

Strange Scriptures

That Perplex the Western Mind

Clarified in the Light of Customs and Conditions in Bible Lands

by

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CHAPTER SIX

HOME LIFE

“Sit Down in the Lowest Seat” (Luke 14:10).

“WHEN thou art bidden to a feast, go and sit down in the lowest seat.”

As we enter the Upper Room where the feast is, we see rugs over the floor and divans or seats like benches all around the walls of the room. The seats nearest the door are very low, just small mattresses or pillows on the floor; the next will be a bit higher; and the ones at the wall just opposite the door where you enter so high that your feet could not reach the floor.

All sit with the feet crossed under them. When a guest arrives he knocks at the door, and a voice from within the rooms calls out, “Who is it?” The person outside replies, “It is I,” but gives no name. If the voice is recognized, the door will be opened; if not, it will remain closed.

This custom reminds us of Acts 12:13, 14, **“And as Peter knocked at the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness.”**

At a feast a servant or a son or younger brother shows the guest to the upper room. If the guest is polite, he will seat himself on the lowest seat, and await the arrival of the householder. When the host arrives and finds his guest on the lowest seat, he will compel him to move to a higher one.

The custom of the East gives the highest seats to older persons and those of high rank. The relatives, youths, and those of lower standing sit in the lower seats.

Jesus said, **“When thou art bidden to a feast, sit down in the lowest seat; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say to thee, Friend, go up higher.”**

“Oh That I Had a Lodging Place” (Jeremiah 9:2).

Jeremiah says, **“Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men.”**

Genesis 42:27 says, **“as one of them opened his sack in the inn.”**

These were resting places for the night, the caravan houses, but they were not found at the end of every journey.

The inns were open to everyone from all parts of the country, all night, and never closed to the poor. No matter how dirty or ragged or forsaken a man was he was always welcome at an inn. It was much like a home to these weary travelers, they met people from far countries and they talked and smoked and parted in the morning.

The inns or khans vary much in size and material; sometimes they are made of mud bricks, sometimes of stone, but the form of the khans is always about the same. A square or oblong court with one or even two stories above it. One of the sides has a large gate, there is a gallery all around the court and often the court has a fountain in it and a well with troughs to water the animals.

The apartments for the animals are opposite the gates. These are divided into rooms, each having a small raised platform for the men to sleep on who are in charge of the animals during the night. Mangers or troughs are built against the walls, from which the animals eat. No matter if a man had riches or was the very poorest, the rooms were assigned as the travelers arrived and no one was favored more than another.

We see a flight of stone steps from the court going up to the rooms for the travelers. They are unfurnished, and the sojourner pays a very modest sum. His own servant, if he has one, cooks his meals. There is absolutely no privacy, and I doubt if these people ever desire to be alone.

He makes his bed on the floor, with a mat or rug, covers his head with his cloak and goes to sleep. A fire is burning on a bare stone hearth and here the robber, the trader, the rich man, poor man, beggar, and the dervish dwell together absolutely indifferent to each other's circumstances.

There are no other kinds of inns known to the people there, these just suit their ways of living and their independence; they would not likely tolerate any other style. And to just such an inn or kahn, God sent His Son with **“no place to lay His head.”**

“The Key Will I Lay Upon His Shoulder” (Isaiah 22:22).

“The key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder.”

It is quite the custom in the Orient for people to carry their key on their shoulder.

The handle is made of brass or silver, or wood, and often very elaborately carved.

The corner of the handkerchief is tied to the ring, and the key is then placed on the shoulder, and the handkerchief hangs down in front. Sometimes you will see men with a huge bunch of these large keys, then they will have half on one side of the shoulder and half on the other side. For a man to be marching along with a large key on his shoulder shows that he is certainly a person of importance.

“Whose key have you on your shoulder?” he would be asked. The key of the house of King David was to be on the shoulder of Eliakim.

There are still many buildings in Palestine which have enormous locks, with keys of course in proportion. Many of them are a real load to carry. The locks are made so that no false key could fit them, and they become more complicated in proportion to the number and position of the guards into which the metal drops are required to fall.

These huge locks are found on the inside of doors of gardens and outer courts, and inner rooms too. The only way the owner can unlock them is to cut a hole in the door, put his arm through the hole, and insert the key. Many of the garden doors are locked this way today.

In the Song of Solomon the bride says, “**My beloved put his hand by the hole of the door,**” that he might enter.

The House Top (Matthew 24:17).

The homes in the East with their flat roofs offer a place of quiet, such as you find nowhere else.

There is often an upper room on the roof reached only by an outside staircase.

In a large well-to-do home these upper rooms would be the most spacious of the home, and the most suitable as guest chambers. At a great feast like the Passover many guests could be accommodated.

As the natives do not remove their clothing at night, they do not need much privacy, and a large number of strangers would see nothing unusual in occupying a room in common.

“They Uncovered the Roof” (Mark 2:4).

“And when they could not come nigh to him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay.”

Scripture tells that there was such a large crowd that the four men who carried the sick man could not force their way through, so they did just what a native would do, went up the outside stairs to the roof, broke up part of the roof, and lowered the sick man down in front of Christ.

Oh, the homes are not like ours, but very low, with flat roofs.

Jesus was probably standing in the open “*lewan*,” a sort of vestibule in front of the house, with the roof over it, but no door. Those who carried the sick man, not being able to “**come at him for the press,**” went to the roof and removed as much of that as was necessary and let the sick man down at Jesus' feet.

It would be an easy matter to do in that kind of house; the roof is not high, and by stooping after they had removed a piece of the roof and holding the corners of the bed or couch — which was merely a thickly padded quilt, such as people still use in that region — letting the palsied man down would be rather a simple affair. The peasants are accustomed to opening their roofs to let down grain, straw and other articles. We have often seen it done.

The materials used for the roofs are beams about three feet or more apart, across which are arranged short sticks quite close together, and then covered with thickly matted thorn bush called *bellan*. Over this is spread a coat of mortar which is covered with earth and rolled flat and smooth. Any part of this could be removed without harming the rest and no objection whatever would be made by the owners of the house. All men did was to scrape back a part of the earth over the *lewan* where Christ stood, remove the thorns and the short sticks and let down the man on the quilt at the feet of Jesus.

Afterwards they would repair the roof, restoring as before. Not all the roofs are made like this, but of material more easily removed. The roof may have been made of course matting, or it may have been of boards or stone slabs, that could very easily have been lifted for the time being.

Anyway, the roofs are very low and flat, easily reached by stairs from the yard or court, and are very easily opened. You and I could with little difficulty open a roof as these four men did.

A Strong Tower (Proverbs 18:10).

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.”

The law of retaliation in the East places upon the nearest relative the duty of killing the slayer.

It matters not whether the death results from an accident or a planned murder. The Mosaic code provided six Cities of Refuge during the life of the officiating high priest. After the high priest died, the penalty was remitted. These cities were not planned to shield the murderer, but to protect him until he had a trial, and if he was found guilty, he must pay the penalty.

However, that was not all the protection given. A man running for his life, could, if overtaken, call upon the name of some great sheikh, thus placing himself under the protection of this man, even if he did not know him personally.

If the avenger of blood, in spite of this appeal, slays the fleeing murderer, then honor demands that the sheikh who was called upon, have the avenger of blood put to death, or infamy would rest upon his name.

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.”

“Thy Word Is a Lamp Unto My Feet” (Psalm 119:105).

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

Several years ago we were on our way from Emmaus to Jerusalem late at night, traveling on donkey back.

As we rode along we noticed a path at a distance, but leading to ours, along which some men were walking. As they approached us, we noticed that as they walked over this narrow, stony path, filled with holes and many good places to stumble, a little light kept shooting out before them.

We waited until they joined us and found they had small foot lamps. Some had straps tied around the ankle with a small clay lamp attached; others were larger clay lamps carried in the hand. They would swing the lamp a few feet before them to throw a light on the stony, unsafe path.

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

God does not promise light for a mile ahead or a half mile, but for one step at a time.

“Rachel Took the Images” (Genesis 31:34).

“Now Rachel had taken the images, and put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them.”

This appears to be the first notice we have of the existence and worship of these teraphim. Later on they were frequently mentioned, but here we see them first in this patriarchal family.

They were very small and easily hidden under the saddle bags of the camel. The Arabs still often hide stolen property under their saddles. Stealing a god to worship did not seem a bit strange to them. They would tell you that it was not a sin to steal a god who would help you get other things you wanted and needed.

Teraphim were frequently consulted for answers about the future by the children of Israel. After they entered the Promised Land, one of their corrupt practices was the worship or use of the teraphim. Many of the Hebrews leaned to idolatry then and consulted these images of gods, but still held on to their belief in the God of Israel.

Rachel stole the family gods or teraphim. We may wonder why such an ado was made over a pair of small figurines of very little money value.

Well, we have learned from a clay tablet that an archaeologist found: "If a son-in-law possessed the household gods of his father-in-law, then he was considered a real son and shared in the inheritance."

Rachel stole the family gods to make her husband an immediate member of her father's family, and that made him an heir and gave him a claim to a portion of Laban's property. Her husband had served the father-in-law fourteen years for the two daughters and she felt he had a right to be considered an heir.

Bed

We have only one reference to a bedstead in Scripture, that associated with the giant king Og (Deuteronomy 3:11).

It was evidently something very unusual in those days. The bed we read of in the Bible was two forms. One is the divan, used most in cities, and in the interior of a house; it would almost never be seen on a housetop where the people slept much of the year.

The divan is a long, narrow mattress, usually stuffed with straw. In a poor home merely the sacking is seen; people better off would have the sacking covered with a bright gay material, or with a homemade rug.

In the daytime these mattress divans are used as a lounge, usually on the floor around the side of the room, at night they would be placed over the floor, as the living room is generally the sleeping-room also.

Psalm 149:5 sounds strange to a Western ear: "**the saints . . . sing aloud upon their beds.**"

It means simply that they were reclined on the divan or thin mattress or rug during the hours of rest in the hot part of the day, as they do even today.

When Esther received Haman at the feast (Esther 7:8), it was not really a bed that he fell upon, but the seat, the divan or rug which was used for a seat or for reclining during the day and was used as a bed at night.

The bedchamber, like the one in which Joash was hid (II Kings 11:2), was a sort of cupboard place with usually an arched top, in which all the thin mattresses or rugs are piled up at night.

This arrangement is very common in the East even now. The ordinary bed, used by most of the Orientals, the Bedouins, and the poorer classes in the cities and in every house, on the roof or in the court, is what we would call a mat. It was usually made from the dwarf-palm, or of tent cloth or grain bags or camel bags. This is unquestionably the bed of the New Testament. **“Take up thy bed and walk”**—a thing even a small child could easily do.

Bottles (Mark 2:22).

The bottle of the Bible ever has been and is the skin of the goat, sheep, calf or kid.

The Arab has an interesting way of removing the skin from the carcass of the animal. The head and the lower joints of the legs are removed; then the slow process of stripping the carcass of its skin begins. No tool or knife is used, it is all done by the hand and fingers.

Once they have the covering of the upper part of a front leg clear, they use it as a tube and blow with all their strength through it, which loosens here and there, the hide from the flesh. Natives never remove a skin in any other way.

The goat skin is the most in demand; it serves for water carrying, the four legs being tightly tied up. This skin is also used for oil, and in Bible times for wine (II Samuel 16:1; Jeremiah 13:12; I Samuel 1:24).

The Bedouins use these skins also as churns. In that case the hairy side is turned in, and serves as a friction for the production of the butter, which usually carries away with it a quantity of hair; however they always melt the butter down and strain it.

It is clear that our Lord referred to skin bottles in Matthew 9:17.

After a skin had been expanded by wine, which would gradually ferment, it would then be used for water or oil (also see Job 32:19).

After the skin of the sheep is removed from the carcass, the wool is cut off; these skins are as a rule used for grain and flour. The skin of the kid is used as a scrip. It is necessary to smoke, salt, and sun dry these skins before they are fit for use. (Psalm 119:83).

When a skin is full it is of very great weight. The women prefer to carry a waterpot full on the head rather than a skin full on the back (Genesis 21:14). A calf's skin is used to carry liquids on the back of a camel.

Cruse of Oil (I Kings 17:12; Matthew 25:4).

A small jar with a rounded bottom, at hand in every house in case of going out at night to a neighbor's house.

The little lamp soon consumes what it contains, and it would be necessary to replenish it before returning home. The light of a lamp is not extinguished; it would be left burning during the visit if its oil permitted.

The cruse contains a supply to replenish the lamp. The foolish virgins were unwise to go out without their cruse of oil.

~ **end of chapter 6** ~

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