

MANNERS AND CUSTOMS OF THE BIBLE - VOLUME 1

by James M. Freeman

Freeman's comprehensive reference guide explaining Oriental customs and practices reflected in biblical narratives, designed to help Western readers understand the cultural context of biblical events, ceremonies, and everyday life in the ancient Near East.

99 Chapters

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000.2 Preface

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. One 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, W. Graham, 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 understandingly. 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.

001 Use of the Term Father

Use of the Term Father

Genesis 4:20-21. 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. 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 which distinguishes him from others. A man of 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 which 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 negro 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 found, also, 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"; in 2 Corinthians 1:3, God is called "the father of mercies"; and in Ephesians 1:17, "the father of glory." There is a corresponding use of the word children. See note on Matthew 9:15 (#650).

002 Babylonian Bricks Bitumen

Babylonian Bricks Bitumen

Genesis 11:3. 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.

1. The soil of Babylonia is an alluvial deposit, rich and tenacious, and well adapted for brick making. 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 firebricks; 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.

2. 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 “slime-pits” 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 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. Fine 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 which 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.”

003 Pharaoh

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

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 what particular Pharaoh or king is referred to here.

004 Use of the Term Brother

Use of the Term Brother Genesis 14:16. And also brought again his brother Lot. In chapter Genesis 11:31 Lot is said to be the nephew, not the brother, of Abram. In like manner Jacob told Rachel (Genesis 29:12) that he was her father's brother; 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, or fellow craftsmen, or fellow churchmen, brothers. The Orientals apply the term to their kinsmen of whatever relation.

005 Uplifted Hand

Uplifted Hand

Genesis 14:22. 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. 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 note on Proverbs 11:21 (#461); and also on Ezekiel 21:14 (#677).

006 Burning Lamp

Burning Lamp

Genesis 15:17. 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. 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. 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 of the lamp, 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; and it is to this day a general practice at the celebration of a marriage to have fire as a witness of the transaction. “Fire is the witness of their covenant, and, if they break it, fire will be their destruction.” Orient. Illus., p. 21.

007 Religion of Names

Religion of Names Genesis 16:13. And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me.

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 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 “in that day there be one Lord, and his name one” (Zechariah 14:9).

008 Tent Door Time of Rest

Tent Door Time of Rest Genesis 18:1. And he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. The “door of the tent” 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. See Genesis 43:16; Genesis 43:25. Some travelers say that the Arabs eat by the door of the tent in order to notice the stranger passing by, and to invite him to eat with them. In the case mentioned in the text Abraham had probably dined, and was resting after dinner.

009 Bowing Hospitality

Bowing Hospitality

Genesis 18:2-3. 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 favor in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant.

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

2. 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. See Genesis 19:2-3; Judges 6:18; Judges 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. As they practice it, it is a lucrative speculation. The Bedaw 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 'which fall from the rich man's table,' and prepare to hear very outspoken hints of the undesirability of his presence" (Palmer's Desert of the Exodus, p. 486).

010 Feet Washing

Feet Washing Genesis 18:4 Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 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 to furnish them a place for repose. See Genesis 24:32. The steward of Joseph gave to Joseph's 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. To this custom of feet-washing the Saviour refers when he mildly reproves Simon the Pharisee, at whose house he was a guest, 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 who are to be recipients of the charity of the Church, names this among others: "if she have washed the saints' feet" (1 Timothy 5:10). This work was the duty of a servant (see 1 Samuel 25:41), and it is this fact which 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. See Genesis 19:2; 2 Samuel 11:8; Song of Solomon 5:3.

011 Bread Making

Bread Making

Genesis 18:6. 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.

1. Bread in the East is made from wheat or barley, rye being but little cultivated. The “fine meal” here spoken of is wheat flour finely sifted, and is considered very choice.
2. 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; 2 Kings 7:16.
3. 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” in the text was a smooth spot of ground on which fire had been kindled and the embers brushed off, when the dough was placed on the ground and the embers raked over it. In other way the bread would soon be ready for the guests. See also 1 Kings 17:12-13; 1 Kings 19:6.

Palmer, while visiting the outlying districts of Sinai, found, upon the watershed of Wady el-Hebeibeh, the remains of a large and evidently ancient encampment. “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.” (Desert of the Exodus, p. 258). What gives peculiar interest to this discovery is the fact that Mr. Palmer thinks that he here discovered the remains of the ancient Israelitish camp at Kibroth-Hattaavah. A detail of the reasoning by which he reaches this conclusion would be out of place here. The curious reader is referred to Palmer’s interesting work, pp. 260, 312, 507, 508.

012 Hosts Flesh Food

Hosts Flesh Food Genesis 18:7. Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf... and gave it unto a young man; and he halted to dress it. 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.

013 Butter Feasts

Butter Feasts

Genesis 18:8. 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.

1. 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.

2. 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 Bedawin custom.

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

014 Tent Partition

Tent Partition Genesis 18:10. Sarah heard it in the tent-door... behind him. 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 Bedawin tents. For description of these tents. See note on Solomon's Song of Solomon 1:5 (#474).

015 Gates

Gates Genesis 19:1. And Lot sat in the gate of Sodom. The gateways of walled cities, as well as the open spaces near them, were popular places of resort, being vaulted and cool, and 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. There the people assembled at the close of the day to tell the news, and to 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; Genesis 34:20; 1 Samuel 4:13-18; Job 29:7; Psalms 69:12; Psalms 127:5; Proverbs 1:21.

Other uses of the gate will be noticed further on.

016 Town Quarters

Town Quarters

Genesis 19:4. 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. In Eastern cities there are different quarters where people live according to their nation, religion, or occupation. These quarters are named after the occupants: 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; Isaiah 56:11. In Jeremiah 37:21, “the bakers’ street” is spoken of.

017 Looking Behind

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

1. Roberts says, that the expression “from behind him,” seems to imply that she was following her husband, which to this day is the custom in India.

2. 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 which 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 palankeen (a closed litter borne by four) come up behind any persons who are walking in the road they will not look behind to see it, but carefully step a little on one side until it has passed, when they will gratify their curiosity.

018 Cave Dwellings

Cave Dwellings Genesis 19:30. He [Lot] dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters. 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 from the Philistines (1 Samuel 13:6). It was thus that David, with four hundred men, was concealed in the cave Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1-2), and afterward with six hundred in Ziph and in En-gedi (1 Samuel 23:13-14; 1 Samuel 23:29; 1 Samuel 24:3). Caves have been common places of resort for the persecuted people of God in all ages. See Hebrews 11:38.

019 Weaning Feast

Weaning Feast Genesis 21:8. Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.

It is still customary in the East to have a festive gathering at the time a child is weaned. Among the Hindus, when the time for weaning has come, the event is accompanied with feasting and religious ceremonies during which rice is formally presented to the child.

020 Burden on Shoulder

Burden on Shoulder Genesis 21:14. Putting it on her shoulder.

It was an ancient Egyptian custom for the women to carry burdens on the shoulder, and for the men to carry them on the head. The women in Palestine, to this day, carry the water skins and earthen jars upon the shoulder. It was thus that Rebecca carried her water pitcher (Genesis 24:15). Sometimes they carry these jars on the head. It is said by some writers, that in India the women of high rank carry the water jars on the shoulder, and the common women carry them on the head.

021 Early Rising Saddles

Early Rising Saddles Genesis 22:3. Abraham rose up early.... and saddled his ass.

1. The habit of early rising is all but universal in Palestine. The climate makes this a necessity for the greater part of the year, the heat being so great that hard labor is oppressive a few hours after sunrise. At early dawn laborers go to their work and travelers start on their journeys. The Scripture references to this custom are numerous. See, for instance, Genesis 19:2; Genesis 21:14; Genesis 28:18; Exodus 34:4; Job 1:5; Psalms 63:1.

2. We are not to imagine by the term "saddle" anything similar to what we call by that name. The ancient saddle was merely a piece of cloth thrown over the back of the animal on which the rider sat. See Matthew 21:7. "No nation of antiquity knew the use of either saddles or stirrups." (Goguet, Origin of Laws. Cited by Burder.)

022 Going and Coming

Going and Coming Genesis 22:5. I and the lad will go... and come again.

Roberts says, that the people of the East never say, as we do when taking leave, "I will go" or "I am going," but, "I go and return."

023 Ceremonial Mourning

Ceremonial Mourning Genesis 23:2. Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.

We shall have occasion, in noticing other passages, to refer to the different modes of manifesting grief at times of bereavement; it is only necessary to say here, that there is in this text an evident allusion to a ceremonial mourning. The word “came” indicates this. The passage shows the antiquity of the custom of formal manifestation of sorrow in honor of the dead.

024 Mode of Bargaining

Mode of Bargaining

Genesis 23:5-6. The children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him, Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the choice of our sepulchers bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulcher, but that thou mayest bury thy dead.

We have in the interesting narrative of this business transaction an exact representation of the Oriental mode of trafficking. Abraham, a great prince, but a stranger, wishes to buy a piece of land for a family burial place. He makes the proposition to those members of the tribe of Hittites in whose territory the land lies. They respond by offering him the use of any one of their own sepulchers which he may select. This generosity, however, is a mere ceremony preliminary to driving a bargain in which they mean to make as much as possible out of the rich stranger. So, also, when Ephron is approached in reference to selling the lot which Abraham desires, he says (vs. 11), "Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee: bury thy dead." This seems to be a wonderful liberality on the part of this Hittite, but he does not expect that his offer will be accepted; or, if actually accepted, he expects in return a present that shall be worth more than his gift.

025 Middlemen

Middlemen Genesis 23:8. Entreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar.

Abraham does not go directly to Ephron, but he gets some of the Hittites to plead for him. No business of importance can to this day be transacted in the East without middlemen.

026 How Money Was Used

How Money Was Used

Genesis 23:16. Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant.

1. The Hebrews probably learned the use of metallic money from the Phenicians, among whom their ancestors dwelt, and who are said to have been the inventors of silver money. Other nations for a long time made oxen and sheep the standard of value. Silver was the metal at first generally used for currency, gold being kept for articles of jewelry. Gold money is first mentioned in 1 Chronicles 21:25. though, of course, it may have been used before the time there referred to. Some suppose that in early times gold jewelry was made of specified weight, so that it might be used for money. See Genesis 24:22.

2. Ancient money, being uncoined, was weighed instead of being counted. Even to this day Oriental merchants weigh the silver and gold which are the medium of traffic; not only the bullion, but the coined pieces also, lest some dishonest trader might pass upon them a coin of light weight. The ancient Egyptians, and some other nations, used rings of gold and of silver for the same purposes that coins are now used. These rings were weighed, the weights being in the form of oxen, lions, geese, sheep, and other animals. Some of these weights have been found; they are made of bronze, and with a ring projecting from the back for a handle. The weighing of money is also referred to in Jeremiah 32:9-10 and in Zechariah 11:12.

3. The word shekel (from shakal, to weigh) indicates the original mode of reckoning money by weight rather than by count; and when coined money was introduced it was natural that the name originally applied to what was weighed should be given to what was counted. Thus we find in the Bible a shekel of weight and a shekel of money. The exact weight of the shekel is not known. It is estimated to have been between nine and ten pennyweights, and is supposed to have been worth nearly sixty cents. This would make the value of the field Abraham bought of Ephron nearly two hundred and forty dollars.

4. The expression "current," seems to indicate some understood standard of value, either as to the purity of the silver or the weight, or both. "The Phenician merchants usually tried the silver themselves, and then, after dividing a bar into smaller pieces, put the mark upon them" (Michoelis). There may also have been a mark on the bar or on the ring money to indicate its weight.

027 Transfer of Property

Transfer of Property

Genesis 23:17-18. The field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the borders round about, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city.

1. All the details of the contract are here given as is still customary in an Oriental bargain. Everything appertaining to the lot is here put down; field, cave, trees, everything "in all the borders round about." Dr. Thomson says, "The contract must mention everything that belongs to it (the lot), and certify that fountains or wells in it, trees upon it, etc., are sold with the field. If you rent a house, not only the building itself, but every room in it, above and below, down to the kitchen, pantry, stable, and hen-coop, must be specified." (The Land and the Book, vol. 2, p. 383).

2. There is no evidence here of any written contract, and probably there was none. The bargain was made "sure" by being consummated in the presence of the crowd assembled at the gate, as bargains often are now in the same country, the number of the witnesses precluding any withdrawing from the contract on either side.

3. We may now notice the steps by which the end of this bargain was gradually reached. How much time was consumed we are not told, but that there was a great deal of talking there can be no doubt. The whole scene vividly illustrates what many modern travelers describe from their own observation. 1. Abraham asks the Hittites the privilege of buying a place of burial (vs. 4). 2. They offer him the free use of any one of their own sepulchers that he may choose (vs. 6). 3. Abraham bows before them in acknowledgment of their courtesy (vs. 7). 4. He asks them to use their influence with Ephron to effect a sale (vs. 8). 5. Ephron offers to make him a present of the whole field and the cave, and calls on the people to be witnesses of his generosity and sincerity (vs. 11). 6. Abraham bows again before them (vs. 12). 7. He declines to take it as a gift, and offers to pay for it (vs. 13). (See a parallel instance in 1 Chronicles 21:22-25.) 8. Ephron names his price (three or four times what the land was worth, if the ancient usages were the same as the modern), and intimates that such a price is a small matter for so great a prince as he is dealing with (vs. 15). 9. Abraham, not being in a condition to insist on lower terms, accepts the offer (vs. 16). 10. The money is weighed, and the land becomes the property of Abraham (vs. 16).

028 Cave Sepulchers

Cave Sepulchers Genesis 23:19. Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah.

Sepulchral caves are still found in many parts of the East. Sometimes a natural cave is used, with such modifications as necessity may require. The place where Abraham buried Sarah was undoubtedly a natural cave. Tombs were frequently hewn out of the rock. See note on Isaiah 22:16 (#501).

029 Chief Servant Mode of Swearing

Chief Servant Mode of Swearing Genesis 24:2-3. Abraham said unto his eldest servant... Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh, and... swear.

1. The most intelligent and faithful servant in the household was appointed overseer of the others. The word "eldest" is not of necessity expressive of age, but of authority. This was the head servant, chief of all the rest, though some of them may have been over others. In a similar way we use the word "elder" in an official sense, even when applied to young men. Such head-servants or stewards may still be seen portrayed on Egyptian tombs, with their secretaries, implements of writing, stewards' account books, and articles for domestic use. This was the position which Joseph filled (Genesis 39:4).

2. The mode of swearing here spoken of seems to have been peculiar to the patriarchs. Jacob required Joseph thus to swear to him (Genesis 47:29). Various conjectures have been made as to the precise position of the hand or hands in taking this oath, for which, as well as for the supposed significance of the oath, commentators may be consulted.

030 Bride Chosen by Parents

Bride Chosen by Parents Genesis 24:4. Thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac. The bridegroom does not make choice of his bride; the parents negotiate this important business between themselves, and the young people are expected to acquiesce in the arrangement. In this instance Abraham sends a trusty servant hundreds of miles away to select for his son a wife whom he never saw. Hagar chose a wife for Ishmael (Genesis 21:21). Isaac gave command to Jacob on this important subject (Genesis 28:1). Judah selected a wife for Er (Genesis 38:6). Young men who chose wives for themselves without parental mediation usually afflicted their parents in so doing (Genesis 26:35; Genesis 27:46). The sons, however, had sometimes the privilege of suggesting their personal preferences to their parents. Thus Shechem did (Genesis 34:4) and also Samson (Judges 14:2).

031 Wells

Wells

Genesis 24:11 He made his camels to kneel down without the city by a well of water at the time of the evening, even the time that women go out to draw water.

“A modern guide-book could hardly furnish a truer picture of what occurs at the close of every day in the vicinity of Eastern villages than this description, written so many thousand years ago.” ■ Hackett, Illustrations of Scripture, p. 89.

1. The position of a camel when at rest is kneeling. These animals are taught it when young.
2. Villages are built near wells or springs for convenience, but not near enough to be discommoded by the noise and dust and crowds which are sure to be drawn to such places.
3. The work of carrying water is done almost invariably by women, excepting in some large Oriental cities, where men as well as women become water carriers. See Genesis 29:10; Exodus 2:16; 1 Samuel 9:11.
4. Evening and early morning are the usual times for visiting the well for a supply of water.

032 Pitchers

Pitchers Genesis 24:15. With her pitcher upon her shoulder. The ancient pitchers were of earthenware (Lamentations 4:2). See also Judges 7:20, where it is said that Gideon's men brake theirs. Such are used now for drawing water. Some have one handle, and others have two.

033 How Wells Are Used

How Wells Are Used Genesis 24:16. She went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up. The wells are usually approached by flights of steps, so that the women may dip their pitchers directly into the water. In some cases the wells are dug deep, and require a rope, or some simple machinery, for raising the water. See note on John 4:11 (#491).

034 Troughs

Troughs Genesis 24:20. She hastened, and emptied her pitcher into the trough.

These troughs are placed near the wells for convenience in watering cattle. They are made of wood or stone. Sometimes a long stone block is hollowed out, from which a number of animals can drink at once; and sometimes the troughs are smaller, several of them lying about the same well, each so small as to accommodate only one animal at a time.

See also Genesis 30:38; Exodus 2:16.

035 Nose Jewels Bracelets

Nose Jewels Bracelets

Genesis 24:22. It came to pass, as the camels had done drinking, that the man took a golden earring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold.

1. The “ear-ring” here spoken of (nezem) is more properly a nose-ring. The servant says (vs. 47), “I put the ear-ring upon her face.” The present of a single earring would be strange; to put it on the face would be stranger still. Nose-jewels are referred to in Proverbs 11:22, Isaiah 3:21, and Ezekiel 16:12, where for “forehead” in the text the margin has “nose.” The nose-ring is made generally of silver or gold, but sometimes of coral, mother-of-pearl, or even of horn, according to the taste or means of the wearer. This curious ornament varies considerably in size and thickness. The metal rings are usually from one inch to one inch and a half in diameter, and sometimes are as large as three inches. Beads, coral, or jewels, are strung upon them. They are usually hung from the right nostril, though sometimes from the left, and occasionally they are suspended from the middle filament of the nose. In India, according to Roberts. the nose-jewels are of different shapes, resembling a swan, a serpent, or a flower. Anderson saw them in Egypt, made of brass, but worn only by women of the lower class. Graham says that in Syria, as well as in Egypt, these ornaments are not worn among the respectable classes of society, but are found among the Africans and slaves; so that the fashion seems to have changed since Rebekah’s day, and since the time when Isaiah wrote.

2. The weight of the nose-jewel given to Rebekah (a half shekel) was nearly a quarter of an ounce, troy.

3. Bracelets are almost universally worn by women in the East. They are sometimes made of gold, sometimes of mother-of-pearl, but usually of silver. The poorer women wear them made of plated steel, horn, brass, copper, and occasionally nothing but simple strings of beads. The arms are sometimes crowded with them from wrist to elbow. They are sometimes flat, but more frequently round or semicircular, and are often made hollow to give, by their bulk, the appearance of greater weight. Bracelets (tsemedim) were also referred to in Numbers 31:50; Ezekiel 16:11; Ezekiel 23:42. The other passages in which “bracelets” occur have different words in the original, which will be explained under the several texts where they are used.

4. The weight of the bracelets presented to Rebekah (ten shekels) was over four and a half ounces. They are sometimes worn heavier than this, so as to seem more like manacles than bracelets.

036 Bridal Presents

Bridal Presents Genesis 24:53. The servant brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment, and gave them to Rebekah.

Rich and splendid apparel, especially such as was adorned with gold, was very general among Eastern nations from earliest times, and is still quite common. Reference is made to this in Psalms 45:9; Psalms 45:13 : “Upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir.”—“clothing is of wrought gold.”

These beautiful and costly bridal-presents are given to the intended bride by the expectant bridegroom for the purpose of binding the contract. See note on Matthew 1:18 (#629).

037 The Nurse

The Nurse Genesis 24:59. They sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse. In an Eastern family the nurse is a very important personage. She is esteemed almost as a parent; and, accompanying the bride to her new home, there remains with her. She becomes the adviser, the assistant, and the friend of the bride. To the nurse, as to a mother, the bride will confide her greatest secrets. Thus Rebekah took with her on her long journey to her future home the nurse who had cared for her since childhood, so that, besides the female servants she took with her (vs. 61), she might have one intimate familiar friend among strangers.

038 Uplifted Eyes Mark of Respect

Uplifted Eyes Mark of Respect Genesis 24:64. Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel.

1. The expression “lifted up” is often met with in the Scriptures in connection with the eyes. It does not always mean to look upward, but sometimes to look directly and earnestly at an object. Roberts says, it is to this day a common form of speech in India. We have in this text an illustration. Isaac may have looked upward when “he lifted up his eyes” and saw the caravan coming, for he was walking in the field, engaged in meditation (vs. 63), and very likely had his head inclined, and his eyes downward; but Rebekah, on the back of a camel, could hardly have looked upward when she saw Isaac. She simply looked directly and earnestly at him.

2. She quickly “lighted off” the camel when she discerned Isaac, thus giving him a customary mark of respect. In like manner Achsah alighted in the presence of Othniel and of Caleb (Joshua 15:18); Abigail thus alighted in the presence of David (1 Samuel 25:23), and even the haughty Naaman was so happy over his wonderful cure that he alighted from his chariot in the presence of Elisha’s servant (2 Kings 5:21), showing Gehazi the respect he would have shown to his master had he been present. Travelers tell us that this custom is still practiced.

039 The Veil

The Veil Genesis 24:65. The servant had said, It is my master: therefore she took a veil, and covered herself.

1. The custom of veiling the face of women, now so common in the East, was not general in the days of the patriarchs, nor for a long time after. The women usually appeared in public with faces exposed. Much of the modern Oriental scrupulousness on this subject is due to Mohammedan influence, the Koran forbidding women to appear unveiled except in the presence only of their nearest relatives. No representations of veils are found on either the Assyrian or the Egyptian monuments; yet the Egyptians, as well as the Hebrews, did use the veil on special occasions. Wilkinson says, that the ancient Egyptian veil was not so thick as the boorko of modern Egypt; but was thin enough to be seen through, like that of the Wahabees. The veiling of the bride before coming into the presence of the bridegroom is a very ancient custom, indicating modesty, and subjection to the husband.

It is claimed by some, however, that the tsaiph—both here and in Genesis 38:14, rendered “veil”—was not properly a veil, but rather a large wrapper which was worn out of doors; a light summer dress, of handsome appearance and of ample dimensions, so that it might be thrown over the head at pleasure. Thus, when she saw Isaac, Rebekah slipped the upper part of her loose flowing robe over her head, thereby concealing her face from her expectant lover.

040 Woman's Tent Marriage

Woman's Tent Marriage Genesis 24:67. Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife.

1. The expression "Sarah's tent" may mean nothing more than her apartment in the principal tent of the encampment (see Genesis 18:9-10; Judges 4:18; and see note on Song of Solomon 1:5, #474), though it is sometimes customary for the women to have separate tents of their own, as seems to have been the case with Leah and Rachel. Genesis 31:33. This would doubtless be desirable where there were more wives than one.

2. There is no evidence of any special religious forms in these primitive marriages. The preliminaries referring to dowry and similar financial matters being satisfactorily arranged, the man took his wife as Isaac took Rebekah. The essence of the marriage ceremony consisted in the removal of the bride from her father's house to that of the bridegroom or of his father.

041 Birthright

Birthright Genesis 25:31;Genesis 25:33. Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.... And he sold his birthright.

Great respect was paid by the household to the first-born son. He had headship over his brothers; he succeeded to the father's official authority; He had a special claim to the father's benediction; in him was the progenitorship of the Messiah; the domestic priesthood belonged to him, according to some authorities, though this is denied by others. Under the Mosaic law he received a double portion of the father's goods. This birthright could be transferred to another for a consideration, or withheld by the father for cause.

042 Item Missing

Item Missing

Genesis 25:34. Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Pottage was often made of lentile, and is so made at this day. Dr. Shaw says that they are cooked like beans, which they very much resemble, “dissolving easily into a mass, and making a pottage of a Chocolate color.” In India this sort of food is considered so cheap and common that it represents, in proverbial speech, anything that is worthless. “The fellow has sold his land for pottage”; that is, for an insignificant consideration. “The learned one has fallen into the pottage-pot”; that is, the wise man has done what was not expected of him—a mean thing. “He is trying to procure rubies by pottage”; that is, he wishes to get great things by small means (Roberts). These expressions illustrate the despicable conduct of Esau, who sold his priceless birthright for a mess of mean food, the emblem of worthlessness.

043 Customs Concerning Wells

Customs Concerning Wells

Genesis 26:15. All the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth. In the East, digging wells gives title to unoccupied lands. Isaac therefore owned by inheritance the land in the vicinity of which these wells had been dug by his father's direction. In a pastoral country it is a serious matter to choke up the wells which have been dug for the convenience of flocks and herds. It is, in fact, a declaration of war, and has always been considered a hostile act. Thus the Israelites did according to Divine command when they invaded Moab (2 Kings 3:19; 2 Kings 3:25). In some parts of Persia the people have a way of concealing their wells with boards covered with sand, so as to conceal them from the eye of an enemy.

044 Strife at Wells

Strife at Wells Genesis 26:20. The herdmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdmen, saying, The water is ours.

These contests between rival herdmen for the possession of wells are still common in the land. Water is so necessary, and yet sometimes so hard to get, that it is no wonder there are battles waged for it. Some travelers state that the Bedouin would give a stranger milk to drink rather than water, the latter being more valuable. A contest similar to the one noticed in the text took place between the servants of Abraham and those of Abimelech (Genesis 21:25).

045 Covenant Feasts

Covenant Feasts

Genesis 26:30-31. He made them a feast, and they did eat and drink. And they rose up betimes... and swore one to another.

It was customary among the Hebrews, and also among the heathen nations, to eat together when entering into a covenant. When Jacob made his covenant with Laban he made a feast for his brethren (Genesis 31:54). Many allusions to this custom are made by classical writers.

046 Seasoned Food

Seasoned Food

Genesis 27:3-4. Go out to the field, and take me some venison; and make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat. This means a dish prepared in any appetizing way, but especially by means of condiments. The Orientals are fond of highly seasoned food. Salt, spices, onions, garlic, and various aromatic herbs, such as saffron and mint, are used as seasoning for their meats.

Some commentators suppose a connection between this feast and the former patriarchal blessing. They regard it as a solemn covenant ceremony—a sacrifice which ratifies the blessing. Such covenant solemnities were usually associated with a meal among the Orientals.

047 Time for Mourning

Time for Mourning Genesis 27:41. The days of mourning for my father are at hand. This alludes to the formal ceremonious mourning for the dead, which usually lasted seven days (Genesis 50:10; 1 Samuel 31:13; Job 2:13), though it was sometimes continued for a longer period.

See note on John 11:17 (#808).

048 Sleeping out of Doors

Sleeping out of Doors

Genesis 28:11. He lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night... and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep.

1. Sleeping out of doors all night could have been no hardship to a man inured to a shepherd's life, for this was a shepherd's custom.
2. It is not likely, as many seem to imagine, that his head rested on the naked stone. His outer mantle could easily have been drawn up over his head, and its folds would have made an excellent pillow on the stone headrest, the hardness of which could be further modified by the covering he usually wore on his head.

049 Monumental Stones

Monumental Stones

Genesis 28:18. Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it.

1. This stone was set up as a monument of God's wonderful revelation to him, and of his vow (vs. 20). Thirty years later he repeated this solemn act in the same place (Genesis 35:14). Moses likewise built twelve pillars at Sinai as a sign of God's covenant (Exodus 24:4). So Joshua set up a monument of stones in commemoration of the passage of the Jordan (Joshua 4:3-9). At Shechem also he set up a stone under an oak as a memorial of the covenant between God and his people (Joshua 24:26). In like manner Samuel erected a stone between Mizpeh and Shen to commemorate his victory over the Philistines (1 Samuel 7:12). As these stone pillars were all erected as testimonies of some great events, it has been suggested that Paul in 1 Timothy 3:15 designs to represent the Church as a pillar of testimony for the truth, God having founded and reared the Church as a monument for that purpose.

There existed in heathen countries a practice similar to the one referred to in the text. Morier gives a good illustration of our text in a little incident he saw while traveling in Persia. He says: "I remarked that our old guide, every here and there, placed a stone on a conspicuous bit of rock, or two stones one upon the other, at the same time uttering some words, which I learned were a prayer for our safe return" (Second Journey through Persia, p. 85). He had frequently seen similar stones without knowing their design.

2. The anointing of the stone by Jacob was doubtless designed as a solemn act of consecration of this stone to its monumental purposes; just as subsequently Moses, by command of God, anointed the tabernacle and its furniture (Numbers 7:1). This act of the patriarch is not to be confounded with the idolatrous practice, common among heathens, of pouring oil upon stones and worshiping them. See note on Isaiah 52:6 (#527).

050 Well Stones

Well Stones Genesis 29:2. Out of that well they watered the flocks: and a great stone was upon the well's mouth. This was to protect the water from impurity, and from shifting sands, which without such protection would soon choke it. Modern travelers make frequent mention of the stone covers to wells and cisterns. Some of these stones are so large and heavy as to require the united strength of several men to remove them. May there not be reference to this custom in Job 38:30 : "The waters are hid as with a stone, and the face of the deep is frozen."

051 Wells Opened

Wells Opened

Genesis 29:3. Thither were all the flocks gathered: and they rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the sheep, and put the stone again upon the well's mouth in his place. This is not a part of the history, since all the flocks were not actually gathered and the stone removed until Rachel came (vs.10). The verse is meant to describe the general custom of the country. It was usual to wait until all the flocks were gathered, and then the stone was taken off and the work of watering began (vs. 8). Harmer refers to the statement of Sir John Chardin, that he had known wells or cisterns locked up in the East, and accepts Chardin's explanation that this may have been the case in this instance, and that Rachel probably had the key, and that for that reason they were all obliged to wait until she came. But we see no reason for supposing any lock and key in the case; no mention is made of them in the narrative. The reason assigned in verse 8 for waiting for Rachel is, not that she had any special means for opening the well, but that it was customary for all the flocks to be gathered before the stone was rolled away.

052 Names From Animals

Names From Animals Genesis 29:6. Behold, Rachel his daughter cometh with the sheep.

Burder calls attention to the fact that the name Rachel signifies, in Hebrew, a sheep, and says, "It was anciently the custom to give names even to families from cattle, both great and small." Oriental Customs, No. 48. This ancient custom is no more singular than that which is common among us, of naming families after all sorts of beasts and birds, wild and tame; for example, Wolf, Fox, Lion, Bear, Bull, Nightingale, Jay, Hawk and Finch.

053 Men Kissing

Men Kissing

Genesis 29:13. And it came to pass, when Laban heard the tidings of Jacob his sister's son, that he ran to meet him, and embraced him, and kissed him. This custom of embraces and kisses among men, though strange to us, is common enough in the East. Jacob kissed his father (Genesis 27:27). Esau embraced and kissed Jacob (Genesis 33:4). Joseph kissed all his brethren (Genesis 45:15). Jacob kissed and embraced Joseph's sons (Genesis 48:10). Aaron kissed Moses (Exodus 4:27). Moses kissed Jethro (Exodus 18:7). David and Jonathan kissed each other (1 Samuel 20:41). The father of the prodigal is represented as kissing him when he returned home (Luke 15:20). The elders at Miletus fell on Paul's neck and kissed him (Acts 20:37). Modern travelers make frequent mention of this custom.

054 Weak Eyes

Weak Eyes Genesis 29:17. Leah was tendereyed. That is, she had weak or dull eyes, which, according to the Oriental standard of beauty, is a great blemish.

055 Relatives Preferred

Relatives Preferred Genesis 29:19. It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man.

It is still customary among many Eastern tribes to give the preference in marriage to a cousin. It is expected that a man will marry his cousin. He is not compelled to do it, but he has the right, and she is not allowed to marry any other without his consent.

056 Brides Bought

Brides Bought Genesis 29:20. Jacob served seven years for Rachel. The dowry comes not with the bride, but for the bride. In Oriental marriages the bride is given only on receipt of a consideration. In many cases the transaction amounts to actual bargain and sale; this, however, is not necessarily the case. Custom regards the father of the bride as entitled to some compensation for the trouble had in her training, and for the loss of service experienced by her departure from home. If this compensation cannot be rendered in money, jewels, or cattle, it may be given in labor. It was in this way that Jacob became herdman to Laban. Moses probably served Jethro in a similar manner, for the sake of having Zipporah. Compare Exodus 2:21; Exodus 3:1. Shechem offered to Jacob and his sons any amount of dowry he was pleased to ask for Dinah (Genesis 34:12).

057 Marriage Feast

Marriage Feast Genesis 29:22. Laban gathered together all the men of the place and made a feast. The usual duration of a marriage feast was a week. Thus, “Fulfill her week,” in verse 27, means, “Wait until the week’s festivities are over.” This was the duration of Samson’s marriage feast (Judges 14:12).

058 The Elder First

The Elder First Genesis 29:26. Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the first-born. This ancient custom still exists in India, and is sometimes observed in Egypt. It also prevailed in old imperial Germany. In India it is considered disgraceful in the extreme, and according to the Gentoo law a crime, for a father to permit a younger daughter to get married before the elder, or for a younger son to be married while his elder brother remains single.

If the eldest daughter be deformed, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, then the younger may be married first. If a father have an opportunity to marry one of his younger daughters advantageously, he will first do all he can to get the elder one married, and until this can be done the younger cannot be married.

059 Significant Names

Significant Names Genesis 29:32. She called his name Reuben: for she said, Surely the Lord hath looked upon my affliction.

Reuben, that is, See! a son! This was in joyful acknowledgment of this evidence of God's goodness. Many of the proper names in the Scriptures have a meaning in some way connected with the persons bearing them. Other people besides the Jews have had this custom: Africans, Arabs, East Indians, and the aborigines of our own land. Thus a certain Abyssinian was named Omazena, because of a wart on his hand; an Arab boy was called Human, because he was born before the gate Bab-el-Duma at Damascus. Among the Hindus we find Ani Muttoo, the precious pearl; Pun Amma, the golden lady; Chiny Tamby, the little friend. Among the North American Indians we have Kosh-kin-ne-kait, the cut-off arm; Wah-ge-kaut, crooked legs; Wau-zhe-gaw-maish-kum, he that walks along the shore.

060 Teraphim

Teraphim Genesis 31:19. Rachel had stolen the images that were her father's.

These "images" (teraphim) are supposed to have been rude representations of the human form; perhaps the statuettes of deceased ancestors. Nothing definite is known as to their size. They could not have been very large, or Rachel would not have been able to conceal them under the baggage; nor could they have been very small, or they would not have served Michal's purpose of deception. See 1 Samuel 19:13; 1 Samuel 19:16. They may have been of different sizes. Their use is very ancient; the Israelites adopted them from the Ara-means. They were household gods which were consulted as oracles. Micah the Ephraimite placed them in his "house of gods" (Judges 17:5; Judges 18:14; Judges 18:17-18; Judges 18:20).

Some Jewish writers believe that the teraphim were supposed, on consultation, to be able to give any information desired, and that Rachel stole them from her father for fear he should learn, by consulting them, what route Jacob and his family had taken. Whether or not the teraphim were actually worshiped is a disputed question. The Hebrews certainly kept up the worship of Jehovah in connection with the use of the teraphim. It was not until the reign of Josiah that this singular custom was abolished (2 Kings 23:24). We even find traces of it afterward as late as the time of Hosea (Hosea 3:4). The practice became deeply rooted, and extended over large regions of country. The Laers and Penates of the Romans are supposed to have been used for the same purposes as these teraphim. "The Penates were divinities or household gods, who were believed to be the creators or dispensers of all the well-being and gifts of fortune enjoyed by a family, as well as an entire community." "Every family worshiped one or more of these, whose images were kept in the inner part of the house." The Laers were "guardian spirits whose place was the chimney-piece, and whose altar was the domestic hearth." Laers and Penates were worshiped "in the form of little figures or images of wax, earthenware, or terra cotta, and of metal, more especially silver" (Barker's Laves and Penates, pp. 146-147).

Faber supposes the teraphim to be identical with the cherubim. He thinks that those which belonged to Laban were images resembling the cherubim which were afterward put on the ark (Origin of Pagan Idolatry, vol. 3, p. 621).

061 Tabret and Harp

Tabret and Harp Genesis 31:27. I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabret, and with harp.

1. The word toph, here and in other places rendered “tabret,” and in a number of texts translated “timbrel,” represents a very ancient musical instrument of percussion. There are three varieties depicted on the Egyptian monuments: one circular, another square or oblong, and a third consisting of two squares separated by a bar. Over these frames parchment was stretched, and in the rim were small bells or pieces of tinkling brass. The toph was used on occasions of joy, and was generally played by women, and often accompanied by dancing. It is reproduced in the “tambourine” which is occasionally seen in the streets of our large cities in the hands of itinerant musicians as an accompaniment to the barrel-organ.

2. The word kinnor, which frequently occurs in the Old Testament, and is translated “harp,” has given rise to considerable discussion. It was undoubtedly the earliest musical instrument made (Genesis 4:21), though some suppose that the text referred to is meant to show that Jubal was the inventor of stringed instruments generally, without referring to any particular kind. As to the shape of this ancient instrument there is no certainty. It has been variously represented by different writers as shaped like the lyre, the Greek letter 4, the guitar, and the modern harp. There is equal variety of opinion as to the number of strings. Seven, ten, twenty-four, and forty-seven have been named. It has also been asserted by some that it was played by means of a plectrum, while others assert that it was played by hand. These conflicting statements may all be harmonized by supposing that the shape varied at different times, or that the word kinnor was the generic term for all instruments of the lyre kind; that the number of strings varied at different periods, or with the size of the instrument; that the instruments were of different sizes; and that they were sometimes played with a plectrum and sometimes by hand. The kinnor was a very popular instrument with the Hebrews, and was used at jubilees and festivals. Its use was also practiced by other nations.

062 Camels' Furniture

Camels' Furniture Genesis 31:34. Rachel had taken the images, and put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them.

It is not known whether this "furniture" was simply the cloth which covered the camel's back, or a couch which might be used at night for a bed, or a fixture resembling the wicker work chair or cage, covered with a canopy, which is used by the modern Arab ladies when they ride on camels. Whether Rachel made use of any such arrangement or not, the place where the teraphim were concealed was evidently in the article, whatever it was, which took the place of a saddle, and on which Rachel sat. It is at this day common for the Arabs to hide stolen property under the padding of their saddles.

063 Covenant Stones

Covenant Stones Genesis 31:48. Laban said, This heap is a witness between me and thee this day. The use of stones in making a covenant is referred to in the Bible on several occasions. Herodotus speaks of a similar custom among the ancient Arabians. He says: "When two men would swear a friendship, they stand on each side of a third. He, with a sharp stone, makes a cut on the inside of the hand of each, near the middle finger, and taking a piece from their dress dips it in the blood of each, and moistens therewith seven stones lying in the midst, calling meanwhile on Bacchus and Urania" (Rawlinson's Herodotus, 2, p. 401).

Some think that Job refers to this custom when he speaks of a "daysman." See Job 9:33.

064 Presents

Presents

Genesis 33:10. Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand. The giving of presents is far more common in the East, and has more significance, than with us. Hardly any transaction of importance can take place without a gift. The formal visits which friends make to each other are preceded by presents of fowls, sheep, rice, coffee, and other provisions. Sir John Chardin notices that in Persia every one gives what is most at hand, and has a relation to his profession, and those who have no particular profession give money. A refusal to receive a present is, throughout the East, interpreted as an evidence of enmity. Hence Jacob's anxiety that Esau should accept the gift he offered. See also Genesis 43:11; Judges 3:18; 1 Samuel 9:7; 1 Samuel 10:27; 2 Samuel 17:27-29; 1 Kings 10:2; 1 Kings 10:10; 1 Kings 14:3; 2 Kings 5:5; 2 Kings 5:15; 2 Kings 8:9; 2 Chronicles 9:24; Psalms 72:10; Psalms 76:11; Proverbs 18:16; Matthew 2:11.

065 Kesitah

Kesitah

Genesis 33:19. He bought a parcel of a field, where he had spread his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of money.

Under the impression that the word kesitah, here rendered "pieces of money," means a lamb, many of the ancient commentators supposed that here was an evidence of early coinage; the "pieces of money" being coins having on them the impress of a lamb. Stanley (Hist. Jewish Church, Lect. III,) adopts this theory, and some other writers of our time agree with him. Coins have indeed been found with the figure of a lamb upon them, but they were not struck until later than B.C. 450, and, according to the best numismatists, probably belonged to Cyprus. Madden affirms that the earliest coined money was in the eighth century before Christ, and that "the use of coined money in Palestine cannot have existed till after the taking of Samaria by the Assyrians (in B.C. 721)" (Jewish Coinage, p. 14).

Other interpreters have supposed the kesitah to be a weight made in the form of a lamb, as ancient weights have been found in the shape of bulls, lions, and other animals. See note on Genesis 23:16 (#26).

Some of the recent philologists, however, deny that kesitah means a lamb. They derive it from a root signifying to weigh, and suppose it to have been a piece of silver of unknown weight or size. The same word is used in Job 42:11.

066 Ear Rings

Ear Rings

Genesis 35:4. They gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their ear-rings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.

Ear-rings were of various sizes, shapes, and material. At the present day, among the Orientals, they are of gold, silver, brass, ivory, horn, and wood; they are sometimes plain, and sometimes adorned with precious stones. Some are small, and fit closely to the ear, leaving no intermediate space; while others are large and heavy, and drop some distance below the ear. Some of these, by their weight, make a disagreeable-looking hole in the part of the ear whence they hang. MacGregor saw some men near Lake Huleh with ear-rings "not in the lobe of the ear, but in the projecting flesh." (Rob Roy on the Jordan, p. 150). It is supposed by some that the use of ear-rings among the Hebrews was confined to the women. If so there must have been exceptions. See Exodus 32:2.

It is evident from this text that it was customary to connect the use of ear-rings with idolatry. This is further intimated in Hosea 2:13, where the wearing of ear-rings is associated with burning incense to Baal. Isaiah 3:20 is also supposed to refer to idolatrous practices. Ear-rings were doubtless used as amulets. With strange figures and characters engraved upon them they were considered as charms warding off evil. They are still thus used in the East. Jacob, being commanded to go to Bethel to renew his covenant with God, desired to put away every vestige of idolatry from the people, and for this reason buried these ear-ring amulets with the teraphim under the oak.

067 Coat of Pieces

Coat of Pieces Genesis 37:3. Israel loved Joseph: and he made him a coat of many colors.

Or, "a coat of pieces." The ordinary tunic was a garment worn next to the skin, reaching to the knees, and usually without sleeves. Joseph's coat is supposed to have had sleeves, and to have reached to the wrists and ankles; a luxurious robe, and a mark of distinction such as, in later times, Tamar and the other daughters of the king wore (2 Samuel 13:18). The "pieces" may have been different pieces of cloth variously colored, and of which the garment was made; or they may have been various colored threads, stripes, or plaids. In India coats of different colored patchwork are made for favorite children, pieces of crimson, purple, and other colors being sewed together. Jackets are sometimes embroidered with gold and silk of various colors. It is believed that a child thus clad will be saved from evil spirits, since the attention of the spirits will be diverted from the child by the beauty of the garment. There is no evidence of any such superstition in the case of Jacob. It was merely an instance of parental favoritism.

068 Cisterns

Cisterns Genesis 37:24. They took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.

There are numerous pits or cisterns still to be found in Palestine. They are often hewn out of the solid rock, and, being narrower at the mouth than at the bottom, it is not an easy thing to get out unaided, if one should be so unfortunate as to get in. Dr. Thomson mentions the case of an acquaintance who fell into one of these pits, or empty cisterns, and, being unable to extricate himself, passed two dreadful days and nights before he was discovered and drawn out, more dead than alive.

These cisterns, when dry, were sometimes used as dungeons for prisoners, and thus Joseph's brethren put him into one. The prophet Jeremiah was also imprisoned in a cistern which had been dug in the courtyard of the prison. See Jeremiah 38:6, where the word bor is translated "dungeon." This is the same word that in the text is rendered "pit," and in some other places "cistern."

See also Jeremiah 14:3, Zechariah 9:11, and the note on Jeremiah 2:18 (#530).

069 Caravans

Caravans

Genesis 37:25. They sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead, with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt. This was a caravan of Arabian merchants on their way to Egypt with such drugs as the Egyptians used for embalming and for medicinal purposes. The Egyptians depended on these itinerant Arab merchants for their supplies of this nature. See note on James 4:13 (#885). The mode of traveling in a caravan is peculiar. Pitts describes it as he saw it in the great caravan which was journeying to Mecca on a religious pilgrimage. It was undoubtedly longer than this commercial caravan, yet this was probably arranged on a similar plan. "They travel four camels abreast, which are all tied one after the other, like as in teams. The whole body is called a caravan, which is divided into several cottors, or companies, each of which hath its name, and consists, it may be, of several thousand camels; and they move, one cotton after another, like distinct troops" (Religion and Manners of the Mahometans, p. 430). He also states that the camels have bells about their necks, which, with the singing of the camel drivers, who travel on foot, make pleasant music. Though there is great confusion at the setting out of a caravan, its different companies and divisions soon settle down into a condition of order. The caravan is also referred to in Isaiah 21:13, Luke 2:44.

070 Mourning

Mourning Genesis 37:34. Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days.

Rending the clothes as a token of grief is a very ancient custom, and is often referred to in the Bible. See Joshua 7:6; 1 Samuel 4:12; 2 Samuel 1:11; 2 Samuel 3:31; 2 Samuel 13:31; 2 Kings 2:12; 2 Kings 18:37; 2 Kings 19:1; Ezra 9:3; Job 1:20. A Jewish writer, quoted by Brinier, says that this ceremony was performed in the following manner: "They take a knife, and holding the blade downward, do give the upper garment a cut on the right side, and then rend it a hand's breadth. This is done for the five following relations, brother, sister, son, daughter, or wife; but for father or mother the rent is on the left side, and in all the garments" (Oriental Customs, No. 65).

Sackcloth is also frequently mentioned. It was generally made of the hair of goats or of camels, and was coarse and black. It was used for straining liquids, for sacks, and for mourning garments. When used for mourning it was sometimes worn next to the skin, which it must have chafed by its harshness, and at other times it was hung like a sack over the outer garments, or instead of them. A girdle of similar material confined its loose folds. Ahab, on one occasion, appears to have worn sackcloth next to his skin all night. See 1 Kings 21:27. In Revelation 6:12, in the darkness accompanying an earthquake, the sun is said to have become as "black as sackcloth of hair."

071 Captain of the Guard

Captain of the Guard

Genesis 37:36. The Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, and captain of the guard.

Literally, "captain of the executioners." He was responsible for the safekeeping of state prisoners, and for the execution of sentence upon them. In cases of treason he sometimes executed the sentence himself. He was the official guardian of the person of the king—the chief of his bodyguard. The king of Babylon had a similar officer in his service. See 2 Kings 25:8; Jeremiah 39:13; Daniel 2:14. In the ruins of the hall of judgment of the palace at Khorsabad, Assyria, there is on the wall a representation of a naked man with limbs stretched out, and arms and ankles fastened to the floor or table, while a tall, bearded man is in the act of flaying him alive. This is supposed to be "the chief of the executioners" engaged at his horrid work; and some commentators interpret the expression "cut in pieces," in Daniel 3:29, to refer to this act of flaying alive. See also Micah 3:3.

072 Prisons

Prisons

Genesis 40:3. He put them in ward in the house of the captain of the guard, into the prison, the place where Joseph was bound.

According to the Eastern custom, the state-prison formed a part of the dwelling-house of the chief of the executioners, or of some other prominent personage. See Jeremiah 37:15. Sometimes even the king's palace was so used. See Jeremiah 32:2.

073 Use of Wine

Use of Wine

Genesis 40:11. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand: and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand.

It has been supposed by some that the ancient Egyptians drank no wine, though they did not object to drinking the unfermented juice of the grape, and this text is referred to as an illustration. It was evidently a part of the duty of Pharaoh's butler to press the grapes into the cup that the king might drink; but it by no means follows that because of this no fermented wine was used. A passage in Herodotus is usually cited as an evidence that only fresh mush was allowed. On the other hand, there is other ancient testimony that establishes the fact that the Egyptians used fermented wine. This testimony is corroborated by the old monuments, which have representations of different articles employed in making wine, wine-presses in operation, and drunken men and women.

074 Burdens on the Head

Burdens on the Head Genesis 40:16. I also was in my dream, and, behold, I had three white baskets on my head.

It is quite common in the East to carry burdens on the head. Thus the head and neck become so strong that it is not uncommon for a man to carry a weight which requires the united strength of three men to lift from the ground. Women and children, as well as men, carry loads in this way. In ancient Egypt only men carried burdens on the head. The women carried them on the shoulder. See note on Genesis 21:14 (#20).

075 Birthday Feast

Birthday Feast

Genesis 40:20. It came to pass the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast unto all his servants. The Eastern kings celebrated their birthdays by holding feasts and granting pardon to offenders. On the occasion referred to in the text the king availed himself of this custom to pardon the chief butler; although, for some reason not stated, he refused to grant the same clemency to the chief baker.

See also Matthew 14:6; Mark 6:21.

076 Egyptian Magicians

Egyptian Magicians Genesis 41:8. He sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt.

These magicians (chartummim) were an order of Egyptian priests who understood the sacred hieroglyphic writings. They cultivated a knowledge of art and science, interpreted dreams, practiced soothsaying and divination, and were supposed to possess secret arts. They were men of great influence in Egypt, much esteemed, and highly honored. They were applied to for direction and assistance on all subjects outside the ordinary range of knowledge. Hence Pharaoh sent for them when he desired an interpretation of his strange dreams. Moses in after years met this same class of men (Exodus 7:11; Exodus 7:22). The same term is applied to the magicians in Babylon (Daniel 1:20; Daniel 2:2).

077 Shaving Among the Egyptians

Shaving Among the Egyptians Genesis 41:14. Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon: and he shaved himself.

Contrary to the custom of the Hebrews and other Orientals, the Egyptians shaved closely, only allowing the beard to grow as a sign of mourning; thus reversing the custom of the Hebrews, who shaved as a token of mourning.

See note on Isaiah 15:2 (#494). Strange to say, the Egyptians, while so careful to shave the beard, sometime fastened false beards to the chin. These were made of plaited, hair, and were different shape and sizes, according to the rank the wearer.

Joseph, while in prison, allowed his beard to grow; now that he is released he shaves, according to the Egyptian custom, as it would have been a disgrace for him to appear with a beard in the presence of the king.

078 Elevation of Slaves

Elevation of Slaves Genesis 41:41. Pharaoh said unto Joseph, See, I have set thee over all the land of Egypt. This elevation of a slave to a position of high office, though uncommon among Western nations, was not so rare in the East. There, change of fortune was so sudden that the beggar of today might be the noble of tomorrow. Many of the most prominent characters in Oriental history were once slaves. The history of Joseph has in this respect often been paralleled. A most curious illustration of this is given by Harmer in his account of All Bey, who was stolen from his native place in Lesser Asia, near the Black Sea, in 1741, when he was thirteen years old, and was carried into Egypt, where, after varied fortunes, he reached a position next in power to the Pasha. (Observations, vol. 2, p. 520).

079 Signets Robes Necklaces

Signets Robes Necklaces

Genesis 41:42. Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck.

1. Great importance was attached to the signet ring, which contained the owner's name, and the impression of which was of the same validity as a written signature is among us. Hence the gift of this royal signet ring was a transfer of royal authority to Joseph. Thus Ahasuerus gave his ring to Haman, and the document which Haman signed with it was considered as coming from the king (Esther 3:10-12). The same ring was afterward given to Mordecai, who used it in the same way (Esther 8:2; Esther 8:8; Esther 8:10). The value and importance attached to the signet ring are referred to in Jeremiah 22:24 and in Haggai 2:23. Some valuable specimens of ancient signet rings have been found by antiquaries. One of the most remarkable of these is now in the Abbott Collection of Egyptian Antiquities, in the Museum of the New York Historical Society. It is in most excellent preservation and of very high antiquity, bearing the name of Shoofoo, the Suphis of the Greeks, who reigned before the time of Joseph. It was found in a tomb at Gizeh, and is of fine gold, weighing nearly three sovereigns. For description of other kinds of seals see note on 1 Kings 21:8 (#323).

2. The fine (or, literally, white) linen robes were worn by the Egyptian priests, which fact has given some occasion to think that Joseph was received into the caste of priests, which was of the highest rank in Egypt, as it was the one to which the king himself belonged.

3. The gold chain was another mark of distinction, since none but persons of high rank were permitted to wear such ornaments. There is in the Abbott Collection a gold necklace which has on it the name of Menes, the first Pharaoh of Egypt, and who reigned several hundred years before Shoofoo. The necklace has a pair of ear-rings to match. The signet and the necklace are no doubt similar in general appearance to those with which Joseph was invested. See also note on Song of Solomon 1:10 (#476).

080 Second Chariot Call for Prostration

Second Chariot Call for Prostration Genesis 41:43. He made him to ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried before him, Bow the knee.

1. The “second chariot” was either the one which followed immediately after the king’s in state processions, or it was an extra chariot used by the king as a reserve in case of emergency. See 2 Chronicles 35:24.

2. The streets of modern Egyptian cities are so narrow that when an ordinary carriage passes through them it is customary to have an usher run before it to warn the people to get out of the way. In the case of Joseph, the command was to prostrate themselves, as they would do in the presence of royalty itself.

081 Granaries

Granaries

Genesis 41:48. He gathered up all the food of the seven years, which were in the land of Egypt, and laid up the food in the cities.

Granaries were often very extensive in Egypt, and every facility was made for the housing and subsequent delivery of the grain. The monuments have many illustrations of the different styles of store-houses that were in use, by which we can obtain some idea of the manner in which the ancient Egyptians received and delivered their grain. Some of these store-houses were evidently low flat-roofed buildings, divided into rooms or vaults, into which the grain was poured from bags. Similar structures were also used in Palestine, though we have no detailed account of the mode in which they were arranged. The Romans sometimes built store-houses for grain on stone pillars. The “barns” mentioned in Luke 12:18, were evidently above ground, since they were to be pulled down. Subterranean storehouses were also common in the East. See note on Jeremiah 41:8 (#554).

082 Sacks, of Two Kinds

Sacks, of Two Kinds Genesis 42:25. Joseph commanded to fill their sacks with corn, and to restore every man's money into his sack. The sacks (keleihem) which were filled with corn, and the sack (sak) which had the money put into it, are supposed to have been of two different kinds. The latter is thought to have been a bag for holding the provender for the journey; while the former (more properly rendered vessels than sacks) were larger, and were filled with the grain that they were carrying to Canaan.

083 Egyptian Dinners

Egyptian Dinners Genesis 43:16. Bring these men home, and slay, and make ready; for these men shall dine with me at noon. The ancient Egyptians had the beasts they desired for food slaughtered in the courtyard of the dwelling. While the monuments give representations of poulterers' shops, they do not show any shops for the sale of butchers' meat, but represent the slaying, in private houses, of quadrupeds intended for food. The cause of this is not positively known. As poultry, fish, and vegetables formed the principal food of the people, it may be that there was not sufficient demand for the flesh of beasts to warrant the establishing of butcher-shops, such flesh perhaps being reserved for great feasts. The slaughter of animals for the table is a common subject of representation on these monuments. The four legs of the animal were tied together, and it was then thrown to the ground. Here it was held by assistants while the butcher cut the throat from ear to ear. The blood was caught in vessels, and set aside for food. The animal was then flayed, and dressed, and cut into pieces, which were carried in trays to the kitchen, where the cook immediately began to get them ready for the table. In this text we find Joseph issuing his orders to "slay and make ready" for the noon-dinner; so that not much time elapsed between the slaughter of the victims and their appearance on the tables ready for eating. See also 1 Samuel 28:24.

084 Form of Salutation

Form of Salutation Genesis 43:29. Is this your younger brother, of whom ye spake unto me? And he said, God be gracious unto thee, my son. This is not a benediction, but one of the numerous forms of Oriental salutation used in meeting or in taking leave of all acquaintance.

085 Bread the Principal Food

Bread the Principal Food Genesis 43:31. He washed his face, and went out, and refrained himself, and said, Set on bread.

Oriental in general are great eaters of bread. It has been computed that three persons in four live entirely upon it, or else upon such compositions as are made of barley or wheat flour. No doubt the term "bread" was often used to denote food in general; but this was because bread was more generally used than any other article of diet. When Joseph's brethren had cast him into the pit, "they sat down to eat bread" (Genesis 37:25). When Moses was in Midian he was invited to "eat bread" (Exodus 2:20). The witch of En-dor "set a morsel of bread" before Saul and his servants (1 Samuel 28:22-25).

086 Egyptian Mode of Dining

Egyptian Mode of Dining

Genesis 43:32. They set on for him by himself, and for them by themselves, and for the Egyptians, which did eat with him, by themselves: because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians.

1. The Egyptian tables were placed along the sides of the room, the guests having their faces toward the wall. In this case Joseph probably sat at one end of the hall and his brethren at the other end, ("they sat before him," verse 33), while the Egyptians sat on either side. The ancient Egyptian table was a round tray fixed on a pillar or leg, which was often in the form of a man, usually a captive, who was represented as holding the burden of the table on his head and shoulders. The entire structure was of stone or of some hard wood. These tables were sometimes brought in and removed with the dishes upon them. One or two guests sat at each table.

2. The Egyptians considered all foreigners unclean. No Egyptian would consent to kiss a Greek, nor to use any culinary utensil which belonged to one, nor to eat the flesh of any animal, even though a clean animal, which had been cut up with a Grecian knife. This was because foreigners ate animals which the Egyptians regarded either as unclean or as sacred. The Hebrews, for instance, slaughtered and ate the cow, which was sacred in the eyes of the Egyptians, and by them, on that account, exempt from slaughter. For this reason the representatives of the two nations could not eat together. Joseph ate by himself because he belonged to a higher caste than the Egyptians around him), and was above them all in social rank.

087 Position of Guests at Table

Position of Guests at Table Genesis 43:33. They sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright, and the youngest according to his youth. The Egyptians sat at their meals; reclining was a Persian custom brought in at a later age. See note on Matthew 26:7 (#712). They used chairs of various kinds, and stools, and sometimes sat on the floor with the left leg drawn under them and the right foot planted on the floor, thus elevating the right knee. The guests were placed according to the rank they occupied. This does not imply the use of long tables, since even at the present day there are posts of honor at the round tables of the modern Egyptians.

088 Mode of Distributing Food

Mode of Distributing Food

Genesis 43:34. He took and sent messes unto them from before him: but Benjamin's mess was five times so much as any of theirs. The ancient Egyptian mode of dining seems to have resembled the Persian rather than the Turkish. Different kinds of food were taken from the large dishes on which the cook had placed them, and were put on one smaller dish which was carried by a servant to the guest. In this instance Joseph saw that his brethren were well supplied from his own table.

Special respect was shown to guests of distinction by sending them some choice dainty, or a larger portion of food than was given to the others. Thus Joseph honored Benjamin with a five-fold portion, which must be considered the greater honor when we learn that a double portion was regarded sufficiently complimentary to a king. In Joseph's estimation his brother Benjamin was worth more than two kings.

089 The Bowl

The Bowl Genesis 44:2. Put my cup, the silver cup, in the sack's mouth of the youngest. The gabia, here rendered "cup," was more properly a bowl, and was distinguished from the kosoth, or smaller cups, into which the liquid was poured from the gabia. The distinction is made in Jeremiah 35:5, where the two words are used.

090 The Divining Cup

The Divining Cup Genesis 44:5. Is not this it in which my lord drinketh, and whereby indeed he divineth? The question whether Joseph actually practiced divination, or only pretended to do so, or merely instructed his steward to ask an ironical question; or whether the original words may not have a different interpretation from that which the translators have put upon them, is one which concerns the commentator rather than the archaeologist. It is an admitted fact that divining cups were used among the Egyptians and other nations. These cups bore certain magical inscriptions, and when used were filled with pure water. Authorities all agree as far as this, but they differ as to the use which was made of the cup after the water was poured into it. We give the statements of various writers, and it is quite probable that they are all correct, different modes being used at different times.

1. The divination was performed by means of the figures which were reflected by the rays of light which were permitted to fall on the water.
2. Melted wax was poured into the water, and the will of the gods was interpreted by the variously shaped figures formed in this way.
3. The cup was shaken, and the position, size, or number of the bubbles which rose to the surface was considered.
4. There were thrown into the water plates of gold and of silver, and precious stones, with magical characters engraved on them. Words of incantation were muttered. Then some of the signs engraved on the stones were reflected in the water, or a voice was supposed to be heard, or the likeness of the deceased person concerning whom the inquiry was made was thought to appear in the water.
5. The inquirer fixed his eye on some particular point in the cup until he was thrown into a dream-like or clairvoyant state, when he could see things strange and indescribable.

091 Loud Weeping

Loud Weeping Genesis 45:2 He wept aloud: and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard. In the East emotions of joy as well as of sorrow are expressed by loud cries. Sir John Chardin (cited by Harmer, Observations, vol. 3, p. 17) says, "Their sentiments of joy or of grief are properly transports; and their transports are ungoverned, excessive, and truly outrageous." He also states that when any one returns from a long journey his family burst into cries that may be heard twenty doors off. In like manner Joseph and his brethren, in their joy at meeting, indulged in excessive weeping.

092 Egyptian Wagons

Egyptian Wagons

Genesis 45:19. Take you wagons out of the land of Egypt for your little ones, and for your wives, and bring your father, and come.

Wilkinson supposes these wagons to have been similar to the war chariots, but with the sides closed. They had wheels with six spokes, and were drawn by oxen, which were harnessed the same as horses for the war chariots. In traveling the wagon was furnished with a sort of umbrella. It is evident from the narrative that wagons were at that time strange in Canaan. The sight of these Egyptian conveyances confirmed to the mind of Jacob the statement of his sons. See verse 27. Rosenmuller aptly suggests that Egypt was more likely than Canaan to develop the idea of a wagon, because it was a great plain (Morgenland, vol.1, p. 212).

093 Gifts of Raiment

Gifts of Raiment

Genesis 45:22. To all of them he gave each man changes of raiment; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver, and five changes of raiment.

Presents of costly and beautiful garments are among the modes of complimenting in use by the Orientals. Since the fashions of dress do not change as with us, these gifts are valuable as long as they last. These “changes of raiment” were designed to be worn on special occasions. Other biblical references are made to this custom of presenting gifts of clothing. Samson offered raiment to any who should guess his riddle (Judges 14:12-13; Judges 14:19). When Naaman visited Elisha he took with him, among other gifts, “ten changes of raiment” (2 Kings 5:5). Even Solomon did not disdain to receive such presents (2 Chronicles 9:24). Daniel was clothed with scarlet as a reward for interpreting the king’s dream (Daniel 5:29). It is said of an illustrious Oriental poet of the ninth century, that he had so many presents made him during his life-time that at his death he had one hundred complete suits of clothes, two hundred shirts, and five hundred turbans. The Hindus, at the close of a feast, commonly give to each guest a present of new garments. See also the notes on 1 Samuel 19:24 (#261), Esther 6:8 (#397) and Job 27:16 (#417).

094 Eyes Closed

Eyes Closed Genesis 46:4 Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes.

It was an ancient custom that the nearest of kin should close the eyes of a deceased person, and give a parting kiss to the corpse. It was a comforting assurance to Jacob that his beloved Joseph, whom he had for many years mourned as dead, should perform this filial office for him. At Jacob's death we are told that Joseph kissed him (Genesis 50:1), and it is to be presumed that he also closed the eyes of the patriarch, as God had promised.

095 Hatred of Shepherds

Hatred of Shepherds Genesis 46:34. Every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians.

Frequent illustrations of the contempt in which the Egyptians held shepherds are seen on the ancient monuments: the shepherds being invariably represented as lank, withered, distorted, emaciated specimens of humanity. Concerning the cause of this feeling there are different opinions. It is certain that cattle were not by any means considered unclean by the Egyptians: The cow was sacred to Isis, and oxen were used for food and for labor; it is not likely, therefore, that taking care of them could have been considered polluting. The objection was not to the tending of cattle—which in itself is as necessary as the cultivation of the soil—but rather to the vagrant mode of life to which the shepherds were addicted, and which was opposed to the designs and policy of the ruling caste. When the foundations of the state rested on agriculture the Egyptians associated rudeness and barbarism with the name of shepherd.

Besides this, Egypt had at one time been invaded by a horde of wandering shepherds, descended from Cush. They established themselves in the country and had a succession of kings. They fought the Egyptians, burned some of their principal cities, committed great cruelties, and were not driven out until they and their descendants had occupied the country for hundreds of years. Some suppose that their expulsion took place only a short time before Joseph's day.

Joseph skillfully availed himself of this well-known Egyptian hatred of shepherds for the purpose of having his brethren settled in a rich pastoral region, and isolated from the native Egyptians, thus keeping them a peculiar people

096 Token of Triumph

Token of Triumph Genesis 49:8., Thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies. This expression is intended to denote superiority and triumph. Job makes use of a similar figure where he represents God as taking him by the neck and shaking him to pieces (Job 16:12). David says, "Thou hast also given me the necks of mine enemies" (2 Samuel 22:41; Psalms 18:40). Jeremiah, lamenting the desolations of his people, says, "Our necks are under persecution" (Lamentations 5:5). The ancient Franks had a custom of putting the arm around the neck as a mark of superiority. An insolvent debtor gave himself up to his creditor as a slave, and as a token of submission he took the arm of his new master and put it around his neck.

Compare notes on Joshua 10:24 (#220) and 1 Corinthians 15:25 (#869).

097 Milk Highly Esteemed

Milk Highly Esteemed Genesis 49:12. His teeth white with milk. This is meant to represent the pastoral wealth of Judah. Milk is, in the East, a very important and highly valued article of diet. In India it is sometimes said of a rich man, "He has abundance of milk." A saying somewhat similar to this, but more closely resembling the text, is applied to one who has a plentiful supply of milk: "His mouth smells of milk."

098 Embalming Mourning

Embalming Mourning

Genesis 50:2-3. Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father: and the physicians embalmed Israel. And forty days were fulfilled for him; for so are fulfilled the days of those which are embalmed: and the Egyptians mourned for him threescore and ten days.

1. Among the ancient Egyptians there were numerous classes of physicians, divided according to the various diseases which were their special subjects of 'study. They were not general practitioners, but specialists; hence their number was large. Joseph had them among his retainers. The Taricheuta, who superintended the process of embalming, were included among physicians as a special but subordinate class. They, in common with the higher class of physicians, belonged to the sacerdotal order.

2. There were different processes of embalming, varying according to the means at the disposal of the family of the deceased. The most expensive (and doubtless the mode by which Jacob and Joseph were embalmed) is estimated to have cost what would be equivalent to about twelve hundred and fifty dollars of our money. Preparatory to this process, the brain was removed by means of a crooked wire inserted through the nose. An incision was then made in the left side of the abdomen with a stone knife, the use of metal not being permitted. (Three of these ancient stone knives are now in the Abbott collection, and a saucer containing a gray embalming powder.)

Through this incision the viscera were drawn with the exception of the heart and kidneys. They were sometimes replaced after being prepared for preservation, and in other instances were put into vases. Some authorities assert that they were thrown into the river Nile; but this is denied by others.

After the removal of the viscera the body was carefully washed externally with water, and internally with palm—wine, oil of cedar, and other antiseptic preparations. The cavities of the head and abdomen were filled with myrrh, cassia, cinnamon, and other aromatic substances, and the incision in the abdomen was sewed up. The body was then steeped in a strong infusion of niter. The time occupied by this steeping process is variously stated at thirty, forty, and seventy days. It may have varied at different periods of Egyptian history, or in different parts of the land at the same time. Some have supposed that forty days were allowed for the embalming proper, and thirty for the steeping in niter. When this process was completed the body and limbs were carefully wrapped in bandages of fine linen, plastered on the underside with gum. These bandages were seven or eight inches in width, and were sometimes six or seven hundred feet long. At this stage of the process the body seems to have been in some way subjected to extreme heat, precisely how is not known. Some have conjectured that it was soaked in pitch, boiling hot; others that it was put into a stove or oven. That extreme heat was applied in some way is evident from the charred bandages and from the appearance of the bones.

Layers of cloth, plastered with lime on the inside, were next placed on the body in a damped condition, fitting exactly to its shape. These layers were put on in sufficient numbers to make a thick case, which, when it was finished, was taken off until it became hardened, when it was replaced, and sewed up at the back. It was painted and ornamented with various figures, and in many instances was gilded. The part immediately over the face was made to resemble, as near as possible, the features of the deceased. The whole was then put into another case made of sycamore or cedar, and sometimes there was in addition an outside case made of the same material, or a sarcophagus of stone.

It is not positively known why the Egyptians embalmed the bodies of their dead. Some think that they believed the existence of the soul depended on that of the body, and hence desired to preserve the body as long as possible. Others suppose that they expected the soul at some distant future day to return to the body, and for that reason wished to preserve the body for its reception. The oldest mummy known to the civilized world is now in the British Museum. "It is supposed to be that of Pharaoh Mycerinus, (Menkare,) of the fourth dynasty, the builder of the third great Pyramid at Gizeh, with whose coffin it was found by Colonel Vyse, in 1837. What is left of the coffin lies close by; it is unquestionably a very early piece of Egyptian work; wooden pegs instead of nails kept it together. Hieroglyphics are still seen on a portion of the lid and on the foot-piece; these, and especially the oval containing the name of Mycerinus, have been preserved with a freshness which is only to be accounted for by the extreme dryness of the climate of Egypt" (HandyBook of the British Museum, by T. Nichols, p. 145).

3. There is a special significance in the seventy days' mourning for Jacob if the custom at that time were the same as in the days of Diodorus Siculus, who was in Egypt about forty years before the time of Christ. He says that on the death of a king the Egyptians put on mourning apparel and closed all their temples for seventy-two days, during which time the embalming proceeded. It would seem, therefore, that Pharaoh ordered royal honors on the occasion of the death of his prime minister's father.

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