

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE -

Customs Regarding Property

MEASURING AND ALLOTING THE LAND

MEASURING THE LAND. It has been the custom even in modern times in parts of northern Palestine and in the Plain of the Philistines to assign land periodically for farming purposes. The land thus assigned is measured by a cord.¹

The Psalmist indicates that this same method was used for measurement of the land of Canaan when it was assigned to the tribes of Israel. "**He cast out the heathen also before them, and divided them an inheritance by line**" (Psalm 78:55). The prophet Amos predicted that the land would be similarly measured and assigned by the foreign foe after its capture. "**Thy land shall be divided by line**" (Amos 7:17).

Allotting land. When land has been measured, "the lot" determines what section each man will secure. Those wishing to farm this land gather together usually at a threshing floor, where the man in charge of operations has a bag and pebbles. A certain distinguishing mark is put on each pebble to indicate the portion of land it represents. Then these small stones are put in the bag, and the bag is given to a small boy, who takes out the pebbles one by one, and hands one to each man desiring the use of the land. Each man upon receiving his "lot," says: "May GOD maintain my lot."

This reminds the Bible reader of the words of the Psalm writer: "**Thou maintainest my lot**" (Psalm 16:5). Each man soon discovers whether his portion is desirable or not. David used this as an illustration of GOD's goodness to him, when he said, "**The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage**" (Psalm 16:6). It would seem, then, that the method used for allotting land by certain Arabs in modern days is similar to that used by the Jews in the days of the Old Testament.²

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANDMARKS

In Bible lands, when those who have the old-time customs, want to prove the extent of their property, whether it is held temporarily or permanently, landmarks hold an important place. The boundary line is marked by a double furrow, but at each end of the furrow a heap of stones, called "the stones of the boundary," is placed. If the rain does away with the furrow line, the landmark is still there to indicate the boundary. To remove one of these landmarks is considered to be a great sin.³

Sometimes small community wars have been precipitated by the removing of a landmark. The law of Moses had this statute: "**Thou shalt not remove thy neighbor's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance**" (Deuteronomy 19:14).

PURCHASING OF LAND

Transfer of property and recording of deeds in ancient times. Jeremiah's account of his purchase of a field gives us the procedure in Old Testament times. Here is the way he describes it:

"And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that was, in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver. And I subscribed the evidence, and sealed it, and took witnesses, and weighed him the money in the balances. So I took the evidence of the purchase, both that which was sealed according to the law and custom, and that which was open: and I gave the evidence of the purchase unto Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Maaseiah, in the sight of Hanameel mine uncle's son, and in the presence of the witnesses that subscribed the book of the purchase, before all the Jews that sat in the court of the prison" (Jeremiah 32:9-12).

Several ancient customs are indicated here. The money was not in the form of coins. Coinage did not come into use until later than the prophet's day. Rather the money was silver that was weighed. The purchase was witnessed by certain Jews who "**sat in the court.**" There were duplicate copies of the deed made out. It was doubtless customary to seal one of these and deposit it in a safe place, which usually meant it was buried on part of the land purchased. The other copy that was open, i.e., unsealed, was placed in the public place designated for recording deeds, where it could be referred to when necessary. However, in the case of Jeremiah's purchase, both copies of the deed were preserved in an earthen vessel because the city of Jerusalem was to be destroyed.⁴

Specific inclusions noted in transfer of property. When purchasing property in the East, especially from the Arabs, it is important to indicate in detail just what is included in the purchase. If this is not done the new owner will discover he is not the owner of all he thought he purchased. In the Orient it sometimes happens that a man owns a well in the middle of a field belonging to another man. The reason for this is that the man in buying the field did not specify that he was buying the well located in the field.⁵

When Abraham purchased the cave of Machpelah as a burying place for Sarah, he was careful to make clear what was included. Scripture says: "**The field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in the borders round about, were made sure unto Abraham**" (Genesis 23:17).

BURYING AND DISCOVERING VALUABLES

Through its entire history, Palestine has been a land where its inhabitants have often buried treasure in its ground. Foreign foes have many times swept through the land to plunder. In more recent years robber bands from the desert have many times rushed in to rob the inhabitants. A feeling of insecurity has caused the people of the country to seek a place to hide away valuable

possessions. Therefore, many times have valuable possessions been buried in secret places.

This was often done by men before leaving for battle, or before going on a long journey. If they returned safely they would be able to reclaim their buried treasure. But if they died in battle, or for any other reason failed to return, the place where the valuables were hidden would remain a lost secret. Because of this situation, there always has been a looking for hidden treasure by certain people all over the Holy Land}⁶

The Bible contains numerous references to this pursuit. Thus it was that in the days of Job it was said: "**The bitter in soul . . . long for death, but it cometh not; and dig for it more than for hid treasures**" (Job 3:20, 21).

One of Solomon's proverbs uses the comparison of seeking for hidden treasure: "**Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God**" (Proverbs 2:35).

The most famous reference to this custom is the parable JESUS told: "**The kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field**" (Matthew 13:44). The important consideration in this story is that hidden treasure that is discovered belongs to the man who owns the property where it is found.

Hence the man in the parable sold all he possessed that he might be able to buy the field where the treasure was found, and thereby become owner of the treasure he had discovered.

REDEEMING LOST INHERITANCES

The Old Testament law provided a way through which an inheritance that had been lost could be redeemed through a "go-el" or kinsman-redeemer. If a man through poverty was forced to mortgage his property, and then was unable to meet the payment on the date of maturity of the mortgage, then the man holding the mortgage could hold the land until the year of jubilee (which came every fifty years), at which time it reverted automatically to its former owner. But before this date a kinsman-redeemer (nearest male blood relation) could go into the civil court and by payment, recover the land for his relative. If the relation had died without an heir, then it became the duty of the kinsman-redeemer to marry his widow, and raise up the name of his brother.⁷

The story of Ruth and Boaz is the Bible example of this ancient custom. Boaz redeemed the estate of the deceased Elimelech, Naomi's husband, by marrying Ruth, the widow of one of Elimelech's sons. There was a kinsman nearer in relation than Boaz, but he chose not to be redeemer, and this left the way open for Boaz, who was next in line to become the kinsman-redeemer. In completing the transaction whereby the inheritance was redeemed and Ruth became his wife, an interesting old custom was observed. The account says: "**Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor: and this was a testimony in Israel. Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, Buy it for thee. So he drew off his shoe**" (Ruth 4:1, 8). Boaz took off his sandal and gave it to the owner of the mortgage as evidence of

completing his act of redemption. This custom was usual in the transfer of inheritances.

1. A. C. Haddad, *Palestine Speaks*, p. 11.
2. G. Robinson Lees, *Village Life in Palestine*, pp. 137,138.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
4. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, pp. 287, 288.
5. A. Forder, *Ventures Among the Arabs*, pp. 274,275.
6. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. II, pp. 640,641.
7. For information on the "Kinsman-Redeemer," see: J. Vernon McGee, *Ruth, the Romance of Redemption*, pp. 110-123. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1943.)

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