

# Strange Scriptures

That Perplex the Western Mind

Clarified in the Light of Customs and Conditions in Bible Lands

by

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## CHAPTER TEN

### GATES AND TRADES

#### **In the Gate of Samaria** (II Kings 7:1)

THE ancient custom of holding markets at gates still obtains in the East, and the people gather every morning to buy horses, mules, asses and camels. At sunrise the owners of the animals assembled and exhibited them for sale. But there were sellers of other goods, with stalls for their display.

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#### **The Seat of Justice** (I Samuel 4:18).

The gates being used as the place of judgment, a seat in the gate became a seat of honor and authority. The aged Eli (who had “**judged Israel forty years**”) was sitting in the gate when the messenger arrived with the news that the ark of God was taken by the Philistines; and we are told that both Mordecai and Daniel sat in the king's gate, an expression which denotes the authority that was vested in them.

We learn also from Scripture that the husband of a virtuous woman was “**known in the gates,**” when he sat “**among the elders of the land**” (Proverbs 31:23).

It is related of the Persians, that when one of their great men build a palace it is the custom to feast the king and his grandees in it for several days. “Then the great gate of it is open: but when these festivities are over they shut it up, never more to be opened.” The custom is one of great antiquity, and may, perhaps, be alluded to in the passage, “**This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it; because the Lord, the God of Israel, hath entered in by it, therefore it shall be shut. It is for the prince**” (Ezekiel 44:2, 3).

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**“An Artificer in Brass and Iron”** (Genesis 4:22).

**“Tubal-cain, an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron”** or “a whetter of every instrument of copper and iron.” His brother, Jubal, was **“the father of all such as handle the harp and organ.”** Tools were required for the construction of these instruments, and therefore the smith's art must have taken precedence.

The preparation of iron for use in war, agriculture or domestic purposes, was one of the earliest applications of labor, and, along with this was the use of copper alloyed with tin, that is, bronze, the “brass” of the Bible. The construction of so huge a vessel as Noah's ark shows us clearly that the smith's art made great progress at a very early age; but whether the metal used then was bronze or iron, we do not know. In the construction of the tabernacle no iron was found, though bronze is frequently mentioned.

After the children of Israel took possession of the land, the occupation of a smith became a very important trade. In the days of Saul it is mentioned that **“there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel”** (I Samuel 13:19), the reason being that the Philistines had either destroyed or removed all who followed that craft, likely to prevent them from possessing themselves of swords and spears. Nebuchadnezzar did the same. We read that he **“carried away . . . all the craftsmen and smiths; and left only the poorest sort of the people of the land”** (II Kings 24:14; Jeremiah 24:1).

The Jewish artificers were not, as the Romans and Greeks, servants and slaves, but men of some rank and wealth: In the New Testament we find that Paul, though of noble birth, was brought up to the craft of tent-making; and even now, almost every Jew, no matter what his prospects are, is instructed in some trade or profession.

The art of overlaying with gold was also known to the ancient Egyptians, as was proved some time ago by the discovery at Thebes of a mummy, which was entirely wrapped in plates of gold.

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**“And They Fetched the Carved Image”** (Judges 18:18).

Carving was one of the crafts of those days. In the Bible carving included all ornamental cutting of ivory, wood, or other hard material.

The carved relics of other days have been found in abundance in the ruins of ancient Nineveh and many other mounds. In one chamber in Nineveh were found two sitting figures, holding a scepter.

The chairs on which the figures were seated and the robes on the figures were enameled with blue let into ivory, and beside them were many figures all covered with gold leaf. They were elegant in design, and showed an intimate knowledge of the art of working in ivory.

There were winged sphinxes, lions, people, bulls, flowers, and all a most wonderful work of art.

Herodotus tells that in the temple of Belus at Babylon there were tables, thrones, couches of solid gold beautifully carved. Couches of ivory and silver, beds inlaid with gold, silver and ivory, have been found in those old tombs.

We think of the ivory throne of King Solomon, overlaid with gold, with its six steps and fourteen lions (I Kings 10:18-20).

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**“And Hiram Sent Masons”** (II Samuel 5:11).

We learn that the masons employed on King David's house were sent by Hiram. The monuments of Egypt, Nineveh, Ruins of Baalbek, and many other wonderful ruins of temples and palaces all bear witness to the wonderful skill of the masons of antiquity.

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**“The Carpenter Encouraged the Goldsmith”** (Isaiah 41:7).

Another of the handicrafts in Scripture is carpentry.

The building of the ark is a proof of the progress of this art before the Flood; and on very ancient monuments we see pictures of hatchets, saws, chisels, oil-horns, planes, drills, mallets, rules, plummets, squares, and baskets of nails, used by the very ancient Egyptians.

We know that “the cabinet-makers of Egypt were not one bit behind the very best of these days, either in design or manual execution.”

They made boxes inlaid with different woods and some of ebony inlaid with ivory. Veneering and dovetailing were also known then. And we read, Isaiah 41:7, **“They helped every one his neighbor. So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smoothed with the hammer, him that smote the anvil, saying, It is ready for the soldering; and he fastened it with nails, that it should not be moved.”**

Then in the New Testament there is Joseph the carpenter, the husband of Mary.

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**“Took Bread and a Bottle of Water”** (Genesis 21:14).

**“And Abraham took bread and a bottle of water, and gave it to Hagar.”**

The bottles of the East are made of goatskins. When the goat is killed, the head and feet are cut off; then the carcass is drawn out of the skin by turning the skin inside out. It is then tanned, then the places where the head and tail were cut off are sewn together.

It is then ready to be filled with water or wine. When filled, it is tied about the neck. The large bottles are he-goat skins and the smaller ones are kids' skins.

Doubtless this was the kind of bottle that Abraham gave to Hagar when he sent her away. Also this Scripture refers to a skin bottle: "No man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled."

After a time, the continual fires and smoke in an Arab tent dry and blacken his goatskin bottles. This illustrates the Psalmist's cry, "**I am become like a bottle in the smoke**" (Psalm 119:83).

David had been living in Saul's palace where they used vessels of gold and silver. At this time he was compelled to live as the wild Arabs, and to drink, like them, out of a smoked goatskin bottle.

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**"Go Down to the Potter's House"** (Jeremiah 18:3, 4).

**"Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels."**

Let us look into an Oriental pottery. You will see no machinery or fine buildings, just a plain shed. You see a wheel, and beside it a pile of clay and a dish of water. The potter takes a lump of clay in his hand, places it upon the wheel, which is revolving, and smooths it into a low cone; then, thrusting his thumb into the top of the cone, he opens a hole down through the center, and this he continually widens by pressing the edges of the revolving cone between his hands. As it enlarges, he gives it whatever shape he pleases with the utmost care and speed.

When Jeremiah was watching the potter, the vessel was marred in his hand, and so, "**he made it again into another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.**"

We saw this happen many times. Because of some defect in the clay, the potter changed his mind, crushed the jar into a shapeless mass of clay, and beginning anew, fashioned it into a totally different vessel.

One is amazed at the quick performance, and at the result, until one remembers that the clay is in the hands of a master workman.

Now let us go into a peasant's home. As you enter, back of the door you will find a bench about four feet high, with three holes in it. This is the water-jar stand. It is called "the holder of jars." Here you will see two large jars, each holding four or five gallons, and beside them a small drinking vessel.

The peasant will offer you the small drinking vessel as you enter the house. It is very much of an art to be able to use it, but to people brought up from childhood in an Oriental home it does not appear so. You will be invited to fill it to the brim from the first jar, called the vessel of honor.

What is the vessel of honor? Well, let us go back to the pottery and ask to buy a vessel. The potter will ask, "Do you want to carry it to the fountain? Then you must bear a vessel of honor"

A vessel of honor, what does it mean? It is a vessel that will give out pure water to quench the thirst of the stranger and the weary traveler. You purchase the vessel of honor, holding about five gallons. It has two handles and is beautifully shaped. You place it on your right shoulder or your head and go to the fountain to get water.

If you meet a stranger he will see your jar filled with cold, clean, refreshing water, and he likely will ask for a drink. This is the mission of a “**vessel of honor**,” giving free water, the gift of God, to passers-by. It is nothing but an earthen vessel, but nevertheless, it is a vessel of honor, because of its giving-out nature. It fulfills the expectation of the master potter.

This is the first large vessel on that bench behind the door. Next to that is another vessel. It looks just like the vessel of honor; but is not of the same nature. You could never tell the difference, but the potter can explain to you the difference between the vessel of honor and the vessel of dishonor.

This vessel will remain at home. All the stale water in the vessel of honor will be emptied into it. It receives much, but gives out very little.

In Jeremiah 22:28 we read of a vessel called “**empty of pleasure**.” This is the vessel beside the vessel of honor on the bench. This vessel receives the left-over water, is forever receiving, but never gives out refreshing water. It is used for stale water only, and after a time the inside becomes slimy, and the water ill-smelling, and there is now no pleasure in it, either to the potter or to the owner. It is finally placed in the backyard as a receptacle for waste things and then will be called an abominable vessel. This is mentioned in Isaiah 65:4.

It must be sad for the potter to know that the vessel he spent much time and skill upon should become a vessel empty of pleasure, and at last become an abominable vessel.

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### **Vessel of Mercy** (Romans 9:23)

**“And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.”**

Here is a vessel of mercy.

A Moslem never prays without washing his hands. In the villages travelers need water supplied to them, so the villagers provide small vessels of water for the traveler to use called vessels of mercy, to help others.

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### **Vessel of Wrath** (Romans 9:22)

Let us return to the pottery. We see a pile of vessels laid aside, called vessels of wrath, useless to the potter. They appeared absolutely all right until they were put into the furnace. They came out cracked, they just could not stand the fire.

However, the potter will not give them up, he has prepared a certain kind of cement out of blood from a small insect called the fasuka which lives on the body of a bull. The potter takes the blood of the fasuka and mixes it with some powdered broken pottery and cements the cracks in his vessel of wrath. When it passes through the furnace again, it may come out all right, or it may come out broken again. He patiently cements it again and again, but he may finally be obliged to lay it aside and pronounce it a vessel of wrath, of no value, and then he casts it away.

Romans 9:22, **“What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.”**

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**A Clean Vessel** (Isaiah 66:20).

**“An offering in a clean vessel into the house of the Lord.”**

It was once a vessel of honor on that bench, giving out life-giving water to thirsty travelers. It has been handled by many unclean hands. Its nature is not changed, but its looks have been marred. So it will be taken to the potter again to be filed and scraped. He will remove all uncleanness left by contact with soiled hands, then place it in the furnace again, burn it once more.

It comes out for use again, clean without and within, “A Clean Vessel.”

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**A Chosen Vessel** (Ephesians 1:1).

Let us once more return to the pottery. Tell the potter that you are returning to your own country and desire to take home a vessel to show your friends. You request him to choose for you. He will hand you his chosen vessel, saying, “I will never be ashamed to send this vessel to any part of the world, for I have chosen it and I know it will never put me to shame. It is a chosen vessel. “It may look the same to you as the other vessels; it may not seem very attractive, but it will stand the test.—It is a chosen vessel.”

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**Holy Vessel** (Isaiah 52:11).

**“The vessel of the Lord.”**

It is a very sacred vessel. No one can handle it but those who are clean and fit to enter the house of the Lord. “Clay in the potter’s hand,” to be made into vessels of honor, dishonor, wrath, mercy; broken, clean, chosen, holy — which? The choice remains in our power.

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