

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER 24 -

The Oriental Town or City

WALLS

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CITY AND VILLAGE, AS TO WALLS. In early Old Testament times the villages were smaller places of abode without walls around them, whereas the cities or towns were larger places that had walls around them. The Mosaic Law made such a distinction: "**If a man sell a dwelling house in a walled city**" (Leviticus 25:29). "**But the houses of the villages which have no wall round about them**" (Leviticus 25:31). The villages were often located near a fortified city upon which they were more or less dependent. Thus the city was the metropolis of the villages. We often read in the Bible of "**cities and their villages**," Some speak of the expression: "cities and their daughters," indicating a mother-city, and her dependent villages surrounding her (cf. Joshua 15:45 and 17:11).¹

Walls a part of city fortifications. In Bible times most cities were walled and fortified for protection against an enemy. Those living in a city without walls would be interested in having walls built for them. Often when the Bible says that a certain character built a city, what is meant is not that a new site was located and a new city was built, but rather that a city already inhabited was supplied with walls entirely around its confines.²

It was thus that Solomon built "**Bethhoron the upper, and Beth-horon the nether, fenced cities, with walls, gates, and bars**" (II Chronicles 8:5).

GATES

Character of gates. The gates of an Oriental city were of course connected with the walls; nevertheless, they were in a sense a structure by themselves. They were usually made of wood or stone, or wood that had been armored with metal. The Psalmist speaks of gates of brass (copper), and gates of iron (Psalm 107:16). Often they were two-leaved (Isaiah 45:1), and were provided with heavy locks and bars (I Samuel 23:7).

Sometimes a city or town had two walls and therefore two gates with a space between them. A sentinel was stationed in the tower of the first gate. When David was at Mahanaim awaiting the result of the battle with Absalom, Scripture says: "**And David sat between the two gates: and the watchman went up to the roof over the gate unto the wall, and lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold a man running alone**" (II Samuel 18:24). This space between the gates was used for many purposes.³

Gateway as a meeting-place. The gateways of ancient walled cities and the open spaces near them, were popular meeting places for the people. They seemed like large halls that could care for great assemblies of people. Being vaulted, they provided a cool place to meet on a hot day.⁴

Variety of uses for gates. These city gates had many uses. **"The openings of the gates" are described by Proverbs as "the chief place of concourse"** (Proverbs 1:21). The city gate was used as a public gathering place for the giving of an address or proclamation. Concerning King Hezekiah it was said: **"And he set captains of war over the people, and gathered them together to him in the street of the gate of the city, and spake comfortably to them"** (II Chronicles 32:6).

David speaks of his persecutors gossiping about him at the city gates (Psalm 69:12). Mordecai sat in the king's gate in order to attract attention from the sovereign (Esther 2:21). The prophets often preached their sermons in the gates of the city. Thus the LORD told Jeremiah, **"Go and stand in the gate of the children of the people, whereby the kings of Judah come in, and by the which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem"** (Jeremiah 17:19).

City gates a place for holding court. One of the most important uses of the gates of an ancient city was for holding court. Stone seats were provided for the judges. Thus Lot sat in the gate as a judge (Genesis 19:1). The city gates of those days would be like our modern courthouse. It was there that Boaz went to redeem the estate of Elimelech and thus receive Ruth to be his wife (Ruth 4:1).

The prophet Amos preached to Israel to **"establish judgment in the gate"** (Amos 5:15). The Mosaic law recognized the city gates as the place of justice: **"Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the Lord thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment"** (Deuteronomy 16:18). Thus it can be seen that one of the most important places in an ancient city was the gates of that city.⁵

Symbolic references to the city gates. The Bible often refers to the gates of the city in a symbolic way. Sometimes the gates are used to represent the city as a whole, as when the LORD said to Abraham, **"Thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies"** (Genesis 22: 17). The Psalmist was no doubt thinking of the temple gates when he said: **"Open to me the gates of righteousness"** (Psalm 118:19). It is customary for the city gates to be closed at sunset, and John alludes to this by way of contrast in his description of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:25).

TOWERS

The Oriental city has had two types of towers located in it.

First was the tower constructed as a part of the city wall. At this point the wall was built higher and served as a fortification. The approach of an enemy could be sighted from here, and weapons hurled down upon men who attempted to take the city. Almost every gate of any consequence would have a tower over it. Then towers were often built where the wall turned a corner. These were called "corner towers." King Uzziah made use of such towers: **"And he made in**

Jerusalem engines, invented by skilful men, to be on the towers and upon the battlements to shoot arrows and great stones withal" (II Chronicles 26: 15).

Second was a citadel tower or fortress which was built apart from the wall and on higher ground than the rest of the city, and thus served to defend the city. The tower of Shechem referred to in the story of Abimelech was doubtless this sort of tower (Judges 9:46).

STREETS

The words used in the Hebrew Bible for streets would indicate that there were three varieties of them.

- The usual street was long, narrow, and winding (Joshua 2:19 etc.).
- Those near the city gates or those in front of a public building, or where one crossed another were broad squares (Nehemiah 8:1).
- A third kind was the short street more like our alley (Proverbs 7:8).

As a rule, Eastern streets today are narrow, and everything would indicate that they were narrow in ancient times. In the cities some of them are paved (usually with stone), but in the villages they are seldom paved. David said, "**I did cast them out as the dirt in the streets**" (Psalm 18:42). Isaiah refers to the "**mire of the streets**" (Isaiah 10:6).

The city streets usually paved in Bible days would include those connected with the temple or some public building. The Oriental appreciates greatly the description of Heaven, "**wherein the streets are paved with pure gold as it were transparent glass**" (Revelation 21:21).⁶

THE MARKET PLACE

The market place is not only a place for the purchase of goods, it is also a place for the people to gather for many other purposes. It is one of the most popular places in an Oriental city. (See section on "Merchants" p. 221 ff. especially: The merchant's place of business.)

The market place as a social gathering place. Business transactions are usually preceded by a social visit with the customer. The important people as well as the ordinary people love to come there and meet their friends and greet them in true Oriental fashion, which always takes much time. JESUS said to his disciples: "**Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the market places**" (Mark 12:38). Discussions of various kinds are entered into at the market. The Apostle Paul took advantage of such an opportunity when he was at Athens. "**Therefore disputed he . . . in the market [place] daily with them that met with him**" (Acts 17:17). The market place was an ideal location for heralding the gospel.⁷

The heavy-laden porter in the market place. In many Eastern cities, carriages or carts are not allowed to enter the city gates and carry loads to the market place. These loads of produce are carried by porters. These men are, as a rule, taken from the poorest of men. What a sight it is to see them laden down with tremendous burdens on their backs! Sometimes two of these porters will stand back to back with their loads locked together and thus rest their tired bodies for a time before proceeding on their way.⁸

JESUS condemned the lawyers of his day with words that doubtless refer to their treatment of these porters. **"Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers"** (Luke 11:46). Perhaps Paul was thinking of porters when he said to the Galatians, **"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ"** (Galatians 6:2). And JESUS must have had in mind especially the poor porters of his day so laden down with burdens, when he gave that most gracious invitation, **"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"** (Matthew 11:28).

Children in the market place. In the Orient children always love to go to the market place, where so many interesting things are happening. They watch with keen interest everything that happens there. They may play pranks, and of course they have their games. JESUS used a crowd of such youngsters as an illustration in one of his sermons. When the suggestion was made by some of them that they "play wedding," and later that they "play funeral," the rest of them balked at both suggestions. JESUS said: **"But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented"** (Matthew 11:16,17).⁹

Laborers in the market place. In the Eastern city men who want employment stand in groups in the market place, waiting for someone to hire them. It was here that the man in the parable of JESUS went to secure workmen for his vineyard. **"And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market place, and said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard"** (Matthew 20:3, 4). These men do not apply for work as is done in the Occident, rather they wait in the market place for some man to come and hire them.¹⁰

Rulers in the market place. At certain times members of the city council will be found there, and they will listen to the case of those who are in trouble. What is done there is of course unofficial because the real court is at the city gates, or as we would say, the courthouse.¹¹

Paul and Silas were taken before the magistrates in Philippi: **"They caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the market place unto the rulers"** (Acts 16:19).

PRESENCE OF BEGGARS

In Eastern cities there are usually many beggars. In Old Testament times the idea of a beggar going from door to door to ask for alms was little known among the Jews. The law of Moses provided for the needy by requiring that the Jews purposely leave some of the harvest for the poor. Also mortgaged property was returned to the original owner at the year of jubilee. However, beggars were not entirely unknown, for Hannah speaks of them in her song of thanksgiving (1 Samuel 2:8). The Psalmist promised that beggary would be the lot of the wicked (Psalm 109:10), and also that the righteous would be kept from the necessity for it (Psalm 37:25)¹²

In New Testament times beggars were usually the blind, maimed, or diseased. Thus blind Bartimeus **"sat by the highway side begging"** (Mark 10:46). The impotent man **"was carried,**

whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple" (Acts 3:2). The beggar Lazarus, who was diseased, was laid at the gate of "**a certain rich man**" (Luke 16:19, 20).

Thus did these needy ones ask alms of those who passed their way. Today in the East a poor sick man is sometimes placed in a booth alongside the door of a rich man's house, and lives by means of the gifts of those who pass by him.¹³

1. See Edwin C. Bissell, *Biblical Antiquities*, p. 31.
2. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, pp. 187, 188.
3. Bissell, op. cit., p. 32.
4. Freeman, op. cit., p. 20.
5. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 499. See also, "Gate," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, pp. 297, 298.
6. See Bissell, op. cit., pp. 32-34.
7. See Abraham Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, pp. 263, 264.
8. G. Robinson Lees, *Village Life in Palestine*, pp. 184-187. For photograph of "porter" carrying burden in modern times, see article by Major Edward Keith-Roach, "The Pageant of Jerusalem," *The National Geographic Magazine*, December, 1927, p. 646.
9. Rihbany, op. cit., p. 264.
10. Lees, op. cit., p. 196.
11. Ibid., p. 193.
12. "Beggar." *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 131.
13. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, pp. 248, 249.

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