

JAMES M. FREEMAN

AN ILLUSTRATED REFERENCE
TO THE
MANNERS & CUSTOMS
OF THE
BIBLE



WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's Note: This new edition from Whitaker House has been updated for the modern reader. In particular, outdated names of geographical locations and people groups have been replaced with contemporary terms.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

AN ILLUSTRATED REFERENCE TO MANNERS AND CUSTOMS OF THE BIBLE
(Previously titled *Manners & Customs of the Bible*)

ISBN: 978-1-64123-660-7

eBook ISBN: 978-1-64123-661-4

Printed in the United States of America

© 1996, 2021 by Whitaker House

Whitaker House
1030 Hunt Valley Circle
New Kensington, PA 15068
www.whitakerhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (Pending)

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PREFACE

Though the Bible is adapted to all nations, it is in many respects an Oriental book. It represents the modes of thought and the peculiar customs of a people who, in their habits, widely differ from us. Graham, who lived among them for many years, has graphically said: "Modes, customs, usages, all that you can set down to the score of the national, the social, or the conventional, are precisely as different from yours as the East is different from the West. They sit when you stand; they lie when you sit; they do to the head what you do to the feet; they use fire when you use water; you shave the beard, they shave the head; you move the hat, they touch the breast; you use the lips in salutation, they touch the forehead and the cheek; your house looks outwards, their house looks inwards; you go *out* to take a walk, they go up to enjoy the fresh air; you drain your land, they sigh for water; you bring your daughters out, they keep their wives and daughters in; your ladies go barefaced through the streets, their ladies are always covered" (*The Jordan and the Rhine*, p. 4).

The Oriental customs of today are, mainly, the same as those of ancient times. It is said by a recent writer that "the classical world has passed away. We must reproduce it if we wish to see it as it was." While this fact must be remembered in the interpretation of some New Testament passages, it is nevertheless true that many ancient customs still exist in their primitive integrity. If a knowledge of Oriental customs is essential to a right understanding of numerous Scripture passages, it is a cause of rejoicing that these customs are so stereotyped in their character that we have but to visit the Bible lands of the present day to see the modes of life of patriarchal times.

The design of this volume is to illustrate the Bible by an explanation of the Oriental customs to which it refers. The Bible becomes more than ever a real book when we can read it with understanding. While this is eminently true of its doctrines, it is also true of its facts. A distinguished author has aptly said: "In studying the Bible the dictionary of things is almost as important as the dictionary of words." It is a part of this "dictionary of things" that we

propose to furnish in this book, though not in the form of a dictionary. The texts illustrated are arranged in the order in which they occur in the Bible, and are accompanied by explanations of the customs to which they allude. This method seems to be the most natural for Bible study, and is the plan followed by Burder, Rosenmüller, and Roberts.

The materials for a work of this character are more abundant now than ever. Supplementing the labors of those who in former days visited Egypt and Syria, travelers have, within a few years, entered new regions and brought to light facts hitherto unknown. The explorations of such men as Botta, Layard, Loftus, and Smith, and the labors of the Palestine Exploration Societies, both of England and America, have been productive of rich results, and, without doubt, results yet more valuable are to follow. The pick and the spade are to be the humble instruments of illustrating and authenticating the Word of God. Already, through their agency, important discoveries have been made. Ancient tablets covered with strange characters have been brought to light; by patient labor and wonderful ingenuity these characters have been deciphered, and made to tell the secrets which for ages they had kept concealed. The tombs of Egypt, the palaces of Assyria, and the royal records of Moab, have been compelled to speak, and now, in different languages, they bear testimony for God and his truth.

Of this varied and valuable material we have endeavored to make diligent use in the preparation of this volume. As it would encumber the work with multitudinous notes of reference to give, in every instance, the authority for the statements made, a list of the principal authors consulted is appended.

Should this volume aid the student in obtaining a better understanding of the Bible, the labor of the writer will not have been in vain.

GENESIS

■ 1. USE OF THE TERM *FATHER*

Adah bare Jabal: he was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle. And his brother's name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ. (Genesis 4:20–21)

In the East, the originator of any custom is frequently spoken of as the *father* of that custom; so, also, a man is often described by representing him to be the father of some peculiarity that distinguishes him from others. A man with a very long beard is called the *father of a beard*. One of the Arabs who accompanied Palmer in his journey across the desert of the Exodus was called the *father of the top-knot* because the lock of hair on top of his head was of unusual size. A celebrated Arab chief was called the *father of the ostrich* because of the fleetness of the favorite horse that he rode. Dr. Thomson was once called by the mischievous young Arabs the *father of a saucepan* because they fancied that his black hat resembled that culinary utensil. When Loftus was in Chaldea his cook on one occasion killed two lion cubs. The Arabs, from that time forth, saluted him as *Abú Sebá'in*, that is, the *father of the two lions*.

The name *father* is also applied to beasts or birds, and even to inanimate things. In Egypt the kite is sometimes called the *father of the air* because of its power of flight. An African city was called *Boo Hadgar*, the *father of stone*—that is, a stony city. There is a Turkish coin called the *father of a cannon* because of the representation of a cannon which is upon it.

In like manner Jabal was called “*the father of such as dwell in tents*” because he was probably the inventor of tents, and Jubal, “*the father of all such as handle the harp and organ*,” because he invented those instruments.

This use of the term *father* is also found in other parts of the Bible. In Isaiah 9:6, the Messiah is called “*the Everlasting Father*,” or *the Father of Eternity*; that is, he is the giver of eternal life; in John 8:44, the devil is called the father of lies; in Romans 4:12, Abraham is said to be “*the father of circumcision*”; and

God is called “*the Father of mercies*” in 2 Corinthians 1:3 and “*the Father of glory*” in Ephesians 1:17. There is a corresponding use of the word *children*. (See note on Matthew 9:15.)

■ 2. BABYLONIAN BRICKS—BITUMEN

They said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.

(Genesis 11:3)



Babylonian Brick

The soil of Babylonia is an alluvial deposit—rich, tenacious, and well-adapted for brickmaking. While many of the bricks of that country were merely sun-dried, others were burned, as were those in the tower of Babel. Fire-burnt bricks were sometimes laid as an outer covering to walls of sun-dried brick. The finest quality of bricks was of a yellow color, resembling our fire bricks; another very hard kind was of a dark blue; the commoner and coarser sorts were pink or red. Amid the ruins

of Babylonia ancient bricks have been discovered, in large quantities, stamped with inscriptions of great value to the archaeologist. The ordinary size of these bricks is twelve to fourteen inches square, and three to four inches thick. At the corners of buildings half-bricks were used in the alternate rows.

The “*slime*” here spoken of is bitumen, which is still found bubbling from the ground in the neighborhood of ancient Babylon, where it is now used for mortar, as in former times. It is also found in some parts of Palestine. At Hasbeiya, near the source of the Jordan, there are wells or pits dug, in which bitumen collects, exuding from the crevices in the rocks. The “*slimepits*” mentioned in Genesis 14:10 may have been similar to these. They were near the Dead Sea, where bitumen is still to be found.

Loftus (*Travels and Researches in Chaldea and Susiana*, p. 31) approves the suggestion of Captain Newbold that the ancient Babylonians in some instances burned their bricks in the walls of their buildings to render them more durable. The rude walls, erected with unburnt brick, cemented with hot bitumen, are supposed to have been exposed to the action of a furnace heat until they became a solid vitrified mass. This is indeed burning “*thoroughly*” and it may have been the method that the Babel builders intended to pursue

had they been permitted to finish their tower; as they said, according to the marginal reading, “*Let us make brick, and burn them to a burning.*”

■ 3. PHARAOH

The princes also of Pharaoh saw her. (Genesis 12:15)

Pharaoh is the common title of the native Egyptian kings mentioned in Scripture. The word itself does not mean *king* as was formerly supposed; recent investigations have satisfied Egyptologists that it means *the sun*. This title was given to the king because he was considered the representative on earth of the god *Ra*, or *the sun*. It is difficult to tell which particular Pharaoh or king is referred to here.



Pharaoh

■ 4. USE OF THE TERM BROTHER

And also brought again his brother Lot. (Genesis 14:16)

In Genesis 11:31, Lot is said to be the nephew, not the brother, of Abram. In like manner, “*Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s brother*” (Genesis 29:12), whereas according to Genesis 28:5, he was the son of her father’s sister—that is, her father’s nephew.

This elastic use of the word *brother* is quite common in the East, however strange it may seem to us; yet we have a usage somewhat similar in the application of the term to persons not in any way related to us. We call fellow countrymen, fellow craftsmen, or fellow churchmen “brothers.” The Orientals apply the term to their kinsmen of whatever relation.

■ 5. UPLIFTED HAND

And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth.
(Genesis 14:22)

This was Abram’s method of taking a solemn oath; a mode still practiced in the East, and to some extent in the West. It is said in Isaiah 62:8, “*The LORD hath sworn by his right hand.*” (See also Daniel 12:7; Revelation 10:5–6; the notes on Proverbs 11:21 and Ezekiel 21:14.)

■ 6. BURNING LAMP

And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. (Genesis 15:17)

The *burning lamp* is supposed to have been an emblem of the divine presence, as fire is represented to be in other parts of the Scriptures. In *Oriental Illustrations of the Sacred Scriptures*, Rev. Roberts says that in India, the burning lamp or fire is still used in confirmation of a covenant. If one's promise is doubted he will point to the flame, saying, "That is the witness." The marriages of the East Indian gods and demigods are described as being performed in the presence of the god of fire. To this day, it is a general practice at the celebration of a marriage to have fire as a witness of the transaction. Roberts says, "Fire is the witness of their covenant, and, if they break it, fire will be their destruction."

■ 7. RELIGION OF NAMES

And she called the name of the LORD that spake unto her, Thou God seest me. (Genesis 16:13)

One of the most prevalent superstitions in Egypt was connected with the religion of names. The Egyptians gave to each of their gods a name indicative of specific office and attributes. It was thus perfectly natural that Hagar, who was an Egyptian, should give a title of honor to Him who appeared to her in the wilderness. Some suppose that the Israelites were influenced by this superstition during their long bondage in Egypt, and that it is to this that Moses refers in Exodus 3:13; and, further, that out of indulgence to this weakness, God was pleased to give Himself a name—one expressive of His eternal self-existence (Exodus 3:14). This ancient Egyptian custom found its way to other nations. Zechariah, alluding to this, speaks of the time when there shall be "*one LORD, and his name one*" (Zechariah 14:9).

■ 8. TENT DOOR—TIME OF REST

And he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. (Genesis 18:1)

The "*tent door*" is a fold of the lower part of the tent, which is fastened by a loop to the post nearby. It may thus be opened or closed at pleasure. For the sake of light and air, it is generally thrown back during the day.

Noon is the hour of rest among the Orientals. When the sun is at its height, the wind often becomes softer and the heat more oppressive. Then the dwellers in tents may be seen sitting *in the door*, or reclining in the shade of the tent. It is also the hour for dinner (Genesis 43:16, 25). Some travelers say that the Arabs eat by the door of the tent in order to notice the stranger passing by

and invite him to eat with them. In the case mentioned in the text, Abraham had probably dined and was resting after dinner.

■ 9. BOWING—HOSPITALITY

And when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, and said, My LORD, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant.

(Genesis 18:2–3)

There are different modes of bowing in the East. In this case the word used (*shachah*) denotes complete prostration of the body; the person falls upon the knees and then gradually inclines the body until the head touches the ground. (See also Genesis 23:7, 12; 42:6; 43:26.)

There is in this text a beautiful illustration of Oriental hospitality. The company of the travelers is solicited as a personal favor to the host, and all the resources of the establishment are used for their entertainment (Genesis 19:2–3; Judges 6:19; 13:15; Job 31:32). Modern travelers often refer to the earnestness with which this hospitality is urged upon them at the present day. It is not always, however, to be regarded as unselfish, in many instances a return being expected from the traveler who is thus entertained. A recent writer says, “Arabs are still as fond as ever of exercising the virtue of hospitality.”



Oriental Bowing

As they practice it, it is a lucrative speculation. The Bedouin sheikh, knowing that he must not nowadays expect to entertain angels unawares, takes a special care to entertain only such as can pay a round sum for the accommodation, or give their host a good dinner in return. The casual and impecunious stranger may, it is true, claim the traditional three days' board and lodging, but he must be content with the scraps that “*fell from the rich man's table*” (Luke 16:21) and prepare to hear “very outspoken hints of the undesirability of his presence” (E. H. Palmer's *The Desert of the Exodus*, p. 486).

■ 10. FEET WASHING

Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.

(Genesis 18:4)

Where the soil is dry and dusty, and the feet shod with sandals, frequent washing of the feet becomes not only a luxury, but a necessity for comfort and health. It is as much a part of hospitality, under these circumstances, for a host to see that his guests' feet are washed, as it is to provide them with food or furnish them a place for repose (Genesis 24:32). Joseph's steward gave his brethren water for their feet (Genesis 43:24). Among the ancient Egyptians, the basins kept in the houses of the rich for this purpose were sometimes of gold. Jesus refers to this custom of feet washing when He mildly reproves Simon the Pharisee for neglecting to give Him water for this purpose (Luke 7:44). Paul, when writing to Timothy concerning the qualifications necessary for the aged widows to receive the church's charity, includes, "*If she have washed the saints' feet*" (1 Timothy 5:10). This work was the duty of a servant (1 Samuel 25:41) and it is this fact that gives force to the beautiful symbolic action of our Lord as recorded in John 13:4–15. The Master of all became a servant to all.

Feet were washed on returning from a journey and on retiring to bed (Genesis 19:2; 2 Samuel 11:8; Song of Solomon 5:3).

■ II. BREAD MAKING

And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth.
(Genesis 18:6)

Bread in the East is made from wheat or barley, rye being but little cultivated. The "*fine meal*" here is wheat flour finely sifted and considered very choice. The "*three measures*" were equal to an ephah, which is supposed to have contained a little less than a bushel. It was an ordinary quantity for baking. (See Judges 6:19; 1 Samuel 1:24; Matthew 13:33.) The *seah* or "measure" is also mentioned in 2 Kings 7:1, 16.

From the haste with which this bread was prepared, it was evidently unleavened. The flour and water were hastily mixed, and the thin dough was either laid on heated stones, where the cakes would soon bake, or the *hearth*, a smooth spot of ground on which fire had been kindled and the embers brushed off; the dough was placed on the ground and the embers raked over it. In either way, the bread would soon be ready for the guests. (See also 1 Kings 17:12–13; 19:6.)

Palmer, while visiting the outlying districts of Sinai, found the remains of a large and evidently ancient encampment upon the watershed of Wady

el-Hebeibeli. "The small stones which formerly served, as they do in the present day, for hearths, in many places still showed signs of the action of fire, and on digging beneath the surface we found pieces of charcoal in great abundance" (*The Desert of the Exodus*, p. 258). What gives peculiar interest to this discovery is the fact that Palmer here thinks he discovered the remains of the ancient Israelite camp at Kibroth-Hattaavah. (The curious reader is referred to Palmer's interesting work, pp. 260, 312, 507–508.)

■ 12. HOSTS—FLESH FOOD

Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. (Genesis 18:7)

The primitive manner in which Abraham and Sarah personally attended to the wants of their guests finds illustration in what Dr. Shaw says of the Arab chieftains in Barbary. There, the greatest prince is not ashamed to bring a lamb from the flock and kill it, while the princess, his wife, prepares the fire and cooks it. This meat was cooked as soon as the animal was killed, in accordance with the oriental usage. A common method of preparing a hasty meal among the Arabs is to cut up the meat into small pieces, run them on small spits or skewers, and broil them over the fire.

■ 13. BUTTER—FEASTS

And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. (Genesis 18:8)

The word here rendered butter (*chemah*) is said usually to signify curdled milk. It is also supposed that it was this which Jael gave to Sisera "in a lordly dish" (Judges 5:25). It is at this day frequently used in eastern countries under the name of *leben*.

A description of an Arab feast, as given by modern travelers, will illustrate the mode of preparing and eating food. The meat is boiled with camel's milk, and with wheat which has been previously boiled and then dried in the sun. It is served up in a large wooden dish, in the center of which the boiled wheat is placed, and the meat around the edge. A wooden bowl containing the melted fat of the animal is pressed down in the midst of the boiled wheat, and every morsel is dipped into this melted fat before being swallowed. A bowl of camel's

milk is handed round after the meal. It is not certain that milk was formerly used in cooking meat, as is here seen to be the modern Bedouin custom.

It is common still in the East to see travelers and guests eating under the shade of trees.

■ 14. TENT PARTITION

Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. (Genesis 18:10)

This was not the tent door referred to in verse 1, but the partition separating the women's part of the tent from that belonging to the men. Such partitions are often seen in modern Bedouin tents. (For a description of these tents, see note on Song of Solomon 1:5.)

■ 15. GATES

And Lot sat in the gate of Sodom.

(Genesis 19:1)



City Gate

The gateways of walled cities, as well as the open spaces near them, were popular places of resort, being vaulted and cool, convenient for the meeting of friends or for a view of strangers, since all who went in or out must pass that way. They often resembled large stone halls and had sufficient area to accommodate large assemblages. The people assembled at the close of the day to tell the news and discuss various topics of interest. Thus it was that Lot at evening happened to be in the city gate when the strangers came

by. In this position, he readily saw them as they entered. Allusion to this use of the gate may be found in numerous other passages. (See Genesis 23:10; 34:20; 1 Samuel 4:18; Job 29:7; Psalm 69:12; 127:5; Proverbs 1:21.) Other uses of the gate will be noticed further on.

■ 16. TOWN QUARTERS

But before they lay down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter. (Genesis 19:4)

In Eastern cities, there are different quarters where people live according to their nation, religion, or occupation. These quarters are named after the occupants, such as the Christian quarter, the Jews' quarter, the Franks' quarter, the quarter of the water-carriers, and the like. This usage may have existed at a very early age, and if so, it probably is referred to in the text. The merchants and tradesmen of Sodom came from the different *quarters* where they lived and surrounded Lot's house. There may also be a reference to this custom in Isaiah 47:15; 56:11. Jeremiah 37:21 speaks of "*the bakers' street.*"

■ 17. LOOKING BEHIND

But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. (Genesis 19:26)

Roberts says the expression "*from behind him*" seems to imply that she was following her husband, which is the custom in India to this day. He also states that when men or women leave the house, they never look back, as "it would be very unfortunate." Should a man on going to his work leave anything that his wife knows he will require, she will not call after him lest he turn or look back, but will either take the article herself or send it by another. If a palanquin comes up behind any persons who are walking in the road, they will not look behind to see it, but carefully step a little to one side until it has passed, when they will gratify their curiosity.

■ 18. CAVE DWELLINGS

And Lot...dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters. (Genesis 19:30)

The country of Judea, being mountainous and rocky, is full of caverns. Caves and clefts in the rock were probably among the earliest dwelling places of man. The inhabitants of Mount Taurus, even to this day, live in caves, as do many of the wandering shepherds of Arabia Petrea. Thus Lot found a home for himself and his daughters. Some of these caves are of immense size, capable of holding hundreds and even thousands of people, and might easily be converted into strongholds for troops. It was in this way that the children of Israel sheltered themselves from the Midianites (Judges 6:2) and the Philistines (1 Samuel 13:6). It was thus that David, with 400 men, was concealed in the cave Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1–2) and afterward with 600 in Ziph and Engedi (1 Samuel 23:13–14, 29; 24:3). Caves have been common places of resort for the persecuted people of God in all ages (Hebrews 11:38).