

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT -

Palestine Water Supply

WELLS, SPRINGS, OR FOUNTAINS WELLS AND THEIR LOCATION. In many cases wells have been depended upon for water in Palestinian towns through the years. Often the well is located outside the city walls, but sometimes the people are fortunate to have the well inside their town. Archaeologists have discovered at least two ancient cities in addition to Jerusalem, that brought water inside their city through a tunnel. The city of Gezer had such a tunnel that lead from within the city to a water supply beneath. And the Canaanites at Megiddo, rather than go outside their city for water, sunk a shaft straight down to the level of the spring, and then dug a tunnel horizontally until they reached it.¹

Securing water for home use. We have already seen (Chapter 8) that it is the duty of the women to go to the well to get the family supply of water. This is carried by them in pitchers of earthenware either upon their shoulder or head. If larger supplies of water are needed, then the men carry such in sheepskin or goatskin "bottles."

Famous wells and fountains of Scripture. Wells were dug by the early patriarchs in various places in the land of Canaan. The town of Beersheba was named after an event that happened at the time Isaac's servants dug a well there. The name means "The Well of the Oath," commemorating the covenant made between Isaac and Abimelech, which followed soon after the trouble over possession of wells at Gerar (Genesis 26).

Jacob's well at Sychar was made famous by the incident of JESUS talking with the woman of Samaria there. There is nothing left at these wells that may be used for drawing water from a depth. Each woman who comes for water brings with her, in addition to the pitcher in which to carry the water, a hard leather portable bucket with a rope, in order to let it down to the level of the water.²

The Samaritan woman had brought all this with her, but JESUS had no such equipment with him. Hence she said to him, after he had asked her for a drink: "**Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep**" (John 4:11). In response to his request she drew from the well and gave him a drink.

It was water from a Bethlehem well for which David in the wilderness longed. To appreciate his desire, one needs to know what thirst in the wilderness means, and also be acquainted with the cool water of the Bethlehem wells and cisterns. In the hillsides around Bethlehem are terraced vineyards, and most of these have a rock-hewn cistern located in them, which collects rain water

in the winter months and preserves this water in a delightfully cool condition in the hot summer months.

The men of Bethlehem boast of their cool water. One man was given a drink, but expressed a longing for water out of his father's vineyard, saying that it was so cold that he couldn't drink an entire glassful without taking it away from his lips at least three times.³

Thus David, stationed at the cave of Adullam, and living in the parched wilderness, and weary from fighting, said: "**Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate**" (II Samuel 23:15). When three of his men risked their lives in fighting Philistines in order to secure for him some of this cool Bethlehem water, David "**poured it out unto the Lord**" (II Samuel 23:16). This was according to the ancient custom of a libation offering, or the pouring on the ground as an act of worship, wine, or oil, or milk, or honey, or water. Sometimes these drink offerings were poured by the Hebrews on the animal sacrificed to the LORD. In doing what he did, David was giving to the LORD the drink of water that had cost so much for the men to secure for him.⁴

Throughout the centuries the town of Nazareth has had put one main source for its water supply, a well or fountain that is located at the northwest extremity of the town. We may be fairly certain that Mary came here with her pitcher to draw water for her household use, and that here the boy JESUS often quenched his thirst.

One of the most important springs in Palestine is the one at Jericho. Its water comes from the Judean wilderness mountains located behind the town. This spring contributes to a pool of water adjoining the excavated mound of old Jericho, and this is now called "Elisha's Fountain." It is believed to be the waters healed by the prophet long ago (II Kings 2:21). Although the level of this water gets quite low in the hot weather, it seldom dries up entirely, and is a source of water for men, animals, and the oasis of banana, fig, and date palms of the vicinity.

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The word "well" to the average native of Palestine has meant "spring" or "fountain," but in the Bible account it often means "**cistern**." Actually the cistern has been a more common source of Palestine's water supply than has the well. To drink water out of the family cistern was the proverbial wish of every Jew, and such was the promise that King Sennacherib of Assyria used to try and tempt the Jews into making peace with him. He said to them: "**Make an agreement with me by a present, and come out to me, and then eat ye every man of his own vine, and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his cistern**" (II Kings 18:31; cf. Isaiah 36:16).

These family cisterns were often dug in the open courtyard of houses as was the case of "**the man which had a well [cistern] in his court**." At the time of year referred to this cistern was dry and so two men could easily be hidden therein (II Samuel 17:18-19). During the rainy season the rain water is conducted from the housetops to these cisterns by means of troughs. Usually the water is drawn up by means of a rope that runs over a wheel, and a bucket made of animal skins is fastened to the rope. Jeremiah used the picture of a cistern that leaked water, to illustrate one of his sermons: "**For my people have committed two evils**"; the prophet said of the LORD,

"They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

THE SOURCE OF JERUSALEM'S WATER

Pools of water in and around the city. Throughout most of its history, the Holy City has depended largely upon private cisterns which its inhabitants have maintained to catch rain water. The city itself has had through the years no living fountain or spring within its walls. The spring of Gihon now called "The Virgin's Fountain," is located in the Valley of Kidron just outside the old city of the Jebusites or the City of David.

King Hezekiah constructed a conduit or tunnel from this spring through the rock underneath the city to a place in the Tyropean Valley, where a reservoir was constructed to receive the water (II Kings 20:20). This reservoir has gone by the name of The Pool of Siloam. This water project was undertaken mainly to give the city a water supply in time of siege. The pool has been an important source of water for Jerusalem through the centuries. Here the Arab women of the old city often come to wash their clothes, or their vegetables, or their children. And farther in the pool or mouth of the tunnel, they get their pitchers filled with the family supply of water. And at this pool also an occasional shepherd will come to wash his sheep"⁵

Other pools located in and around the city that have supplied water include *the Pool of Hezekiah*, located inside the walls and fed with water through an underground conduit from the Pool of Mamilla. This latter pool lies 2000 feet to the west of Jaffa Gate outside the walls, and is in the Valley of Hinnom and receives drainage water coming down that valley. *The Pool of the Sultan* lies just outside the Southwestern corner of the wall in this same valley. *The Pool of Bethesda* is to be found just inside the Eastern wall, between St. Stephen's Gate and the Northern wall of the temple enclosure. It was here that many sick ones bathed in CHRIST's time, believing its waters had healing properties. It was here CHRIST healed the impotent man (John 5).

Solomon's Pools and the Temple Area Reservoir. Two miles south of Bethlehem there are three reservoirs of water that have for centuries been called Solomon's Pools, because it is generally believed that he originally constructed them. Josephus indicated that it was probably Pontius Pilate who rebuilt and enlarged them. Water from these pools was brought to Jerusalem by means of a rock aqueduct and emptied into a great reservoir located under the temple area.⁶

Even today water from this source is brought up to the surface at a point between the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque el-Aksa, by an animal skin bucket attached to a rope and running over a wheel. Water carriers using goatskin "bottles" come here to get their water and carry it to many parts of the old city of Jerusalem.⁷

During six months of the year, when there is no rain, water becomes scarce in many parts of Palestine, especially during the latter part of that season when one after another cistern has dried up, and permanent wells and ever-flowing sources must be depended upon for water. In such times the water carrier will go to a well, or reservoir, and then peddle his supply of water to those who need it. He may go down the streets of the city, or he may go into the marketplace. He will call out: "Ho, ye thirsty ones, come ye and drink." There have been times when a philanthropic person has paid the water carrier for all his supply of water and thus let him offer if

free of charge to those who need it. Then he will call forth:

"Ho, ye thirsty ones, come and drink today for nothing, for nothing!"⁸

Such words remind us of the prophetic invitation of Isaiah: "**Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy. . . without money and without price**" (Isaiah 55:1).

Water for modern Jerusalem. The portion of Palestine now included in the new nation of Israel has undergone a marvelous transformation in regard to the supply of water for irrigation purposes as well as for household use.

Primitive customs are fast disappearing and modern customs are taking their place in the Jewish sections of the land. The Jewish part of Jerusalem has had a new supply of water coming thirty miles from ancient Antipatris or Bas el Ein) located in the Plain of Sharon. Water coming from copious springs located there is pumped by relay pumping stations through a large pipeline up to the crest of the hills where the Holy City stands.

The Jerusalem under the control of Israel has become very much westernized, with water piped to the houses. But in much of the ancient or Arab portion of Jerusalem, (1953) one still sees women carrying water pitchers on their head or shoulder) and men carrying goatskin "bottles" of water very much like it was done by the ancient Hebrews.

And numerous cisterns still conserve rain water.

1. For details about the water system of these two cities, see Miller, *Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, pp. 428, 429.
2. James Neil, *Pictured Palestine*, p. 155.
3. John D. Whiting, "Bethlehem and the Christmas Story," *The National Geographic Magazine*, December, 1929, pp. 730, 731.
4. See "Libation," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 647.
5. For photograph of this pool, showing some of these actions, see article by Maynard Owen Williams, "Home to the Holy Land," *The National Geographic Magazine*, December, 1950, p. 722.
6. Major Edward Keith-Roach, "The Pageant of Jerusalem," *The National Geographic Magazine*, December, 1927, pp. 665-667. For further details regarding Solomon's Pools, see G. Frederick Owen, *Abraham to Allenby*, p. 320, ch. VII, reference note 2.
7. For picture showing men filling these "bottles" with water from source, see article by Keith-Roach, p. 669.
8. Samuel Schor, *Palestine and the Bible*, pp. 49, 50.

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