

Strange Scriptures

That Perplex the Western Mind

Clarified in the Light of Customs and Conditions in Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

PEASANT MEN

“Take It for Nothing” (Genesis 23:11-16).

When Ephron the Hittite offer the field to Abraham as a burying place for Sarah, he said, “**I give it thee**”; but, doubtless, with just as much thought of doing so as the Arab dealers of today, when they say, “Take it for nothing.” And the Hittite finally charged Abraham far more than the land was worth.

Today, in the Eastern lands, when a customer prices an article, the dealer will usually reply, “Take it for nothing, I shall be happy to make you a present of it.” But by this they mean that they expect a present in return of very much greater value.

If you desire to buy anything, the best way is to push it to one side and seem indifferent about it. Then the seller is almost sure to name a price somewhat near an honest value. They always keep the best goods in the background, and only bring them out when they see they cannot sell you the inferior ones.

Genesis 23:15: **“And the Hittite said to Abraham, The land is worth four hundred shekels of silver; what is that betwixt thee and me? bury thy dead, I will give it thee.”**

“Go to the Ant, Thou Sluggard” (Proverbs 6:6-11).

Laziness appears to have been a very prevalent vice in these countries from days of old.

Solomon appears to have more to say about this subject than any other. His rebuke of the sluggard drawn from the habits of the ant is very suggestive. Solomon so intensely disliked laziness, that he expressed his dislike of it in many ways.

“The slothful man roasteth not that which he took in hunting.”

The most good-for-nothing creature may be roused by the excitement of the hunt, but is too indolent to roast the game afterwards.

“The soul of the sluggard desireth, but hath nothing.”

He coveteth greedily all day, but his hands refuse to labour.

“He will not plow by reason of the cold,” is true today. Plowing and sowing cannot be carried on until the winter rains commence; therefore he neglects to sow his fields.

We have known farmers go out to sow and plow, but the rain and cold proved to be more than they cared for, so they retreat into their mud huts, kindle a fire, and doze away the time by the side of it. Nor can you rouse him, — as Solomon said, **“A little more sleep, a little more folding of the hands.”**

It is said that these lazy men will not turn over on their pillow, even if muddy water is leaking from the roof into their eyes.

Proverbs, the twenty-fourth chapter, is a perfect description of the poor fellahs today. **“I went by the field of the slothful, — and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall was broken down.”** And the owners are too indolent to do anything about it.

Solomon surely knew the peasants of his day — and of these days too. The peasant men desire to do nothing but smoke, sleep and gossip. The women do the work and carry the burdens, mostly.

“Go to the ant, thou sluggard” — and learn her secrets of life.

“They Make Broad Their Phylacteries” (Matthew 23:5).

“All their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments.”

In Exodus 13:9, 10, 16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:18-21, we find the Israelites commanded to bind the law upon their heads and on their hands, a reminder that they must live holy lives.

As a symbolic witness of this the orthodox Jew even today, binds small leather boxes on his forehead and arm. These are cubic in shape, made of leather specially prepared from the skin of a clean animal. The one for the forehead has on the outside the Hebrew letter shin, the initial of Shaddai — Almighty. Inside it is divided into four compartments, each of which contains a piece of parchment, inscribed with one of the above passages from the Pentateuch.

The phylactery for the arm has only one compartment, and has all those passages of Scripture on a small scroll inserted.

An expert prepares these phylacteries, and the very slightest mistake from the rules renders them worthless. They are fastened to the forehead and arm with leather straps with knots tied in a certain pattern.

The young Hebrew wears these for the first time when he comes to the age of Bar-Mitzvah, twelve or thirteen years old. He then goes through a ceremony, and is considered a man, responsible for himself.

Jesus at the age of twelve must have gone through this ceremony, and after this He was found in the temple hearing the doctors and asking them questions.

The wearing of phylacteries externally was too often a symbol with no reality back of it, and Christ rebuked the Jews for this outward show. "**All their works they do to be seen of men,**" was what Jesus said to them.

'The Sabbath Was Made for Man' (Mark 2:27).

Christ said, "**The sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath.**"

The weekly day of rest was one of God's beautiful plans for man's mental and physical rest from labor, and a day to especially cultivate his spiritual nature, a day for fellowship with God.

It began at sunset on Friday and ended at sunset on Saturday.

When Christ was on earth, man had a tendency to observe the sabbath in letter rather than in spirit. However, even then it had its noble side. The Jew dressed himself in his festal garments: he lighted his sabbath lamp: the table was spread with special food and the men all went to the synagogue.

The work was done the day before so that no work that could be avoided was done on the sabbath. It was a beautiful day of worship and rest.

Then the rabbis feared that the day would not be properly observed, so they made laws which in course of time so completely destroyed the purpose of the day, that to keep all these laws that the rabbis had made, became very much harder and more exacting than the labor of the working day. Thus was God's beautiful day for meditation, worship and rest brought to nought.

One can scarcely believe that leaders could make such absurd regulations, a few of which are:

- The greatest burden a person might carry on the sabbath day must be less than the weight of a dried fig.

- They must not begin anything new just before the sabbath, lest the sabbath should find one in the midst of the task.
- A scribe must not carry his pen, or a tailor a needle on the sabbath.
- A woman was not allowed to have a pin in her clothing, she was not allowed to look in a mirror, because she might see a white hair and be tempted to remove it, which would be labor.
- The rabbis forbade them to cut their nails.

And many, many other absurd regulations could be mentioned which made the sabbath a very hard and unhappy day.

It had become a day of form and so lacked spiritual significance.

Back of all these absurd rules there was a genuine piety and a real desire to observe the sabbath day as God had planned it.

This attitude toward the sabbath was very distasteful to the Son of God, because for Him all of God's laws were necessary for man's highest good, and were made to meet a real need.

The sabbath was made for man, not only for the physical man, but for the most important part of him, the spiritual.

“A Writer's Inkhorn by His Side” (Ezekiel 9:2).

“And one man among them was clothed with linen, with a writer's inkhorn by his side.”

This is a description of the scribe as you see him today in Bible Lands and as he appeared in Bible days.

Customs have changed so little in many ways since Ezekiel lived there.

Very few people can read or write yet, so the scribe is needed and is a very important person in a city or town. Indeed in many villages he may be the only person who can read or write a letter.

The scribe carries an inkhorn in his girdle or leather belt. The inkhorn is usually about ten inches long by two inches wide, made of wood or metal. It is really a long tube and holds the wooden pens. In the upper end of this case the inkstand is attached.

The ink is made of powdered charcoal, lampblack, or soot, mixed with gum and water. It is exceedingly black and would never fade out, but could very easily be washed off the parchment with water.

You see today the scribes writing letters for people or reading a letter for them, near the gates, or on street corners.

“He Wrote on the Ground” (John 8:6).

“Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground.”

This story of Jesus writing in the sand appears picturesque, unusual.

Instead, it was the common, universal habit or practice. You visit a native camp or village today and you will see Bedouins sitting idle, scribbling words or sentences with their finger or a camel-wand.

Often when they desire to describe something to you they will draw the whole plan in the sand with their finger. Sometimes in bargaining for sheep or goats all the computations will be made by writing in the sand. It has always been and is today a common practice.

“Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground.”

A White Stone (Revelation 2:17).

“I will give him a white stone.”

This Scripture makes one think of another custom. If a man sins against a young woman of his tribe or of another tribe, he will be put to death. However, sometimes the people accept “blood” money and the culprit goes free. Always afterwards he lives in a white tent, or rides a white camel, and has a large white stone in front of his tent.

These are to show that no one has any right to harm him; he is forgiven; the price is paid and it is with him now as though he had never committed the sin.

“I will give him a white stone.”

Forgiveness, vindication, or a proof of forgiveness is shown by the white stone.

Little Children (II Kings 2:23).

As Elisha went up to Bethel **“there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him.”**

The Hebrew word here does not mean little children, any more than does the word used by the Lord in John 21:5. **“Then Jesus said unto them, Children, have ye any meat?”**

Both terms have a general meaning. The “**children**” who mocked Elisha and were punished so severely, were no doubt young men.

“**Hands of the Masters**” (Psalm 123:2).

“**As the eyes of servants look unto their masters, and the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress: so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God.**”

In Palestine a servant is summoned, not by calling, but by clapping the hands, and, to show what you require of them, you gesture, but do not speak a word.

In a country where life is simple, this is much easier than in our part of the world. However, even there the servant must watch closely or he or she will fail in service.

What a beautiful illustration of the relationship which should exist between the Lord and His servants!

“**Our eyes wait upon the Lord our God.**”

“**Kicking Against the Pricks**” (Acts 26:14).

“**It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.**”

The plowman in Bible Lands carries in his hand a long pole or goad, with a sharp metal point or prick on one end of the pole and at the other there is a flat piece of iron which is used to clean the plowshare.

Quite often the young ox, probably not well broken in, will kick, because he does not like his work.

The plowman then holds the pole or goad in such a position that when the ox kicks again, he will kick against that prick or sharp point, and thus the animal will learn it doesn't pay.

Paul, kicking against the plan of God, learned his mistake.

“**Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.**”

“Iniquities Like a Heavy Burden” (Psalm 38:4).

One of the first things we noticed in Palestine, and we could scarcely believe our eyes, was the enormous loads carried by the porter or *atal*. You can scarcely understand unless you have seen these burdens yourself.

We have several times seen a single porter carry an ordinary piano on his back for quite a distance. His piled up burden very often extends far beyond his head.

After the burden has been placed on the porter's back, he cannot easily lay it down until he has reached his destination. When he becomes desperately weary and must have a little rest, he calls a wayfarer, and the latter just stoops down under the load for a few minutes, takes the weight of the burden from the weary porter, and gives him a short rest.

This is what Galatians 6:2, “**Bear ye one another's burdens,**” means. In the same chapter and the fifth verse we read, “**for every man shall bear his own burden.**”

That sounds like a contradiction, but not so.

In our Greek Testament in verse two we have the word *baros*, meaning the very heavy burden like the porter carries; in verse five we have this word, *phortion*, the light burden that any person might carry in his hand.

The Word of God is telling us that Christians must be ready to get under another's heavy load and give him a little rest, he must not throw his own lawful burdens upon others, he must carry the light ones alone.

“I Cast Out My Shoe” (Psalm 60:8; 108:9).

“Over Edom will I cast out my shoe.”

The shoe, like a dog, is considered unclean.

In Palestine houses there is always a threshold called the *mastaby*, where the people of the house and all guests remove their shoes and enter barefooted. Shoes are never worn in a mosque or in well-to-do homes where they have rugs over the floors. Shoes are never spoken of with respect, but in terms of very great disrespect.

The angel of the Lord said to Moses (Exodus 3:5), “**Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.**”

In Joshua 5:15, “**And the captain of the Lord's host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy.**”

David, speaking by inspiration, was deriding Edom and said, “**Upon Edom will I throw my shoe.**” David, to humble Edom, considers that country as an equal only to the *mastaby* or place near the door used for the purpose of casting unclean shoes. The shoe in Bible days was always associated with everything you could think of that was low, filthy, and contemptible.

It was only made and worn to protect the feet from the filth and vile things over which the person had to walk.

To unloose the shoe was the work of a slave. John the Baptist said that he was not worthy to unloose the shoes of Christ.

We see more clearly what the expression of Amos meant when he said that the rulers and oppressors had “**sold . . . the poor for a pair of shoes**” (Amos 2:6; 8:6). “**To cast the shoe upon**” anyone meant to degrade and humble him to the very limit.

“Over Edom will I cast out my shoe.”

“As Trees Walking” (Mark 8:24).

What a queer sight it was at first to us to see men, women and animals walking along the road with such huge loads of brushwood, thorn bushes, or branches that you just couldn't see what was carrying it. If it was a donkey all you could see was the lower part of four small legs.

The half-restored sight of the man who had been blind prevented him from seeing clearly between the branches and the animal that carried them, but he remembered the days when he had his sight, and he knew what these walking trees really were.

Redemption of the Purchased Possession (Ephesians 1:13, 14).

“Ye are sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise until . . . the redemption of the purchased possession.”

The seal is a large wooden instrument, twenty inches or longer and has the symbol of the owner engraved upon it. When a man goes to the open market and makes a purchase of a large amount of grain lying in a big heap, he very carefully impresses the grain on all sides with his seal. In that way he makes it impossible for anyone to steal his grain without breaking his symbol and thus protects his purchase until he returns to remove it to his own house or barn.

The Book says that is what God does for His purchased possession, His redeemed ones, until He removes them to the Owner's home.

"After that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Ghost of promise, which is the earnest (or pledge) of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory."

"They Comfort Me" (Psalm 23:4).

The heavy clubs carried by the shepherds are a means of defense, for the shepherd never knows what he may meet. They are the clubs mentioned in the Shepherd Psalm.

Where would the "**comfort**" come in? The weight of these clubs would not feel comfortable. The watchful shepherd is always guarding his sheep that they may not be injured or killed by wild animals.

If a wild animal approaches, the shepherd comes and with all the strength he has, he brings the heavy rod down upon the enemy of his sheep and they are saved.

Then, sometimes the sheep or the little lambs are caught in the thorns or bushes or they may fall into a deep hole. The shepherd then takes his staff and tenderly lifts the lamb out of its difficulty. He also leans on the staff when walking over rough, stony paths.

"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

"A Bruised Reed" (Isaiah 42:3).

"A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench."

The shepherd spends much time alone with his sheep in desert solitudes; and his reed pipe, a frail little instrument of two reeds bound together, hollowed out and with holes on the side, helps to pass the hours cheerfully. He learns to play many little tunes on it. It is very easily broken and if it falls and is crushed by a careless foot, its music is stilled. It is of almost no value, a new one could easily be made and the bruised pipe left by the wayside to rot.

But the shepherd appears to have a sentimental feeling about it; he will not let it go, not at all. He picks up the crushed reed, and so tenderly repairs it, binding up its broken parts, until once more he draws from it the music he dearly loves. **"A bruised reed shall he not break."**

What a picture of the sinner, bruised and broken by sin, of no apparent value, lying by the wayside; and then God's love and concern and His desire to restore the broken life.

“The smoking flax shall he not quench.”

Here in this Scripture we see a little clay lamp, with its wick floating in an hour's supply of olive oil. The oil has burned out, the wick smokes. We would probably say, “Throw it out, get a fresh wick; this one smokes and it is of no value.” But the owner does not agree to that, “The old will do, all that is needed is oil, then the wick will burn as brightly as ever.”

That is just what God does, with His grace — restores when the light is almost out.

“The smoking flax will he not quench.”

White Asses (Judges 5:10).

“Ye that ride on white asses, ye that sit in judgment.”

Palestinians acquainted with the law, religious or secular,—in other words, rabbis and lawyers—usually select the white ass for their journeys in preference to the ordinary donkey or horse, as it is much more impressive in looks and more sure footed.

“Ye that rid on white asses.”

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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