

Manners And Customs of Bible Lands

by
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CHAPTER NINE Dress and Ornamentation

THE STYLES OF DRESS in Anglo-Saxon lands are undergoing a constant change, whereas, in Eastern countries, the manner of dress today is largely the same as it was centuries ago. There is a prevalent view in Bible lands that it is morally wrong to change anything that is ancient. Thus the prevailing Palestinian dress of modern times (except of the Jews who have gone back to their land from various parts of the globe) is much as it was in the epoch that produced the Bible.¹

THE INNER GARMENT - TUNIC OR SHIRT

The tunic (often translated "coat") was a shirt which was worn next to the skin. It was made of leather, haircloth, wool, linen, or in modern times, usually of cotton. The simplest form of it was without sleeves and reached to the knees or sometimes to the ankles. The well-to-do wore it with sleeves and extending to the ankles. Women as well as men wore it (see Song of Solomon 5:3), although there was no doubt a difference in style and pattern in what was worn by the two.²

Among the lower classes, the tunic was often the only dress worn in warm weather. Persons of higher rank might wear the tunic alone inside the house, but would not wear it without the outer garment outside, or when they were to receive a caller. In the Bible the term "naked" is used of men clad only with their tunic (cf. Isaiah 20:2-4; Micah 1:8; John 21:7). To be dressed in such a scanty manner was thought of as "nakedness."³

As a rule the Jews of CHRIST's day had at least a change of apparel. A man would be considered poor to have only one garment.⁴

Yet John the Baptist said to those who heard him, "**He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none**" (Luke 3:11). And when JESUS sent out the Twelve on a preaching and healing mission, He told them not to take an extra undergarment with them (Matthew 10:10).

The apparel which Jacob gave to Joseph (Genesis 37:3) is rendered in our English translations, "**coat of many colors.**" But the Hebrew expression here is the same as the one used for the garment worn by Tamar the daughter of King David, and translated in the Greek and Latin, "a sleeved tunic." (See II Samuel 13:18) For this reason many Bible scholars believe it was a long undergarment with sleeves: The working classes usually wore a short tunic, whereas the aristocracy wore a long tunic with long sleeves. Thus it would be a mark of distinction for Joseph to wear the latter. But some are inclined to think it was a robe worn over the tunic.⁵

The garment of JESUS for which the Roman soldiers cast lots was a tunic without seam (John 19:23). It has often been referred to as a robe, but this is not correct, for it was not His outer garment, but rather His undergarment.

THE OUTER TUNIC OR ROBE

In Bible times there was a looser and longer kind of tunic that was sometimes used but not by the ordinary people. Scripture indicates its use by kings (I Samuel 24:4), prophets (I Samuel 28:14), nobles (Job 1:20), and sometimes youths (I Samuel 2:19). Some Bible scholars believe it to have been a third garment, i.e., in addition to the ordinary tunic and outside mantle. But others have thought of it as a special robe that was worn over the undergarment, and thus might have taken the place of the mantle.⁶

THE GIRDLE

If the tunic was ungirded it would interfere with a person's ability to walk freely, and so a girdle was always worn when leaving home for any kind of a journey (See II Kings 4:29; Acts 12:8). There were and are today two kinds of girdles.

One, a common variety, is of leather, usually six inches broad and furnished with clasps. This was the kind of girdle worn by Elijah (II Kings 1:8), and by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4). The other, a more valuable variety, is of linen (See Jeremiah 13:1), or sometimes of silk or embroidered material. It is generally a handbreadth wide. The girdle served as a pouch in which to keep money (II Samuel 18:11) and other things that might be needed (Mark 6:8). The girdle was used to fasten a man's sword to his body (I Samuel 25:13). Thus the girdle was a very useful part of a man's clothing.⁷

The Scriptures often make symbolic use of the girdle. When JESUS said to His disciples: "**Let your loins be girded about**" (Luke 12:35), it was as if He had said: "Be as men who have a long race to run; gather up the folds of your flowing robes, and fasten them with your girdle; that nothing may keep you back or impede your steps."⁸

In Bible language, "**be girded**" means: "to be ready for action" (cf. Psalm 18:39). The prophet Isaiah spoke of righteousness as the girdle of Messiah's loins when He rules the world (Isaiah 11:5). And Paul calls truth to be the Christian's girdle in his warfare with Satan (Ephesians 6:14).

THE OUTER GARMENT, OR MANTLE

The outer garment which the Palestinian villager wears, is a large cloak which would serve the purpose of a Westerner's overcoat. It is made of wool or goat's hair and sometimes of cotton. It is dark brown and different shades with whitish perpendicular stripes. It serves as a shelter from the wind and rain, and as a blanket at night. It is a more or less common sight to behold a man walking on a hot day wearing his heavy cloak, and if he should be asked why he does so, his answer would be, "What keeps out the cold, keeps out the heat also."⁹

It was this outer garment or mantle with which Elijah smote the waters of Jordan and crossed over with Elisha, and when he was taken up to Heaven this mantle became the property of Elisha (II Kings 2:8-13). The three young men who were cast into the fiery furnace were clad in their mantles as well as their tunics and other garb (Daniel 3:21).

The Law of Moses contained an explicit commandment regarding this outer garment. This is the

way the law reads:

"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 raiment for his skin: wherein shall he sleep? And it shall come to pass, when he crieth unto me, that I will hear; for I am gracious" (Exodus 22:26, 27).

The need for this commandment is easily understood when it is known how the mantle is used at night. Going to bed at night is a very simple matter for the Bedouins or peasants. Mats, rugs, or mattresses are used to lie upon, but the host does not provide any covering. Each person provides his own which consists of his mantle. Being closely woven, it is warm, and if he sleeps out-of-doors, this covering is even waterproof.¹⁰

It was because this outer garment was a man's covering by night that the law did not allow anybody taking this as a pledge or security, for this would deprive him of his means of keeping warm while sleeping. Such a garment if taken at all had to be returned by sunset.¹¹

A knowledge of this law and its purpose is an aid in understanding certain statements of CHRIST. On one occasion He said: **"Him that taketh away thy cloak forbid not to take thy coat [undergarment] also"** (Luke 6:29). This order is understood easily, because the outer garment would be the one most easily seized by a robber. But on another occasion He said. **"If any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat [undergarment], let him have thy cloak [outer garment] also"** (Matthew 5:40). A Jewish court would not award an outer garment as judgment, because of the rule of the Law of Moses already referred to, but could award an undergarment. In such a case JESUS advocated going the "second mile" by giving the outer garment also.¹²

Because of the fullness of the mantle it served as a means of carrying various things therein. The lap was often filled with grain or fruit. JESUS said, **"Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom"** (Luke 6:38). Ruth could put six measures of barley into her mantle (Ruth 3:15). Thus the upper garment served many useful purposes.¹³

HEADDRESS

The Jews of Bible times gave much attention to the care of their hair. The young people loved to wear it long and curled (Song of Solomon 5:11), and they were proud to have thick and abundant hair (II Samuel 14:25,26). Middle-aged men and priests would occasionally cut their hair but very little. Baldness was scarce and suspicion of leprosy was often attached to it. Thus when the youth said of Elisha, **"Go up, thou bald head"** (II Kings 2:23), it was using an extreme curse, for the prophet being a young man, may not actually have been bald-headed. Men would not cut their beards, but allow them to grow long (II Samuel 10:4,5). Beards would be anointed with oil often.

In public the Jews always wore a turban, for at certain seasons of the year it is dangerous in Palestine to expose the head to the rays of the sun. This turban was of thick material and passed several times around the head. It was somewhat like our handkerchief and was made of linen, or

recently of cotton.¹⁵

The patriarch Job and the prophet Isaiah mention the use of the turban as a headdress (Job 29:14; Isaiah 3:23). In place of the turban, the Palestinian Arabs today for the most part, wear a head veil called "*Kaffieh*" which hangs down over part of their garment.

***** The Bible teaches that it is a shame for a man to have long hair, and is a sign of rebellion against authority, according to 1 Corinthians 11. Absalom clearly was a rebel. Even in the OT, men (especially the priests, the examples to the rest of Israel) cut their hair short - see Ezekiel 44:20. *****

SANDALS

The shoes as worn by the majority in New Testament times were no doubt what we would call sandals. They consisted of a sole of either wood or leather, which was fastened to the foot by leather thongs. Some people wore that which was more like an Occidental shoe. With these, either the entire foot was covered, or the toes were left bare. Such shoes were probably considered to be a luxury, for the Bible references to footwear indicate the universal use of sandals.¹⁶

The Old Testament often makes mention of the sandals. The prophet Amos said, "... **because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes [sandals]**" (Amos 2:6). And Abraham spoke of the sandal thongs (Genesis 14:23). The New Testament references to sandals are also numerous. The angel told Peter, "**Gird thyself and bind on thy sandals**" (Acts 12:8). And John the Baptist refers to the latchet (thong, Robertson) of Messiah's sandals (Mark 1:7).

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WOMEN'S DRESS AND MEN'S

The law of Moses forbade a man to wear a woman's clothing, and a woman to wear a man's clothing (Deuteronomy 22:5). Among the Bedouin Arabs of Palestine there is a great care that either sex shall not imitate the other in matters of dress. A traveler one day discovered a Bedouin man who had put on a woman's garment while doing some rough work. He was hired to be a guide, but the man was very careful that none of his countrymen should see him in a woman's garb, and hurried away as soon as possible to change into a man's apparel.¹⁷

The difference between the dress of women and men needs to be noted carefully.

"The dress of women was different in detail rather than of kind. They too wore tunic and cloak. We may suppose that in every case their dress was a little more elaborate. Doubtless they wore longer tunics, larger mantles than their menfolk. And if they did, they may be said to have had every right to them, for they generally made not only their own clothes but those of their lords."¹⁸

The veil was the distinctive female wearing apparel. All females, with the exception of maidservants and women in a low condition of life, wore a veil. They would usually never lay it aside, except when they were in the presence of servants, or on rare occasions. This custom has prevailed among the Eastern women down to the modern era. When traveling, women may

throw the veil over the back part of their head, but if they see a man approaching, they place it back in its original position. Thus Rebekah, when she saw Isaac approaching her camel caravan, covered her face with her veil (Genesis 24:64, 65).

When women are at home they do not speak to a guest without being veiled and in the presence of maids. They do not enter the guest's chamber, but rather, standing at the door, they make it known to the servant what is wanted (See II Kings 4:12, 13). It is well to remember that prostitutes went unveiled. Today, as in olden times, virgins and married women may be seen wearing veils in Bible lands.¹⁹

The old customs are not being observed strictly by some Moslem women, for they are now going unveiled. Although it was the custom for women to wear a veil entirely covering their head, when they were in public, this custom was not always strictly enforced among the Hebrew women. They were allowed more liberty than the Arab women are allowed today. The Egyptians saw Sarah's face (Genesis 12:14). While Hannah was praying, Eli "**marked her mouth**" (I Samuel 1:12).

When a woman kept her veil down, it was forbidden for anyone to lift it, but she was free to do so if she chose. JESUS said, "**Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart**" (Matthew 5:28). All these Scriptures indicate that women sometimes exposed their faces to view. Young girls were more apt to be veiled than a married women.²⁰

The headgear of Bethlehem women is of interest in throwing light on Biblical customs. It was of two parts. First, there was what might be called a high cap on the front of which have been sewn rows of gold and silver coins. It would have to be a dire circumstance that would ever cause her to part with any of these coins. If she lost one of these, an evil meaning would be attached to the loss, and so it would be considered a great shame. Thus the woman whom JESUS told us about (Luke 15:8-10), had not merely lost a coin that could be used for buying articles, she had lost a part of that which was an ornament to her and which was also her dowry. Reflection was cast upon her character.

Second, there was the veil, which was quite a large affair perhaps six feet long and some four feet wide, and so placed over the cap as to cover the entire headgear, with the exception of the coins. Most of these veils are made of heavy white linen. Some have embroidery work on them, and some are nearly covered with needlework.²¹

ORNAMENTATION

As a rule, Jewish men did not indulge in extravagances of dress, and there was little ornamentation among them. They often carried a cane or staff, which would be ornamented at the top, but it served the useful purpose of protecting them from half-wild dogs that abounded in the country, and was not much of an ornament. Certain men wore a ring on their right hand or, suspended by a cord or chain around the neck.²²

Actually this was the signet ring or seal, and served as the personal signature of its owner, and so was not usually worn as an ornament. (For Scriptural examples of the ring, see Genesis 38:18;

Song of Solomon 8:6; Luke 15:22, etc.)

Among the women there was more apt to be ornamentation than among the men. Peter and Paul condemned an elaborate braiding of women's hair (I Peter 3:3; 1 Timothy 2:9), and the use of ornaments may possibly have been involved in the custom. Earrings were at one time worn by the women of Jacob's family (Genesis 35:4). And the golden earrings of the Israelitish women contributed to the making by Aaron of the golden calf (Exodus 32:2). These earrings, as now worn in the East, have as their main design the form of balls, long pendants, crescents, or disks. On behalf of his master, Abraham's servant had two bracelets ready to give Rebekah (Genesis 24:22). In recent years these are made of gold, silver, brass, or colored glass. In the third chapter of his prophecy, Isaiah lists many feminine ornaments. Necklaces or pendants are referred to also (Isaiah 3:19). Today they take the form of balls, squares, or hollow cylinders. Anklets, now having bells and disks attached, are also mentioned in this chapter (Isaiah 3:18). These are worn by Bedouin women today. Noserings also worn by these women were a part of Isaiah's list of feminine ornaments (Isaiah 3:21) Amulets were worn in Isaiah's day (Isaiah 3:20) and still are worn in the East as a charm to protect a person from various kinds of evil.²³

SPECIAL DRESS OF THE PHARISEES

The Pharisees in their religious garb, took two articles of dress which were worn by other Jews and emphasized them in a special way until they became their distinctive apparel. One of these was the phylactery. It was a little box of metal, or bands of parchment which was fastened to the hand or forehead by straps. It contained passages of Scripture referring to the Passover and the redemption of the first-born from Egypt. The custom was based on certain Scriptural admonitions (Exodus 13:9, 16). And the Jews still bind them upon their arms and foreheads.²⁴

The other special feature of the Pharisees' dress was the blue fringes placed at the corners of the mantle, as the law of Moses commanded (Numbers 15:37,38; Deuteronomy 22:12). The Pharisees had unusually broad phylacteries, and very long fringes (Matthew 23:5). It was for this proud use of these things without an appreciation of their value, that JESUS condemned them so severely.²⁵

THE DRESS OF CHRIST

How was JESUS CHRIST dressed? The famous artists, who have painted pictures of Him for us, have not always given an accurate view. One writer of the past century has attempted to describe His dress. It is worthy of careful study:

Upon His head He must always have worn the turban, the national headgear, used alike by rich and poor . . . The turban He wore was probably white. It was fastened under the chin by a cord, and at the side fell down to the shoulders and over the tunic. Under His turban He wore His hair rather long*, and His beard uncut. His tunic, the underneath vesture, was of one piece without seam, it was therefore of some value, and had probably been given Him by one of those women who **"ministered unto Him of their substance."**

Over this He wore the talith, loose and flowing. This mantle was not white, for we are told it became white during transfiguration. It was not red, for that was only the military color; it is

possible it was blue, for blue was then very common; or it may have been simply white with brown stripes. In any case, JESUS had at the four corners of this mantle, the ciccith [fringe] . . . He wore sandals on His feet, as we learn from John the Baptist; and when He was traveling, going from place to place, He doubtless wore a girdle around the loins, and carried a stick in His hand.²⁶

***** Jesus did not have long hair, as that would have contradicted His own Word in 1 Corinthians 11 *****

1. James Neil, *Pictured Palestine*, pp. 5, 6.
2. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, pp. 396, 397.
3. Ibid., p. 397.
4. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of CHRIST*, pp. 191, 192.
5. Barrows, op. cit., p. 397.
6. "Outer Tunic," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, Charles R. Barnes, ed., pp. 281-282. See also Barrows, op. cit., pp. 398, 399.
7. "The Girdle," loco cit. (Encyclopedia).
8. Stapfer, op. cit., p. 192.
9. Anis C. Haddad, *Palestine Speaks*, pp. 105, 106 (Anderson, Ind.: The Warner Press, 1936).
10. Ibid., pp. 108, 104.
11. Ibid., p. 108.
12. John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (vol. 1, *An American Commentary on the New Testament*), p. 120. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886.)
13. Stapfer, op. cit., pp. 192, 193.
14. Ibid., p. 198.
15. Ibid., pp. 198, 199.
16. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, pp. 345 and 442.
17. John D. Whiting, "Bedouin Life in Bible Lands," *The National Geographic Magazine*, January, 1937, p. 79.
18. Max Radin, *The Life of the People in Biblical Times*, p. 131 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1929).
19. Thomas Upham, *John's Biblical Archaeology*, p. 141.
20. Stapfer, op. cit., p. 193.
21. John D. Whiting, "Village Life In the Holy Land," *The National Geographic Magazine*, March, 1914, pp. 262-264.
22. Stapfer, op. cit., p. 199.
23. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, pp. 69-71.
24. Stapfer, op. cit., p. 199, 200.
25. Loc. cit.
26. Ibid., pp. 200, 201.

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