

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN -

Religion in the Home

THE FATHER AS PRIEST IN PATRIARCHAL TIMES

IN THE DAYS of the early patriarchs, the father was the priest for the whole family, and this honor and responsibility of exercising the priesthood usually was bestowed upon the first-born son upon the death of the father. This practice continued until the law of Moses transferred this right to the tribe of Levi, which tribe then furnished the priests to Israel as a nation.¹

The altar. The religion in the homes of those early days largely centered about an altar upon which animal sacrifices were offered up to GOD. Thus when Abraham came into the land and had pitched his tent in the vicinity of Bethel, the Scriptural record says of him, "**And there he builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord**" (Genesis 12:8). Later on it is recorded that he built an altar at Hebron (Genesis 13:18). It is said that Jacob built one at Shechem (Genesis 33:1-20). And then in obedience to the command of the LORD, he went to Bethel, and like his grandfather, built an altar to the LORD there. Anticipating doing this, he said to his family, "**Let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went**" (Genesis 35:3).

The altar in the home life of those early days helped to produce a sense of sin, a realization of GOD's holiness, and a knowledge that the way of approach to GOD was through a sacrifice. The altar was the forerunner of the family prayer life in a Christian home today, which is based upon forgiveness of sin through the blood of CHRIST of which the animal sacrifice was a symbol.

The teraphim. In the land of Babylonia, from which Abraham had originally come, there was family worship of household gods, and the home had its altar along with clay figurines of these gods, which were called "teraphim." These family gods served as guardian angels of the home. At the death of a father, these household gods, or teraphim, would often be left to the oldest son, with the understanding that others' of the family would have the right to worship them.²

When Jacob left the home of Laban in Haran, Genesis says, "**Rachel had stolen the images (Teraphim) that were her father's**" (Genesis 31:19). Laban was very much agitated over this theft. He pursued Jacob's party and said to him, "**Wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?**" (Genesis 31:30). But why was Laban so concerned about discovering those lost teraphim? Sir Charles Leonard Woolley, in charge of excavations at Ur of the Chaldees, tells of a tablet of that region which reveals a law that throws light on Rachel's theft. Dr. Woolley puts the law thus:

"The possession of the household gods conferred the privilege of primogeniture."³

Thus Rachel must have stolen her brother's birthright when she took her father's teraphim, and she was thereby seeking to make Jacob the legal heir to the wealth of Laban.⁴

This ancient form of idolatry was vitally linked to family affairs. It would seem that Rachel brought forth those stolen teraphim when the family was about to move from Shechem to Bethel. Jacob said to his family at that time, "**Put away the strange gods that are among you and be clean**" (Genesis 35:2). The presence of these relics of former days would indicate an effort to combine the superstitions and heathen charms of an idolatrous worship along with the worship of the true and living GOD. The teraphim appeared on several occasions in later history of the Israelites.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION UNDER THE LAW

The law of Moses was very definite in its requirement that parents must train their children in the knowledge of GOD and His laws. Concerning these divine precepts it said:

"**Teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons**" (Deuteronomy 4:9). Concerning the carrying out of this commandment, one writer has said: "Religious education in the family, as it has continued, is a special mark Judaism"⁵

It became the very solemn duty of Hebrew parents to teach their children the commandments of the law, and also to explain to them the real meaning of the religious observances. No doubt it has been this emphasis upon religious education in the family which has contributed so largely to the permanence of the Jew in history.⁶

And it is also true that any failure of the Jews to fulfill their God-given mission in the world may be traced in part at least to their failure in family religious training.

FAMILY PILGRIMAGES TO THE SANCTUARY

A very important part of Hebrew family life was the pilgrimage made to the place of the sanctuary. "**Thrice in the year shall all your men children appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel**" (Exodus 34:23). The whole family could go, but the male members were required to go on this pilgrimage. The feasts of the LORD came at these three seasons of the year. The element of thanksgiving was largely emphasized in most of them. the LORD made a special promise to those going on such a pilgrimage to GOD's house. "**Neither shall any man desire thy land, when thou shalt go up to appear before the LORD**" (Exodus 34:24). With so many of the menfolks gone from their homes, GOD promised to look after these homes against any possible attack from an enemy while the family was away on this pilgrimage.

The family of Elkanah was in the habit of making such pilgrimages. "**And this man went up out of his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice unto the Lord God of hosts in Shiloh**" (I Samuel 1:3). It was while on such a pilgrimage that Hannah prayed for a baby boy, and in due time Samuel was born.

The most famous example of a family pilgrimage to Jerusalem is of course that of Joseph, Mary, and JESUS. Luke reports it: "**Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast**" (Luke 2:41-42). We can scarcely imagine how much that trip to the Holy City must have meant to the boy Jesus. The journey alone would be thrilling to any child, but to JESUS it was being in his Father's House that gave him the biggest thrill of all (Luke 2:49).

Some Bible readers have been perplexed because Luke says that Joseph and Mary went a day's journey before discovering that JESUS was absent from them. But the present-day Syrian customs of family religious pilgrimages throw light on what actually took place. Luke says: "**They sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance**" (Luke 2:44). On such pilgrimages, kinsfolk and acquaintances travel together in large groups, and the young people of the party are considered to be perfectly safe as long as they are with this group. On these trips parents often go for hours at a time without seeing their sons. It is quite probable that JESUS was with the caravan when it started out, and then was detached from his kinsfolk and returned to the city and to the temple.⁷

THE BIBLE IN THE JEWISH HOME OF CHRIST'S TIME

In the days when JESUS grew up as a boy in his Nazareth home, whatever else of the Hebrew Scriptures the youth may have been acquainted with, they grew up to hear recited a prayer called "The Shema." This prayer was in reality the quotation of three passages from the Pentateuch. It was repeated morning and evening by the men. And Jewish boys when they became twelve years of age had to be able to repeat this prayer. The three Scriptures that made up the Shema were: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Deuteronomy 11:13-21; and Numbers 15:37-41. It is quite likely that after JESUS returned from that pilgrimage to Jerusalem, He would borrow the manuscript from the synagogue of Nazareth (if He did not have a copy of the Scriptures in His own home) and study in it, especially the books of Moses and the prophets. In His teachings He often referred to these writers, and was especially fond of Isaiah and Jeremiah.⁸

The widespread use of the Shema in CHRIST's time became with many a mere form with little or no meaning. It was possible for this prayer to become as vain as a heathen prayer. Doubtless CHRIST was protesting such use of it when He said, "**But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen [Gentiles] do**" (Matthew 6:7).⁹

The practice of the phylactery, which the Pharisees made such wide use of, was based on some of the Scripture in the Shema, and as used by them, was condemned by JESUS.¹⁰

ENTERTAINING FELLOW-BELIEVERS IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

In the days of the apostles, great importance was attached to the religious duty of believers entertaining fellow believers who came to their town. In time of persecution, such hospitality would be of great value.

Luke tells of one such time of persecution thus: "**Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word**" (Acts 8:4). How welcome a Christian home of refuge would be to one who had to flee from his home because of his testimony for CHRIST!

The Apostle Paul stayed in the home of Aquila and Priscilla, while he carried on his missionary work in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3). One of the qualifications of a good bishop Paul gave in the words "**given to hospitality**" (I Timothy 3:2). And to laymen he stressed the importance of being "**given to hospitality**" (Romans 12:13). Peter told the saints, "**Use hospitality one to another without grudging.**" (I Peter 4:9).

The word translated "**hospitality**" means "*friendly to strangers*." Peter was not thinking of believers entertaining their Christian friends, but rather of their entertaining traveling Christians who were in need of food and shelter.¹¹

The hospitality among the early Christians promoted Christian fellowship, and thus strengthened growth in the faith. It must have exerted a great influence upon the youth growing up in the homes where it was practiced. (See also Chapter Seven, "The Sacred Duty of Hospitality.")

CHRISTIAN GATHERINGS IN THE HOME

The early gathering place for Christian worship was in the home. The earliest excavation of a church by archaeologists, where a date has been ascertained, is of a room within a house that was set apart for worship, and was thus furnished as a chapel. It dates back to the third century A. D.¹²

It seems difficult for the twentieth-century Christians to realize that most, if not all, of the earliest churches met in homes. Dr. A. T. Robertson lists some of those early gathering places:

The church in Jerusalem met:

- in the house of Mary (Acts 12:12)
- at Philippi in the house of Lydia (Acts 16:40)
- at Ephesus in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19)
- and later in Rome (Romans 16:5)
- and likewise there was the church that met in the house of Philemon in Colossae apparently (Philemon 2).

The homes surely received a special blessing from that service. There was responsibility also.¹³

1. Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, (Philadelphia: Desilver, Thomas & Co., 1836) Vol. II, p. 163.
2. Barbara M. Bowen, *The Bible Lives Today*, p. 70.
3. Sir Leonard Woolley, *Abraham; Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins*, pp. 164, 165. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).
4. Loc. cit.
5. Theodore S. Soares, *The Social Institutions and Ideals of the Bible*, p. 60.
6. Ibid., pp. 61, 62.
7. Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, pp. 49-51.
8. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in The Time of CHRIST*, pp. 386-388; also 143.
9. Ibid., p. 389.

10. See "*Special Dress of the Pharisees*," Ch. IX, p. 101 f.
11. Kenneth S. Wuest, *First Peter in the Greek New Testament*, pp. 115, 116. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1942).
12. Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, p. 335.
13. Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Paul and the Intellectuals*, pp. 207, 208. (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1928.)

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