

Manners And Customs of Bible Lands

by
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CHAPTER THREE - Houses of More Than One Room

AMONG THE ARABS of Palestine villages and towns, houses of more than one room are owned by those who are more or less prosperous. The Arabic word meaning "house" also means "a room," The same thing was true of the houses belonging to the ancient Hebrews. As a rule the houses of one room were in the villages, and those of more than one room were in the cities.¹

BUILDING A HOUSE OF TWO, THREE, OR MORE ROOMS

If a house of two rooms is to be built, the Oriental does not place them side by side, as the Occidental builder would do. Rather the breadth of a room is left between the two rooms, and a wall is constructed between the ends, and as a result of this arrangement, the house has an open court. If the builder expects to have three rooms, then a room would be substituted for the wall at the end of the court, and there would be three rooms around a courtyard. If there are to be more than three rooms in the house, the additional rooms are added to those at the side, making the court of greater length.²

THE APPEARANCE AND ARRANGEMENT OF ROOMS

There is a great difference between an Oriental and Occidental house of more than one room. The exterior of the Occidental house is made to be as beautiful as possible, and especially the part that fronts on the street. But the exterior of the Oriental house presents an appearance that is mean and blank by comparison. The Oriental house fronts inwardly toward the court, rather than outwardly toward the street, as does the Occidental house. The general plan of the Oriental house is a series of rooms built around an open courtyard. The reason for this arrangement is that seclusion is the chief thought in mind.³

THE ORIENTAL COURTYARD

Open to the sky. It is important for the Westerner to realize that at the center of the Oriental house of several rooms is a courtyard that is open to the sky. The courtyard is an important part of the house. A person can be in the court and thus in the house, and yet he would be outdoors from the point of view of the Westerner. As an example, Matthew 26:69 says: "**Now Peter sat without in the palace.**" Now this simply means that Peter was outside the rooms of the palace, and yet he was in the open courtyard, located in the central portion of the building.⁴

Although the court is open to the air above, at times an awning is drawn over a portion of it.⁵

And some houses have a gallery around the sides of the court.⁶

Often planted with trees, shrubs, or flowers. These Oriental courtyards are often made beautiful

by the presence of trees, shrubs, or various flowers.⁷

The Psalmist refers to such a practice with the familiar words: "**I am like a green olive tree in the house of God**" (Psalm 52:8). And again he said: "**Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God**" (Psalm 92:13). He is illustrating divine truth by referring to trees so often planted in courtyards of houses. Actually trees were never planted in the Temple courts.⁸

Cisterns often built in courts. The interesting story of two men in the days of David who hid from Absalom is told in II Samuel 17:18, 19. "**But they went both of them away quickly, and came to a man's house in Bahurim, which had a well in his court; whither they went down. And the woman took and spread a covering over the well's mouth, and spread ground corn thereon: and the thing was not known.**" The "well" mentioned here was actually a "cistern" which is often dug in Oriental courtyards in order to catch the rain water. *When these cisterns are dry, they make good places for fugitives to hide.* Because the mouth of these cisterns is at the level of the ground, it makes it easy to cover it over with some article, and then spread grain over that, and thus the place of hiding can be kept secret.⁹

Fires often kindled in courts in cold weather. This practice is illustrated in Simon Peter's experience of denying Jesus. A fire was built in the courtyard of the high priest's house where JESUS was being tried. John 18:18 says: "**And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warmed themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself.**"

Courtyard as a bathing-place. When the Scripture says that David from his palace roof saw the beautiful Bathsheba bathing (II Samuel 11:2), it needs to be understood, that she was in the courtyard on the inside of her house, not visible to ordinary observation, yet the king from his palace roof saw her and was tempted to sin.¹⁰

Meals often eaten in the courtyard. Today, as in the days of JESUS, meals are often eaten in the interior court of the Oriental house. No doubt JESUS was entertained at meals which were served in the open court of His host's house.¹¹

THE DOOR AND THE PORCH

Location and appearance of the door. The door or gate was located in the middle of the front side of the house. This entrance was usually so arranged that nobody could see into it from the street. Sometimes a wall was built in front of it to serve this purpose.¹²

Oriental gates, or large doors often have small doors like a panel within them. The small door is in use for ordinary occasions, and the large gate or door is opened only on extraordinary occasions.¹³

Acts 12:13 speaks of Peter knocking "**at the door of the gate,**" which doubtless means the smaller door within the larger gate.

The use of keys. The Oriental key of modern times is like the key of Isaiah's days, and most

certainly not like the small occidental variety. Isaiah 22:22 says: "**The key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder.**" Dr. Thomson tells of seeing different keys in Palestine that would be large enough to lay on the shoulder of a man. He saw one key about a foot and a half in length. The keys were usually made of wood. The lock is placed on the inside of the gate or door, and to make it possible for the owner of the house to unlock it, a hole is cut in the door, and he thrusts his arm through this hole, and then inserts the key. In Song of Solomon 5:4, the bride says: "**My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door.**" She saw him thrust his hand through the hole, that he might unlock the door and then go in.¹⁴

The porch and duties of the porter. The passageway inside the door and leading to the courtyard itself is called the porch. It is most often furnished with some kind of seats for the porter or for the servants.¹⁵

It was in this porch that one of Peter's denials, took place. "**And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth**" (Matthew 26:71; Mark 14:68).

It is the duty of the porter (or servant or member of the family serving in that capacity) to parley with any visitor who knocks on the door desiring admission.¹⁶

The purpose of this is to give opportunity to recognize the voice of the visitor, and identify him as a friend. So it is not expected that the door will be opened as soon as the knock is heard. The one inside will call out, "Who?" And the outsider, instead of giving his name, will rather answer, "I." Acts 12:13, 14 says: "**And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness.**" When Rhoda had listened to Peter's voice then she recognized who it was outside the gate.

The familiar words of Revelation 3:20 present the same idea: "**Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come into him,**" (for additional light on Revelation 3:20, study the relation between host and guest as given in Chapter Seven of this book). We must recognize the voice of the Saviour who is knocking. When JESUS came walking on the water to the fearful disciples in the storm, He did not say: "It is Jesus, be not afraid," but rather, "**It is I; be not afraid**" (Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20). They heard His voice and recognized that it was the voice of Jesus. The Oriental is trained to listen to a voice and be able to recognize a friend.¹⁷

THE UPPER ROOM

The upper room or chamber is a well-known part of many Oriental houses today, and is frequently referred to in the Bible (cf. II Kings 1:2; 23:12; Acts 9:37; 20:8, etc.). Those who cannot afford such a room are content with booths or arbors on the roof of their houses. But when it is possible to do so they construct a room. It provides a place of coolness in the hot weather, a place of retreat, and a distinguished guest is given accommodations there. If more than one room is built on the roof, it is called a summer house, in contrast with the winter house which is downstairs.¹⁸

The most famous upper room of Old Testament times was the prophet's chamber built for Elisha, that he might have a place of retirement suited to a man of prayer. There was doubtless an outside stairway leading to it, so that the prophet might come and go without disturbing the people in the house. The furnishings of the room included a bed, a table, a stool and a lampstand (candlestick) (II Kings 4:10).

In the New Testament there are several notable uses of the upper room. JESUS sent two disciples to secure the use of a guest chamber for the Passover meal. A large upper room was put at their disposal. With thousands of Jews from all over Palestine in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast, it was expected that anybody having such a room would gladly let it be used for that purpose.¹⁹ (See Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7-13) And then the prayer meeting that preceded Pentecost was held in an upper room (Acts 1:13). Perhaps it was the same room where JESUS had celebrated the Passover with them. At any rate, it had come to be their fixed place for meeting. Upon the death of Dorcas, Luke says her body was washed and placed in an upper chamber, according to the custom of those times. The miracle of her being raised from the dead followed Peter's going up into that upper room (Acts 9:36-41).

LETTING THE SICK MAN THROUGH THE ROOF TO JESUS

A knowledge of the Oriental house is necessary in order to understand the story of the palsied man, who was let down through a hole in the roof, in order to get him to JESUS to be healed. Mark and Luke both give this aspect of the story. Mark says: "**They uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed**" (Mark 2:4). Luke puts it this way: "**And let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus**" (Luke 5:19). These accounts present some difficulties, and several interpretations have been offered in solving them. The two most plausible ones will be given here.

The simplest explanation is that advocated by Dr. Thomson. He suggests that the sticks, thorn-bush, mortar, and earth of the roof were broken up, and thrown aside sufficiently, to let the sick man down into the house. He says that this could be done and the place could be repaired easily. Often this very thing is done in order to let grain, or straw or other things through. He testifies to having seen it done himself. The one difficulty about such a process, with the crowd below, would be the amount of dust caused. It would seem that Luke's account mentioning the letting down of the man through the tiling presents a difficulty to this interpretation. But some have considered "the tiling" to be a reference to the ordinarily constructed roof in the Orient. The Greek word for "tiling" means, "pottery ware," and such a word could describe a dirt roof when rolled and allowed to harden into clay.²¹

Other teachers of the Word have a different idea of what was done with the man. Advocating this view, Dr. Edersheim has this to say:

It is scarcely possible to imagine that the bearers of the paralytic would have attempted to dig through this into a room below, not to speak of the interruption and inconvenience caused to those below such an operation. But no such objection attaches if we regard it not as the main roof of the house, but as that of the covered gallery under which we are supposing the LORD to have stood . . . In such case it would have been comparatively easy to "unroof" the covering of "tiles"; and then "having dug out" an opening through the lighter framework which supported the

tiles, to let down their burden "**into the midst before Jesus.**"²²

In this connection Edersheim indicates that there were outside as well as inside stairways leading up to the roof.

MORE ELABORATE FURNISHINGS

The simple furnishings of a one-room house, where the common people lived, have already been described.

Houses of more than one room were inhabited by those in a better situation. The wealthy usually had upper rooms as well as lower rooms, and of course, the furnishings were more elaborate. The divan or raised seat was located around the borders of the room. The rich adorned these and floored them. They were used for seats during the daytime, and beds were put on them at night. Amos speaks of the luxury of ivory beds in his day (Amos 6:4). The bed customarily in use was a mattress and pillow that could be placed where desired. In wealthy homes, carpets, curtains, and awnings were present in abundance. The Oriental custom was to sit on the divan with the lower limbs of the body crossed.²³

1. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 90.
2. Ibid., pp. 90, 91.
3. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 384.
4. James M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 390.
5. Barrows, op. cit., p. 385.
6. Freeman, op. cit., p. 198.
7. Loc. cit.
8. Barrows, op. cit., p. 3B6.
9. Freeman, op. cit., p. 146.
10. Ibid., p. 144.
11. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of CHRIST*, p. 178.
12. Barrows, op. cit., pp. 384, 385.
13. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, p. 251.
14. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. III, pp. 413, 414.
15. Barrows, op. cit., p. 3as.
16. Rice, op. cit., p. 251.
17. Milton B. Undberg, *A Guest in a Palestinian Home* (pamphlet), pp. 3,4.
18. Mackie, op. cit., pp. 92, 93.
19. Thomson, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 562.
20. Ibid., Vol. II, pp. 433, 434.
21. "Tiling," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, Charles R. Barnes, ed., p. 1107.
22. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of JESUS the Messiah*, Vol. I, p. 503.
23. Barrows, op. cit., p. 394.

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