

# Manners And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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## CHAPTER SEVEN -

### The Sacred Duty of Hospitality

#### ORIENTAL ATTITUDES ON ENTERTAINING A GUEST

##### EATING ALONE DISLIKED

IT IS A PART of Oriental etiquette to want to share hospitality with others. After a meal has been prepared, an Arab has been heard to call out three times from a high spot in the neighborhood, inviting men to come and partake of the meal. These men of the desert do not like to eat their meal alone.<sup>1</sup> The patriarch Job felt that way about it in his day: "**Or have eaten my morsel myself alone, and the fatherless hath not eaten thereof**" (Job. 31:17).

Guests believed to be sent by GOD. These men of the East believe that a person who becomes their guest is sent to them by GOD. Thus their hospitality becomes a sacred duty. When one such a host entertained Westerners, he was so happy that he wept tears of joy that "Heaven had sent him guests."<sup>2</sup>

When Abraham entertained three strangers who proved to be angels, he showed much the same attitude. His enthusiasm in receiving the guests would indicate his belief, that those he was to entertain were sent to him by the LORD. It is said that he "**ran to meet**" the three men, that he "**hastened into the tent unto Sarah**" to get her to make ready food, that he "**ran unto the herd,**" and that he "**fetcht a calf,**" and that he "**hasted to dress it**" (Genesis 18:2-7).

##### KINDS OF GUESTS

Friends as guests. In the East a friend is always welcome to receive hospitality. The Romans of New Testament times had a token of hospitality between two friends, which consisted of a tile of wood or stone, which was divided in half. Each person wrote his name on one of the two pieces, and then exchanged that piece with the other person. These were often kept and handed down from father to son. To produce the counterpart of one of these pieces would guarantee the hospitality of a real friend.<sup>3</sup>

The Book of Revelation no doubt refers to this custom in one of the promises to overcomers: "**And will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written**" (Revelation 2:17).

Strangers as guests. There is an Oriental proverb that says, "Every stranger is an invited guest." The Bedouin Arab of today, like Abraham of old, will sit in the entrance way of his tent, in order

to be on the watch for stranger guests (Genesis 18:1).<sup>4</sup> The inspired apostle gave command concerning hospitality to this type of guest: "**Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares**" (Hebrews 13:2). When Paul exhorted the Roman believers to be "**given to hospitality**" (Romans 12:13), he was referring to the same thing, for the Greek word he used for hospitality, "*fil-ox-en-ee-ah*," means, "love to strangers."<sup>5</sup> (See also "entertaining fellow-believers in N.T. times," Chapter 13).

Enemies as guests. One remarkable feature of Oriental hospitality is that sometimes an enemy is received as a guest, and as long as he remains in that relationship, he is perfectly safe and is treated as a friend.<sup>6</sup> There are certain Oriental tribes of tent-dwellers who have the rule that an enemy who has "once dismounted and touched the rope of a single tent," is safe.<sup>7</sup>

### PROVISION MADE FOR GUESTS

Among tent-dwellers. If a guest is entertained by one who lives in a tent, there is no separate place provided, nor would it be expected. Usually, the first section of tent within the entrance is the regular guest apartment, which serves as dining room and sleeping quarters. The men eat with their guest and sleep with him.<sup>8</sup> It was in this guest-apartment of his tent, that Abraham entertained his angel guests, when Sarah in the adjoining woman's apartment, overheard what was said (Genesis 18:1-10).

In the villages and cities. If a village was not provided with a community guest room, then a guest would be entertained in one of the houses, and since most of these had but a single room, that one room would serve as reception room, dining room, and sleeping quarters. This room would be much like the reception apartment of the tent.

But in many of the villages and cities, a public guest chamber is provided. The food for guests entertained here is supplied by the families providing the room. Often a servant is hired to care for the room. The guest-room may be an upper room, or in summer, the shade of a large tree might serve as the guest-room. This room is the social gathering place for the men of the village. Women are not allowed in these guest chambers. So, if a man has his family with him when traveling, he does not go to this public reception room, but waits until someone invites them into his house.<sup>9</sup>

The Book of Judges tells of a Levite traveling with his concubine and a servant, and how he was thus entertained by an old man (Judges 19:15-21). As many families sleep on the housetop in summer weather, a guest is often given that place for the night.<sup>10</sup>

Saul was entertained overnight on the roof top and Samuel called to him early in the morning (I Samuel 9:26).

In the cities or where there are houses of more than one room, built around a courtyard, the guest room is usually at the end of the court. As a rule this room is more open than other family rooms. This would correspond to the raised divan in some one-room houses, which serves as the place of honor for guests. In large houses a well-furnished room is provided near the door, so as not to disturb the family. If there is an upper room, a distinguished guest is often accommodated there.<sup>11</sup>

The man of GOD was provided such a room as a place of retirement (II Kings 4:10).

### **CUSTOMS WHEN A GUEST ENTERS A HOME**

Bowing. When a guest is received into an Orient home, bowing between the guests and host is quite apt to take place. In Western lands such bowing would be of the head only, but in the East there is a more expressive custom of saluting with the head erect and the body a little inclined forward, by raising the hand to the heart, mouth, and forehead. The symbolic meaning of this action is to say something like this: "My heart, my voice, my brain are all at your service."<sup>12</sup>

But those who are used to this custom on many occasions enter into a more complete bow. They do not wait to do this only for royalty, but when they want to express thanks for a favor, or supplicate for a favor, and at many other times of meeting they often fall on their knees, and then incline the body touching the ground with their head, and kissing the lower part of the other person's clothing, or his feet, or even the dust at his feet. To those not acquainted with such manners, it would seem that one person was worshiping the other like he would worship GOD; but ordinarily, worship of this sort is not involved in the action.<sup>13</sup>

Cornelius is said to have worshiped Peter: "**And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him**" (Acts 10:25). Of course Peter rejected this lest it might involve divine worship. Concerning the enemies of the Philadelphian church, the Book of Revelation records these words of our LORD: "**I will make them of the synagogue of Satan . . . I will make them to come and worship before thy feet**" (Revelation 3:9). The Revisers have a marginal note in explanation of the word "worship" in both of these Scriptures: "The Greek word denotes an act of reverence, whether paid to a creature or to the Creator." There are many examples in the Bible of this Eastern custom of bowing in varying degrees of intensity (cf. Genesis 18:2,3; 23:7, 12; Matthew 18:26; Revelation 19:10).

Greeting. Upon entering an Arab house or a Bedouin tent, the greetings used are something like this: The host will say:

"Salam alakum" which means, "Peace be on you." The guest will respond with the words: "Wa alakum es-salam," meaning, "And on you, peace."<sup>14</sup>

Knowing that these Arabic customs date back for centuries, how significant then are the instructions of JESUS to his disciples, who were to be entertained in certain homes: "**And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house, and if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again**" (Luke 10:5, 6).

Kissing. Guests in Holy Land homes expect to be kissed as they enter. When entertained by a Pharisee, JESUS commented on his reception by saying to him, "**Thou gavest me no kiss**" (Luke 7:45). The difference between the Oriental and the Occidental way of greeting each other is made clear by one who lived in Palestine many years.

Here men shake hands when they meet and greet, but in Palestine, instead of doing this, they place their right hand on their friend's left shoulder and kiss his right cheek, and then reversing

the action, place their left hand on his right shoulder, and kiss his left cheek. In this country men never kiss each other's faces; there it may be constantly seen. But how the practice lights up the numerous allusions in Scripture which are naturally lost to a Westerner! Once grasp the fact that their kiss answers to our hearty handshake between friends and social equals, and how much - how very much becomes plain that was before obscured<sup>15</sup>

Scriptural examples of men kissing men might be multiplied. Jacob kissed his father (Genesis 27:27). Esau kissed Jacob (Genesis 33:4). Joseph kissed his brothers (Genesis 45:15). Jacob kissed the sons of Joseph (Genesis 48:10). Aaron kissed Moses (Exodus 4:27). Moses kissed Jethro (Exodus 18:7). David and Jonathan kissed each other (I Samuel 20:41). The Father kissed the Prodigal (Luke 15:20). The elders of Miletus kissed Paul (Acts 20:37). This custom is frequent in the Orient in modern times.<sup>16</sup>

Removing the shoes. Upon entering a house to be entertained, a guest does as all Orientals would do, he takes off his boots, shoes, or slippers before entering a room. This becomes necessary since they sit on a mat rug, or divan, with their feet beneath them, and shoes would soil the couch and the clothes: and would also make a very uncomfortable seat. The idea of defilement from the shoes led to the custom of removing the shoes upon entering sacred places.<sup>17</sup>

Thus at the burning bush the LORD told Moses, "**Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground**" (Exodus 3:5).

Washing the feet. After bowing, greeting, and kissing, the Eastern guest is offered water for washing his feet. Wearing of sandals would naturally necessitate foot washing, but it is often done when shoes have been worn. A servant will assist the guest by pouring the water upon his feet over a copper basin, rubbing the feet with his hands, and wiping them with a napkin.<sup>18</sup>

When JESUS and his disciples were gathered together, the Saviour took the place of the servant, and washed the feet of His disciples, who themselves had disdained to do such a humble task. John tells us that He "**laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel**" (John 13:4, 5). Paul gave as a recommendation of a widow: "**If she have washed the saints' feet**" (I Timothy 5:10). This custom was also common in Old Testament days (Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; 1 Samuel 25:41, etc.).

Anointing the head with oil. The custom of anointing guests with oil is an ancient one among nations of the East. Olive oil alone was often used, but sometimes it was mixed with spices. Simon the Pharisee was accused of lack of hospitality because he failed to anoint JESUS (Luke 7:46). This would indicate the custom was quite common in the days of the Gospel accounts. David immortalized the custom when he wrote his shepherd psalm and exclaimed: "Thou anointest my head with oil" (Psalm 23:5)

Travelers in the Orient in recent times have discovered that this practice of anointing still exists in some quarters.<sup>19</sup>

## CARING FOR A GUEST AFTER ENTRANCE

The guest given a drink of water. One of the first things done for a guest who has been received, is to offer him a drink of water. The doing of this is recognizing him of being worthy of peaceful reception. Thus to give a drink of water is the simplest way to pledge friendship with a person. When Eliezer, Abraham's servant, sought a welcome, he did so by requesting of the maiden who came to the well to draw water (Genesis 24:17, 18), "**Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher.**" And when she made answer, "**Drink, my lord,**" it was an indication that he was welcome to be a guest at the nearby home. With this significance attached to a drink of water, the promise of JESUS takes on new meaning (Mark 9:41), "**Whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.**"<sup>20</sup>

The guest served a meal. The sharing of food in the East is a very special act of hospitality. It means far more than it means in the West. It is a way of making a covenant of peace and fidelity.<sup>21</sup>

When Abimelech wanted a permanent covenant with Isaac, the confirmation of that covenant came when Isaac "**made them a feast, and they did eat and drink**" (Genesis 26:30).

An Oriental considers as sacred the expression, "bread and salt." When it is said, "There is bread and salt between us" it is the same as saying, "We are bound together by a solemn covenant." A foe will not "taste the salt" of his adversary unless he is ready to be reconciled to him.<sup>22</sup>

In some rural districts of Syria today there is a custom that a person on a mission of importance will not eat bread and salt of his host until first the purpose of his errand is made known. They think that the covenant of "bread and salt" must not be entered into until the attitude of the host is known regarding the mission of the guest.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Abraham's servant refused to eat at the table of Laban, until first he made known his mission of seeking a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:33).

Dr. Thomson, Syrian missionary, was once guest in a Bedouin sheik's tent. The host dipped a bit of bread in some grape molasses and gave it to the missionary for him to eat. Then he said to him, "We are now brethren. There is bread and salt between us. We are brothers and allies."<sup>24</sup>

When the Gibeonites sought a covenant of friendship with Israel in the days of Joshua, it was said that the Israelites "**took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD**" (Joshua 9:14). Once having entered into this covenant, Israel was bound to keep it.

The guest made lord of the house. An Eastern proverb runs thus: "The guest while in the house is its lord." This is a true statement of the spirit of the hospitality of the East. One of the first greetings a Palestinian host will give his guest is to say, "*Hadtha beita*" i.e., "This is your house." This saying is repeated many times. Thus actually the guest during his stay is master of the house. And whenever the guest asks a favor, in granting it the host will say, "You do me honor."<sup>25</sup>

There must have been the same attitude between host and guest in the days of Lot. The host was considered to be a servant, and the guest was lord. Thus Lot spoke of himself and his guests:

**"Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house"** (Genesis 19:2).

Privacy not expected by the guest. An Oriental guest would think he was ill-treated if he were left alone at any time. He does not need privacy at night, because he sleeps with his clothes on. He is happy to have others sleep with him. If a sleeping place is assigned to him in an upper room, then some of the family sons sleep alongside of him that he might have their companionship. He would feel he was being deserted if treated the way he would be if entertained in the West, just as a Westerner would feel oppressed by the constant attentions of an Oriental host.<sup>26</sup>

### **PROTECTING A GUEST**

In the lands of the East, when a host accepts a man to be his guest he thereby agrees at whatever the cost to defend his guest from possible enemies during the time of his entertainment. Dr. Cyrus Hamlin, an American missionary in the East, was entertained by a governor. The host took a piece of roast mutton and handed it to the missionary, saying as he did so, "Now do you know what I have done?" In answering his own question he went on to say: "By that act I have pledged you every drop of my blood, that while you are in my territory no evil shall come to you. For that space of time we are brothers."<sup>27</sup>

The Psalmist felt utterly secure, though he had enemies close by him, when he knew that GOD was his host. **"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies"** (Psalm 23:5).

### **THE ABUSE OF HOSPITALITY**

Among Eastern nations it is considered a terrible sin indeed for anybody who has accepted hospitality from a host to turn against him in the doing of an evil deed. This feeling goes back to very ancient times and is often alluded to by various writers.<sup>28</sup>

The prophet Obadiah refers to this sin: **"The men that were at peace with thee have deceived thee . . . They that eat thy bread have laid a wound under thee"** (Obadiah 7). The Psalmist David speaks of this terrible evil, **"Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me"** (Psalm 41:9). And the LORD JESUS quotes this very passage from the Psalm as having its fulfillment in the treachery of Judas the betrayer, who ate at the same table with Him (John 13:18).

### **RENEWING A BROKEN COVENANT**

Among oriental people, when a covenant of friendship has been once broken, it may be renewed by those involved once again eating together. After His resurrection, JESUS ate at least three times with various disciples of His, and this was no doubt done in order to renew the covenant, which had been broken by their disloyalty to Him during the days of His passion<sup>29</sup> (cf. Luke 24:30, 41-43; John 21:12, 13).

In the Old Testament we have an example of this when Jacob and Laban were in strained relationship. They restored their friendship by eating together, as well as entering into an oath

(Genesis 31:53,54).

### THE DEPARTURE OF A GUEST

When the time comes for a guest to depart, a Syrian host will do his best to delay the departure. He will beg him to stay for one more meal, or to wait until the morrow before he leaves. In Judges nineteen is the finest example in the Bible of this custom of delaying the guest. The host said to the guest: "**Comfort thine heart with a morsel of bread, and afterward go your way.**" After the meal he urged him, "**Tarry all night.**" The next day the guest was persuaded to tarry until afternoon. But when urged to stay over another night, the guest decided it was time to insist on departing, which he did. This is typical Oriental procedure (Judges 19:5-10).<sup>30</sup>

When a guest departs, the usual salutation is as follows. The guest will say: "With your permission." And the host will make answer, "Depart in peace."<sup>31</sup>

Isaac must have used just such a salutation when Abimelech and his men departed, after having been entertained by Isaac at a meal. Scripture says: "**And they departed from him in peace**" (Genesis 26:31).

When a host desires to do special honor to his departing guest, he will walk with him out of the town a distance. Sometimes this walk will last for an hour, and will come to an end only after the guest has urged his host that he need not go any farther.<sup>32</sup>

Thus Abraham walked with his departing guests "**to bring them on the way**" (Genesis 18:16).

1. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 214.
2. H. Clay Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life*, p. 97.
3. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, p. 82.
4. Trumbull, op. cit., pp. 75, 77.
5. Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 654. (New York: American Book Company, 1889.)
6. Rice, op. cit., p. 82.
7. Trumbull, op. cit., p. 115.
8. Selah Merrill, *East of the Jordan*, pp. 480, 481.
9. John D. Whiting, "Village Life in the Holy Land," *The National Geographic Magazine*, March, 1914, pp. 253-257. This article is illustrated with numerous photographs showing manners and customs of the Palestinian Arabs.
10. Rice, op. cit., p. 253.
11. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, pp. 93, 94.
12. James Neil, *Pictured Palestine*, pp. 64, 65.
13. Ibid., pp. 65-67.
14. John D. Whiting, "Bedouin Life in Bible Lands," *The National Geographic Magazine*, January, 1937, p. 72.
15. Neil, op. cit., p. 68.
16. Freeman, op. cit., p. 36.
17. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. III, p. 85.
18. Rice, op. cit., p. 88.

19. Freeman, op. cit., pp. 219, 220.
20. Trumbull, op. cit., pp. 106, 108, 112.
21. Ibid., p. 108.
22. Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian CHRIST*, p. 191.
23. Ibid., pp. 191, 192.
24. Trumbull, op. cit., pp. 110, 111.
25. Milton B. Lindberg, *A Guest in a Palestinian Home*, a pamphlet, pp. 6, 7.
26. Mackie, op. cit., p. 93.
27. Trumbull, op. cit., p. 110.
28. Freeman, op. cit., p. 223.
29. George H. Scherer, *The Eastern Color of the Bible*, p. 66.
30. Cf. Rihbany, op. cit., pp. 218, 219.
31. John D. Whiting, "Bedouin Life in Bible Lands," *The National Geographic Magazine*, January, 1937, p. 72.
32. Rihbany, op. cit., p. 221.

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