

Strange Scriptures

That Perplex the Western Mind

Clarified in the Light of Customs and Conditions in Bible Lands

by

Barbara M. Bowen
Bob Jones University, Greenville, S. C.

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CHAPTER FOUR

CLOTHING AND JEWELS

“Her Clothing Is Silk and Purple” (Proverbs 31:22).

“SHE maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.”

King Lemuel tells us that all the household of a virtuous woman **“are clothed with scarlet.”** Girls and women will spend all their spare time making beautiful garments, embroidered and spangled with gold, silver, and flowers.

In several homes I visited, the women with great pride showed me their wardrobe of from a dozen to twenty very heavy outer garments, all hand work. Some of them were made before their marriage; some belonged to the mother or even to the grandmother.

They were only worn on great festivals, like Christmas or Easter, when they just sit in state to receive their friends, and pass around coffee and pipes. One can scarcely understand why so many fine garments, when you consider their humble occupations; for, daily, except on these big occasions, you find them sweeping out the kitchen, boiling the pot, collecting thorns for the fire, and doing all the hard work of the home and the field too, or going to market to sell the vegetables they have raised.

The woman eats her meals after her husband and his friends have finished, just sitting on the ground with her small children around her, outside the room where the men had their meal and are now smoking and talking.

She wears her hair in a large number of braids, which hang down the whole length of her back, with money tied to the end of each braid, which together with what she wears on her forehead would be worth fifty dollars or more. All through the long braids you would see charms and evil eye beads.

“She Took a Veil and Covered Herself” (Genesis 24:65).

“When Rebekah saw Isaac in the field, she took a veil and covered herself.”

The veil is a very important and indispensable article in the East and has been so since the very earliest times. The women have at least four kinds of veils; two kinds for the home and two different kinds for the street.

The first is made like a kerchief, falling on the back of the wearer just as an ornament. The second passes under the chin and falls over the chest. The third is the white veil, which covers the whole body, nearly. The fourth is a sort of handkerchief, which is worn to cover the face.

For a woman to be seen on the street without a veil would be a calamity.

In ancient times the veil was the most important part of an Eastern woman's dress — her chief concern was always to hide her face. Only the Christian women go unveiled today.

“Mine Horn Is Exalted in the Lord” (I Samuel 2:1).

This was Hannah's triumphant cry. Job, stripped of all his glory, could say, **“I have defiled my horns in the dust.”**

The horn was an ornament worn on the head. It was an emblem of power and authority, and the habit of wearing a horn, though not so common, has not yet entirely disappeared.

In addition to the various trinkets worn on the head, neck and arms, the Syrian women wear a hollow horn, made of copper or silver. It is tapering and varies from fifteen to twenty inches in length. It cannot be a very comfortable adornment pressing against the forehead. It is held in place by straps, and over the horn is thrown a veil of white muslin, which can be drawn over the face for concealment. The horns worn by the men were shorter.

This ornament is mentioned in II Samuel 22:3; I Kings 22:11; Psalm 75:5, and other places.

“With Their Loins Girded” (Exodus 12:11).

Another very important part of the Eastern costume is the girdle, which is a long piece of cloth like a shawl, folded around the waist or loins. It is useful in keeping in order the long loose robes worn in those countries.

Christ frequently alludes to the uses of the girdle, and bids His people to be ready, waiting for their Lord; having their loins girded and not to sit in idleness with loose and disordered garments. These girdles are still worn by both men and women, some are worsted, some silk, and the Bedouin men often wear leather girdles.

“Round Tires Like the Moon” (Isaiah 3:16-24).

The Old Testament abounds with references to such ornaments and even the style of them has scarcely changed. Chains and bracelets and earrings, and headbands, and tinkling ornaments for the feet and **“round tires like the moon”** of silver or gold to place on the head under the veil, and the nose-rings are as fashionable today as ever.

The tire is a kind of round cap of gold or silver, beaten very thin and hung all around with money and precious stones. The women are exceedingly proud of these “tires.”

A Gold Chain About Joseph's Neck (Genesis 41:42).

Pharaoh put a gold chain about Joseph's neck at the time of Joseph's exaltation.

Bracelets and chains are often mentioned in the Bible.

Eliezer gave Rachel bracelets that weighed ten shekels. The Jewish women are still addicted to wearing heavy bracelets. But bracelets and chains were worn by men of noble birth and officials of high rank.

Belshazzar placed a gold chain around the neck of Daniel. Saul had a bracelet around his arm.

The same kinds of chains and bracelets can be found on arms and around necks today in the Land of the Bible.

“The rings, and nose jewels” (Isaiah 3:21).

Many of the women in parts of the Bible Lands still wear rings in the left nostril, which is bored low down in the center. These rings are usually of gold with pearls or rubies placed in the ring. The men formerly wore nose rings.

In Genesis 24:22, **“I put the earring upon her face,”** which the commentators tell us means that he put a jewel on her nose.

“Thy Signet, and Thy Bracelets, and Thy Staff” (Genesis 38:18).

The articles most appropriate to a patriarch were, **“a staff, a signet-ring, and bracelets.”** Thus when Judah asked Tamar what pledge she desired from him, she replied, **“Thy signet, and thy bracelets, and thy staff that is in thine hand.”** The ring was engraved with the name of the owner or with some emblem.

Both sexes wore rings, both for ornament and use. The one for use had seals or signets, and are much used today where the custom of sealing every document still prevails. A document without a seal would not be legal. A merchant's letters and bills must be sealed.

The modern Egyptians wear the seal-ring on the little finger of the right hand. The ring is usually silver, with a carnelian or other stone, upon which is engraved the owner's name.

“Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it on Joseph's hand.”

“The king took his ring . . . and gave it to Mordecai.”

Job 38:14, **“It is turned as clay to the seal.”**

In Egypt the granary doors were kept sealed, but not with wax. The inspectors put the seal of their rings upon a handful of clay and covered the lock.

The ring is still an emblem of authority in Egypt, Turkey, Persia, and other parts of the East. When Pharaoh placed his ring upon Joseph's hand, it meant delegated power, and Pharaoh could have conferred no greater honor.

Ornaments of the Feet and Legs

“In that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet . . . and the ornaments of their legs.”

Anklets and stride-chains are unknown in our country, but not in the Bible Lands. The effect of the stride chain was to shorten the step, and the anklet was covered with bells. The daughters of Zion are described as **“walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet”** Isaiah 3:16.

Arab ladies are extravagantly fond of silver and gold ornaments and they also wear silver money around the forehead, suspended from the neck, and attached to the back.

The jewels can never be taken for the husband's debts. A poor man may go to jail for a few piasters (one piaster is five cents), while thousands glitter on the dress of his wife. Often the husband purposely gives his wife the money to escape liability for just debts.

Beds and Bedchambers (Matthew 9:6).

The bed of Bible Lands is not at all like the piece of furniture we are accustomed to in our homes; it is like a quilt. The Eastern bed is not a bed-stead, but a thick mat, very easily rolled up and carried under the arm.

The Bible Lands bedrooms are not rooms kept for sleeping at all, they are merely recesses in the ordinary family room, in which the folded-up mats or quilts are placed during the day. It was in one of these recesses in the wall made to hold the mats to sleep on that the little king Joash, was hidden by his aunt Jehosheba (II Kings 11:2).

“But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Joram . . . took Joash, the son of Ahaziah, and stole him from among the king’s sons which were slain; and they hid him, even him and his nurse, in the bedchamber from Athaliah, so that he was not slain.”

Sometimes the word translated “**bed**” in English refers to the Eastern deewan or couch, quite another thing from the mat or quilt of Matthew 9:6, where Christ said to the man he healed, **“Arise, take up thy bed, and go into thine house.”**

We are too apt to get a very wrong impression of the incident in Esther 7:8, from the use of our English word “bed.” Here in this Scripture, the word “**bed**” merely means the couch or deewan on which the queen was sitting.

Very likely it was a raised stone platform built against the wall, as you see in many homes even today. The word “**pillow**” too, is liable to give an incorrect idea. When Jacob used a stone for a pillow, he was doing what he did every day and what others did.

“My Children Are With Me in Bed” (Luke 11:7).

“Trouble me not; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee bread.”

The village home has only one room, and here all the family sleep. Very often three or even four generations and perhaps widowed sisters and aunts, live together in one house. The house is divided into two parts, one part raised a few feet above the rest. This highest part is used by the family for a kitchen, dining room and living room by day, and a bedroom at night.

The lower part is the room for the animals. In the summer they sleep in the open, but the rest of the year, when night comes the man puts the animals in the house with the family. They tell you that the breath of the animals helps to keep the family warm. At night you see the ox and a donkey or two, a few goats and perhaps a dog, all sleeping below the family.

When dark comes, because they go to bed soon after sunset, the people spread their mats or quilts on the floor, and all living in the house lie down in their clothes together and sleep.

For the father to rise to attend to the needs of a neighbor would awaken the whole household, so the man had a far better excuse than we might at first think he had.

“Israel Bowed Himself Upon the Bed's Head” (Genesis 47:31).

Then in Hebrews 11:21 we read, **“leaning upon the top of his staff.”** Hebrews gives the need light toward understand this verse in Genesis.

There are two words in Hebrew of which the consonants are exactly the same. Up to the sixth century no vowels or vowel points appear in Hebrew usage, and the context alone decided which of the two words of similar consonants was intended by the writer. In this Scripture there is apparent confusion between two Hebrew words: *mittah*, place of reclining, and *mattah*, staff.

The staff was the symbol of patriarchal authority, and, leaning upon it, oaths were made or solemn injunctions given. Compare the practice of Bishops giving their benediction leaning on the Pastoral Staff. Jacob's bed was probably the ordinary bed of the desert wanderer, the *ilhaf*, a mere mat or thick quilt.

“A Cottage in a Vineyard, a Lodge in a Garden of Cucumbers” (Isaiah 1:8).

We can understand a cottage in a garden in our country. To us appears a small but substantial house, but what it really happens to mean is a booth lightly constructed of brushwood, in which the farmer and his family live during harvest time, where they are laboring.

The Feast of Booths or Tabernacles was celebrated, and is now, in just such structures or cottages. The farmer may live a distance from his farm or garden, so in the time of harvest he builds a light structure in which they all live to protect the harvest from thieves.

“A lodge in a garden” was something similar, but flimsier in construction. It refers to the rude shelter which the laborer builds for himself in a field where he is hired.

Harvest is past and the people return to their homes, but these structures, cottage and lodge, are never removed, but left to fall apart. The heavy rains of winter beat upon them, the fierce winds tear them in pieces, and these tattered parts present a sorry spectacle of ruin, which is a good picture of a people whom God, grieved by their rejection of His love, has left to themselves.

“The daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers.”

“A Lamp in Jerusalem” (I Kings 15:4).

A native in the Bible Lands will not sleep in a dark room. However poor he may be, he absolutely must have some light.

To them it is the symbol of the supremacy of good over evil, the triumph of life over death.

An Eastern home is never in darkness except for one of two reasons. Either the inmates of the home are dead, or the house is deserted. The many references to lamps are symbolic of the continuance of a family.

Job says (Job 18:5, 6), **“the light of the wicked shall be put out, and the spark of his fire shall not shine. The light shall be dark in his tabernacle, and his candle shall be put out with him.”**

We see in Proverbs 13:9, **“The light of the righteous rejoiceth: but the lamp of the wicked shall be put out.”**

“I Will Pour Water on Him That is Thirsty” (Isaiah 44:3).

An Easterner in drinking water never touches the earthen water-jar to his lips. He tilts back his head, holds the vessel high above him, pours a stream of water down into his mouth, and — he never appears to swallow; the water just runs down his throat and he never spills it on his lace or clothes. **“I will pour water on him that is thirsty.”**

Broken Sherd (Isaiah 30:14).

“A sherd to take fire from the hearth, or to take water withal out of the pit.”

This picture, which means little or nothing to our minds, was full of beauty to those who first heard it spoken.

Pitchers and jars of earthenware are the usual means of carrying water from the well to the home. These jars are very easily broken. A woman stumbles or falls on her way to the well, the vessel crashes from her head to the ground and there lies in pieces.

Frugality is one of the Eastern woman's virtues. Even these broken pieces of pottery (sherds) may be turned to service.

She selects two of the largest: one she places by the side of the well or water pit; the other she takes home and places beneath the hearth. The piece by the well side will serve some day for the thirsty traveler to stoop down and scoop up the cool waters out of the pit. The sherd by the hearth will be used to carry glowing embers to light another fire, perhaps in a neighbor's home. Now we see the full vividness and force of Isaiah's analogy, which depicts the utter ruin of rebellious and faithless Israel:

“As a potter's vessel that is broken in pieces he shall not spare: so that there shall not be found in the bursting of it a sherd to take fire from the hearth, or water withal out of the pit.”

Rings (Isaiah 3:21).

When Pharaoh committed the government of Egypt to Joseph, he took his ring from his finger and gave it to Joseph. (Genesis 41:42). After the victory of the Israelites over the Midianites, they offered to the Lord the rings, the bracelets, and the golden necklaces, taken from the enemy (Numbers 31:50). James (James 2:2). distinguishes a man of wealth and dignity by the ring of gold on his finger (Luke 15:22). The ring was used chiefly to seal with; and the Scripture generally assigns it to princes and great persons — as the king of Egypt, Joseph, Ahaz, Jezebel, and others.

The patents and orders of these princes were sealed with their rings or signets, an impression from which was their confirmation. The ring was one mark of sovereign authority. Pharaoh gave his ring to Joseph, as a token of authority.

“I Will Make Thee As a Signet” (Haggai 2:23).

“In that day . . . O Zerubbabel . . . I will make thee as a signet” (seal ring).

The meaning is evident from the importance of the signet ring in the eyes of the Oriental, who is accustomed if he owns a ring to carry it constantly with him, and to care for it as one of his most prized and valuable possessions. The signet being an emblem of authority was used to stamp documents and other legal articles. Indeed, without being stamped by a signet, no document was considered authentic.

“I will make thee as a signet.”

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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