We can understand how easily those boundary stones could be changed by a jealous and dishonest neighbor, even if it was forbidden by the law of Moses. It is still, as in the time of Moses, an unlawful and accursed act to remove the neighbor's landmark.

There are no government surveyors or maps to which appeal can be made in case of disputed boundary lines. Furrows made by the plow for division are easily filled up, and the most common landmarks of mere piles of stones balanced one upon another, which a child could remove or knock down; yet they are respected and left untouched from generation to generation.

“Thou shalt not remove thy neighbor's landmark, which they of old have set in thine inheritance” (Deuteronomy 19:14; 27:17).

“They Shall Still Bring Forth Fruit in Old Age; They Shall Be Fat and Flourishing” (Psalm 92:14).

The olive tree, mentioned forty times in the Old Testament, is one of the very first trees named in the Bible. An olive leaf was brought to Noah's ark (Genesis 8:11). The olive is the most common cultivated tree in Palestine, producing abundant fruit and oil. One tree often furnishes from ten to fifteen gallons of oil.

Olives and bread constitute a large part of the food of the peasants. Olive oil was and is today used very much for lighting. In the service of the tabernacle, besides being used for light, it was one of the ingredients of the “**Holy anointing oil**” (Exodus 25:6; 30:24).

Olive oil was used in treating wounds (Luke 10:34). It was used for the head (Psalm 23:5), as an act of courtesy (Luke 7:46), as well as to anoint priests, kings, and prophets for service (Leviticus 8:12; I Samuel 16:13; I Kings 19:16). Many references in Leviticus show how much use was made of oil in connection with offerings.

The olive tree has small white flowers in May, which fall readily (Job 15:33.). The fruit is gathered by beating (Deuteronomy 24:20). or shaking the tree (Isaiah 17:6). The olive tree grows slowly, very often lives to a very, very great age, and bears fruit till the last, even when the trunk is nothing but a shell.

“The righteous shall still bring forth fruit in old age.”

The Snare of the Fowler (Psalm 91:3).

“For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as birds that are caught in a snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them” (Ecclesiastes 9:12).

The fowler places the snare where it will not be seen, in a place much frequented by birds.

The snare is not large, but it is sure, and if the bird comes near it, he becomes a captive. It will be completely covered with leaves or anything to disguise it, so the birds will not know there is any danger near until too late.

God has promised not only to keep us from dangers we can see and know about, but from the unseen dangers.

“Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler.”

Elisha Plowing With Twelve Yoke of Oxen (I Kings 19:19).

“Elisha was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth.”

We are apt to think that he had a team of twelve yoke of oxen with which he was working, but the picture is of twelve separate plows following one after another as closely as possible. We have seen a dozen of them at work like this.

Now the arable land of nearly all villages is cultivated in common. The Arab farmers delight to work together in companies, partly for protection, but more for their great love of gossip.

Their small plows make no real furrow, but merely scratch the soil, so any number may follow after, each making his own scratch, and they go back and forth until the whole piece of land is plowed. It was well that Elisha was last, for they may not pass one another. We can believe that Elisha's oxen and plow were like the ones in Palestine today. The people worked in companies then as they do now, and for the same reasons.

Weights and Scales (Deuteronomy 25:13).

“Thou shalt not have in thy bag divers weights (margin, stones) a great and a small.”

In most countries money was originally paid out by weight. The standard unit of weight among the Jews was the shekel, which was represented in patriarchal days and for long after by a stone or stones of specific gravity. We read in Leviticus 19:36, margin, *“Just balances, just stones, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have.”* (Deuteronomy 25:13, margin; Proverbs 20:10, margin).

As no two such weights were of similar appearance, and not all equally ponderous, even when of the same apparent size, the eye of the customer had no standard of estimate by which he might detect the trader's dishonesty, who used different weights for different occasions and customers. Hence the significance of the command in Deuteronomy 25:13, *“Thou shalt not have in thy bag divers weights (marg. stones a great and a small)”*.

The practice of weighing money is very ancient. In the account of the transaction between Ephron and Abraham, we read that the latter weighed to the Hittite landowner, as purchase money for the cave of Machpelah,

“four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchants” (Genesis 23:16); and there is evidence to show that the practice continued till the time of Jeremiah.

The shekel was the standard weight of the Jews, so let us see how it stood in relation to their other weights. It was divided into two bekaahs, and the bekeh into ten gerahs. The talent equaled 3,000 shekels; and between the shekel and the talent came the “pound” or maneh, which according to Ezekiel 45:12 contained sixty shekels, though at other times it contained only fifty; and at one time no less than one hundred shekels.

During the winter of 1937-38, while living in the American Colony in Jerusalem, we were very much interested in the manner of measuring the value of wood which was brought there for sale. It was hard wood, mostly chunks and roots of the olive tree, fairly dry. There was in the back yard of the Colony an old crude pair of balances. The Arab who brought the wood on the back of his camel would place in one “pan” of the balances a rough rock which had been brought in from the field. Then he would fill the other pan until the balances balanced; then unload and repeat.

As the weight of the rock represented a certain value in wood, and the arrangement had been agreed upon, all concerned seemed to be satisfied.

“He Drinketh Up Scorning Like Water” (Job 34:7).

This idiom is very common among the Arabs. It is natural to their mind to think of many operations under the idea of eating and drinking, which we connect with some other sense than that of taste. They very commonly speak of eating a great rain when they have been drenched in a shower; or they say they ate a strong wind or a very piercing cold. There are many, many other things that they will tell you they drank or ate.

“He drinketh up scorning like water.”

A Bag With Holes (Haggai 1:6).

“He that earneth wages, earneth wages to put into a bag with holes.”

God had commanded the children of Israel to repair the Temple and they disobeyed Him. They could earn more money in other kinds of work, and they probably said to each other, “There is no hurry about repairing the temple, it can wait for a while without doing any harm; our families need more and more; we have a good chance to earn big wages just now and it is surely our duty to look after our families first, to do our best for them.

Listen to what God thinks and says, **“He that earneth wages, earneth wages to put into a bag with holes.”**

We see this same situation everywhere today. Church work neglected, people earning money on the Sabbath and their pew is empty. Does it ever occur to them that all that extra money may fall through holes?

Unless we pay our debt to God first, we are apt to remain in debt to others. It always pays to obey God, to repair the temple, to put first things first.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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