

Manners And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER FIVE -

Customs at Mealtime

EASTERN HABITS, connected with the eating of a meal, are such a decided contrast to Western habits, that much care should be given to the study of them, if the many references in the Bible to eating, are to be interpreted accurately.

WASHING OF HANDS BEFORE EATING

Oriental are careful to wash their hands before a meal, but they would think that the Occidental way of washing in the water already made dirty by the hands, to be very untidy and disgraceful. The servant or whoever takes his place, pours water on the hands to be washed as they are held over a basin. Often the basin has a concave cover with holes, so as to allow the dirty water to run through and thus be out of sight. The method of eating without knives, forks, or spoons, makes this washing a necessity.¹

That this method of washing was in vogue in the days of the prophets is seen by the way Elisha was characterized by the king's servants: "**Here is Elisha the son of Shaphat, which poured water on the hands of Elijah**" (II Kings 3:11). Elisha had served as Elijah's servant, and pouring water, so that his master could wash his hands, was an important part of his duties.

When the Pharisees complained against the disciples of JESUS, because they ate bread without washing their hands (Matthew 15:1,2; Mark 7:1-5), it was concerning a lengthy ceremonial washing of hands that they spoke. The Jewish hierarchy of that day had given forth a positive injunction as to exactly how this ablution should be done. It was not a law of Moses but a tradition of the elders. JESUS refused to sanction it as a rule that was binding. *It was not the custom of washing hands before eating that JESUS objected to, but the authority the rabbis claimed to have in telling the people the exact and detailed manner in which it must be done.*²

POSITION WHILE EATING

According to general Arabic custom, the seemly posture while eating is "to sit erect on the floor at the low table, with the legs either folded under the body, or thrown back as in, the act of kneeling"³

Thus in the desert tent of the Bedouin, or in the simple house of the Fellahin, this would be the position of those eating a meal. And we can be sure that this was the posture of the common people of Bible days in most cases. The exception to this rule is the custom of the wealthy, or the

habit of the people on special occasions such as suppers or feasts; and this will be dealt with in a later section. It is easy to imagine Elisha and the sons of the prophets eating in the usual Oriental position, when it says concerning them: "**And the sons of the prophets were sitting before him: and he said unto his servant, Set on the great pot**" (II Kings 4:38).

USE OF TABLE, CHAIRS, AND DISHES

Table. In many cases the Arab custom would seem to indicate to the Westerner that they use no table at all when serving a meal. Actually, a mat spread upon the ground serves the purpose of a table. This is especially true of the tent Arab.⁴

This was the early Semitic table of Old Testament times, for the Hebrew word "*Shool-khawn*," usually translated "table," has as its root meaning, "a skin or leather mat spread on the ground."⁵

With this sort of a table in view, the Psalmist can be understood when he said concerning his enemies, "**Let their table become a snare before them.**" David's meaning would be, "Let their feet become entangled in it, as it is spread on the ground."⁶

If the Arabs use more of a table than this mat, then it is likely to be a polygon stool, no higher than about fourteen inches, and those eating would sit on the floor around this stool.⁷

Chairs. With such an Oriental table in general use, it would follow that Occidental chairs would be largely missing. In regard to making use of chairs in ancient Bible days it has been said: "On ordinary occasions they probably sat or squatted on the floor around a low table, while at meals of more ceremony they sat on chairs or stools."⁸

The scriptural instances of chairs or stools used at mealtime, include Joseph's brothers sitting on seats at a banquet in Egypt (Genesis 43:33); and David's having a seat at the table of King Saul (I Samuel 20:5, 18). Both of these cases are connected with royalty or high position. On ordinary occasions the "chair" used by the vast majority of Israelites was the ground or floor on which would be spread a carpet or a mat.⁹

Dishes. At an Oriental meal the only dishes are those in which the food is placed on the table; there are no dishes given to each one having a part in the meal. Often there is only one dish for the food, and it is usually a tray of basketwork, or a copper dish.¹⁰

JESUS spoke of His betrayer as "**he that dippeth his hand with me in the dish**" (Matthew 26:23; Mark 14:20). In entertaining his guest, Gideon put the meat in a basket, and the broth in a pot (Judges 6:19).

SAYING GRACE AT MEALS

Before the Arabs begin their meal each person repeats after the Master of the house some such a grace as, "In the name of God," or, "Praise Allah," or, "God be praised."¹¹

In the Old Testament era the Jews were in the habit of saying grace at meals, and if a prophet was to be present he was expected to do it for them. Concerning Samuel when Saul was to eat

the sacrifice with him, it was said, "**He doth bless the sacrifice: and afterwards they eat that be bidden**" (I Samuel 9:13). In relating the miracle of JESUS feeding the five thousand John says, "**And Jesus took the loaves and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples . . .**" (John 6:11). And concerning the feeding of the four thousand, Matthew is careful to include the blessing in his description: "**And he took the seven loaves and the fishes, and gave thanks**" (Matthew 15:36).

Dr. Edersheim suggests that CHRIST may have prayed an extemporaneous prayer for grace, or He may have used the formula widely used by the Jews of His day as a mealtime grace. Here is the formula: "Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our GOD, King of the world, who causes to come forth bread from the earth."¹²

Also it was customary for the Jews in those days to have a second prayer of thanks at the end of the meal. Their authority for this was Deuteronomy 8:10: "**When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee.**" In the saying of these graces it was customary for one of the guests to give the thanks in a loud voice, and for the rest to say Amen, or to repeat some of the words of the grace.¹³

USE OF HAND INSTEAD OF KNIFE, FORK, OR SPOON

In general it may be said that the Arabs in eating do not use knives, plates, or napkins which are considered so essential in the West. They say: "What does a man want of a spoon when GOD has given him so many fingers?" Sheets of bread, about as thick as heavy flannel; take the place of spoons or forks to some extent. A piece from this bread is broken off and shaped so as to put some of the food on it.¹⁴

They use this bread to scoop up any partially liquid dish, such as soups, sauces, or gravies. Each torn off piece of bread that thus serves as a spoon is eaten along with the food it contains.¹⁵

Meat is usually served in a single large dish and is eaten with the fingers. Broth is served in a separate dish and it is used to moisten the bread. This method of eating is actually not as untidy as might be supposed.¹⁸

The invitation Boaz gave to Ruth to eat with his workers, indicates that these same customs must have been in operation in those days: "**And Boaz said unto her, At mealtime come thou hither, and eat of the bread, and dip thy morsel in the vinegar**" (Ruth 2:14). And at the last supper JESUS said to His disciples, "**He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me**" (Matthew 26:23). Furthermore, He spoke of dipping a choice portion of the meat called the sop into the dish (John 13:26). More will be said of this under the section dealing with suppers and banquets. Suffice it to say, that most of the Oriental customs of today in regard to eating date back, not only to the days of our Saviour, but also to the Old Testament era.

WASHING AFTER THE MEAL

After a typical Oriental meal, washing the hands again is of course essential. If there is a servant, he is the one to bring in the pitcher of water and basin, and the water is poured over the hands of those who have eaten the meal. A napkin is placed over the shoulder so that the hands may be

dried. They do this for each other if there is no servant to do it for them.¹⁷

That this method of pouring water to wash hands was used in ancient times has already been seen concerning the washing of hands before eating.

1. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, p. 101.
2. Edwin C. Bissell, *Biblical Antiquities*, p. 81.
3. Abraham Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, p. 225.
4. Selah Merrill, *East of the Jordan*, pp. 480, 481.
5. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 1020. (New York: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1906).
6. "Table," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, Charles R. Barnes, ed., p. 1078.
7. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. III, p. 75.
8. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 413.
9. Thomas Upham, *Jahn's Biblical Archaeology*, p. 156.
10. Thomson, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 75.
11. Rice, op. cit., p. 102.
12. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of JESUS the Messiah*, Vol. I, p. 684.
13. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of CHRIST*, p. 184.
14. Merrill, op. cit., pp. 480, 481.
15. Rice, op. cit., p. 103.
16. Bissell, op. cit., p. 80.
17. Thomson, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 78

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