

Strange Scriptures

That Perplex the Western Mind
Clarified in the Light of Customs and Conditions in Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER THREE

GARMENTS

THE native's ordinary outfit consists of an undershirt, a long loose garment reaching to the ankles, and an outer cloak.

The material is cotton, white or dark blue, and sometimes silk for the outer cloak for the women and wool for the men.

They wear very bright colors and much jewelry. The various styles of the outer cloak show the social rank of the wearer.

Seamless Coat (John 19:23).

“The coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout.”

In the southern part of Palestine the abba, or outside cloak, of the fellah is made of two strips of material joined by a seam. In the northern part of the country the abbas are made of one piece of material, woven throughout without a seam.

Many artists picture the Lord dressed in an outstanding and very fancy way, but coming from Galilee, He must have dressed as a Galilean peasant, and worn over his other garments a seamless abba or cloak such as they wore in northern Palestine.

Garment Not to Be Taken in Pledge (Exodus 22:26, 27).

“If thou at all take thy neighbor's raiment to pledge, thou shalt deliver it unto him by that the sun goeth down: For that is his covering only, it is his garment for his skin: wherein shall he sleep?”

Retiring in a native home at night is a much more simple affair than in our country. The place where a man has been lounging around all day becomes his bed at night.

There is no furniture whatever in the tents or the guest rooms. When dusk comes, the mother spreads mats and rugs all over the floor or ground, and on these the whole family sleep; often three or four generations live in a one-room house, and they all sleep on the floor together.

When the peasant becomes sleepy, he just lies down in his clothes, wherever he happens to be at the time, — on the ground, on the sidewalk, or in the fields, it doesn't matter to him; he pulls one of the wide sleeves of his cloak over his head, wraps the cloak around his body and he is asleep.

Almost always his legs and feet are bare and exposed to the weather, rain or cold or even snow, but with no apparent discomfort to him at all. Many times we have been obliged to walk out on the street because a man or boy, or perhaps several, were having a nap on the sidewalk, head covered, legs and feet bare.

It is a very common sight to see men and boys thus sleeping, often with a stone for a pillow, not under the head, as we have our pillows, but under the neck.

Even today the giving of a small article as a pledge of security is very common. Still the taking of a coat or cloak for a pledge is considered most unkind, as it deprives the owner of his only night covering.

This commandment, given so long ago to a people like the peasants of today, is still religiously kept, — a proof of how very little the customs of the Bible Lands have changed since Old Testament days.

“If thou take thy neighbor's raiment to pledge, thou shalt deliver it to him before the sun goes down.”

Sackcloth (Revelation 6:12).

“And the sun became black as sackcloth of hair.”

Sackcloth is a very heavy, coarse, dark colored cloth of goat's hair. It is worn as a sign of mourning, next to the skin.

Esther 4:1 says that:

“Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes . . . and cried with a bitter cry.”

“Rend your clothes, and gird you with sackcloth, and mourn” (II Samuel 3:31).

Conversely, the putting off of sackcloth was, and is, a symbol of joy, of thanksgiving for deliverance from an intolerable position or condition; it celebrated a changing of affliction by one's enemies to the casting off of the yoke of bondage (Psalm 30:11).

“They Enlarge the Borders of Their Garments” (Matthew 23:5).

There are zizith or fringes at each corner, and those the Jews reverently kiss.

Numbers 15:38:

“Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringes of the borders a ribband of blue.”

In Bible days this robe was the distinctive garment worn by the Jews, but during the Maccabean persecution the Jews were so easily distinguished by their dress that, as a measure of safety, they were allowed by Jewish leaders to wear the fringe on an inner robe, only during the hour of prayer.

This they continue to do to the present day. They call it now a “prayer shawl.”

Probably Christ, as a strict Jew, wore the fringes on an outer garment. The **“hem of his garment”** was the zizith (Luke 8:44). The woman came behind Him, and touched the border or fringe of his garment. The talith is generally a gift to a son by his mother when he is made *“Son of the Law”* (*Bar-Mitzvah ceremony*); and by a bride to her bridegroom.

Women never wear a talith, as they are not obliged to pray. A talith is worn by a Jew over his head or shoulders while praying. It is shaped like a shawl or a scarf now, but in Bible days it was a man's upper garment. Blue stripes are woven into the white at each end.

“And put upon the fringe at the borders a ribband of blue.”

Coat of Many Colours (Genesis 37:3).

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours.”

In the Authorized Version of the Bible you find that the word *“many”* is in italics, always indicating that it was not in the language, and we also notice that the word translated **“colours”** is given in the margin as *“pieces.”*

Many commentators tell us that this is “*a long garment with sleeves.*”

Very likely they are puzzled as to why Jacob should give his son a coat with pieces or a long garment with sleeves as a mark of favor, decided that it surely must have been a very wonderful brilliant kind of garment, more beautiful than the other sons had, so they missed the whole meaning of Joseph's gift from his father.

It also appeared that the older brothers were very childish men, aroused by jealousy because Joseph had been given a very handsome coat.

This “**coat of many colours,**” so called, was a plain long white shirt, the kamise, or undergarment of the desert ranger. In nearly all of those garments the sleeves were of moderate size, but the Bedouin told us that only two people in each whole tribe are allowed the privilege of the extremely long pointed sleeve — *the Sheikh of the tribe and the man whom he had chosen as his heir.*

So the wrath of the elder brothers was not an outburst of childish anger. It represented a very deep-seated hurt of mature men whose claim to succession to the leadership of their tribe had been set aside for their younger brother.

However, we must see Jacob's viewpoint and feeling about it, too.

Jacob had been fearfully deceived by his father-in-law when, after serving seven years for Rachel, the woman he loved, he was given Leah for his wife instead. Then he served seven years more for Rachel. Had Jacob married Rachel as he desired, her son would have been Jacob's heir.

As it was, Leah's sons were born first, but Jacob very much desired that his wife Rachel's son, Joseph, should be heir as he should have been. Therefore, Jacob makes, or has made the garment with the long sleeves to be worn by his heir and gives it to Joseph.

“And Jacob made him a coat *with long sleeves.*”

“Now We See Through a Glass Darkly” (I Corinthians 13:12).

After seeing the mirrors of the Bible days, we understand the meaning of these words of the apostle Paul.

When the Hebrews left Egypt, they brought with them their mirrors, which were made of bronze, copper alloyed with tin, the brass of the Bible. They were so well made that they had a wonderful luster.

A great many mirrors found in tombs at Thebes, although buried in the earth for many centuries, have been cleaned and polished until they again give a fairly clear reflection. The mirrors were always round with a metal handle.

How illuminating is the account given us of the sacrifice of the children of Israel giving their mirrors, which were melted and used as the metal for the production of the laver in the court of the Tabernacle.

It was natural to translate “mirror” as “glass,” but the spade has shown us that all the mirrors of Bible days were metal.

“Now we see through a glass [or by means of a mirror] darkly, but then face to face.”

“A Good Name is Better Than Precious Ointment” (Ecclesiastes 7:1).

We can scarcely understand the value put upon perfumes and ointments by the Eastern people, and their enjoyment of the perfumes, especially at their feasts of all kinds. Many of them were fearfully expensive. They kept their perfumes in very precious vases and jars of alabaster and glass and metal.

Perfumes are so much used in Eastern countries that the omission of them means that one is in mourning. The perfumes mentioned in the Bible were applied in various ways.

Often the people wore perfumes about their persons; sometimes they were used in the way of fumigation; sometimes the perfume was extracted and mixed with oil, and used afterward as ointment; and sometimes the perfume was kept in bottles, which were fastened to the girdle, — but the Word told them that a good name was even better than that.

Veil

The Eastern or original veil may be anything from a square yard to three or four square yards in dimension.

It is usually of cotton material, and is worn down the back, not necessarily covering the face. The veil is useful in many ways, especially for carrying things in. Ruth would have no difficulty in carrying six measures of barley presented to her by Boaz.

A veil is always used at a wedding ceremony to cover the face of the bride. Even the Bedouin women, who never cover their faces on ordinary occasions, have their brides' faces covered, and the removing of the veil is the great point in the wedding ceremony. The bridegroom, after walking round the bride three times, removes the veil from her face and throws it over his shoulder.

It is a proclamation to all that the government of his bride rests upon him. How very wonderfully this ceremony is brought to notice in the prophecy referring to our Lord, “**the government shall be upon his shoulder**” (Isaiah 9:6). — Christ in glory reigning with His bride, the Church.

Saul Lay Sleeping (I Samuel 26:7).

The sheikh's tent was always distinguished from all other tents by a tall spear standing upright in the ground in front of the tent. It was customary, when a party went out on an excursion to rob or for war, that at night the place where the chief slept was designated by a spear. So Saul, lying asleep, had his spear stuck in the ground at his head and the people lay round about him.

This whole scene is truly Oriental, even to the deep sleep into which the whole party had fallen. Then the cruse of water at Saul's head agrees with the customs of the people of that day. It is a hot, dry country and the people need a drink in the night, and the quantity that an Arab can drink is enormous.

We see Saul and his party asleep in a shady valley, after the weariness of a hot day. David, from the hillside, marks the spot where the king slumbers, creeps carefully down and stands over his persecutor. Abishai pleads with David to be allowed to strike him once, just once; but David forbade him, and, taking the cruse of water and the spear, he ascends to the top of the hill and then cried out to Abner, Saul's body guard.

What a sensation must have gone through the camp as David's voice rings from the hill-top!

“Art not thou a valiant man? and who is like thee in Israel? . . . As the Lord liveth, ye are worthy to die, because ye have not kept your master, the Lord's anointed. And now see where the king's spear is and the cruse of water that was at his bolster.” (I Samuel 26:15).

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