1 Kings - Commentaries by James M. Freeman

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 321. Token of Abasement

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1 Kings 20:32. So they girded sackcloth on their loins, and put ropes on their heads, and came to the king of Israel.

This was a sign of deep abasement and submission. It was a Persian custom for persons desiring clemency from the sovereign to approach him with a sword suspended from the neck. The same practice has also been noticed in Egypt. Harmer suggests that these servants of Ben-hadad appear before Ahab with ropes around their necks from which their swords hung. Others suppose that these ropes were halters.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 320. Gods for Hills and Valleys

1 Kings 20:28. The Syrians have said, The Lord is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys.

There seems to be an allusion here to the opinion, prevalent among all heathen nations, that the different parts of the earth had different divinities. They had gods for the woods, for the mountains, for the seas, for the heavens, and for the lower regions. The Syrians seem to have received the impression that Jehovah was specially the God of the mountains; but he manifested to them that he ruled everywhere.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 313. The Face Between the Knees

1 Kings 18:42. He cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees.

This is not, as some commentators have thought, a posture obtained by kneeling on the ground and then bending the face over to the earth. It refers to a common Oriental position for meditation and devotion. The person sits with the feet drawn close to the body, thus bringing the knees nearly on a level with the chin. In Egypt there are many statues of men in this position. Specimens of these can be seen in museums of Egyptian antiquities; there are several such in the Abbott Collection in New York, and a number in the British Museum, one of which is made of black basalt. This was undoubtedly the posture of Elijah, who, in addition to sitting in this peculiar manner, inclined his head forward until his face was literally “between his knees.” Dr. Shaw found this to be an occasional posture of the Turks and Moors in Barbary while engaged in their devotions. Rosenmüller tells of a Persian poet who was so lost in religious contemplation, with his head upon his knees, that he failed to hear the voice of a friend who accosted him (Morgenland, vol. 3, p. 194). In India this posture is likewise common for those who are engaged in deep meditation or who are in great sorrow. Roberts gives several illustrations of it: “This morning, as I passed the garden of Chinnan, I saw him on the ground with his face between his knees. I wonder what plans he was firming! It must have been something very important to cause him thus to meditate.” “Kandan is sick or in trouble, for he has got his face between his knees” (Oriental Illustrations, p. 205).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 312. The Sound of Rain

1 Kings 18:41. Elijah said unto Ahab, Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain.

In India, according to Roberts, it is as common to say, sound of rain, as with us to say, appearance of rain. This expression sometimes refers to the thunder which precedes rain, and sometimes to a blowing noise in the clouds which shows the approach of rain.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 309. The Habits of a Heathen God

1 Kings 18:27. It came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.

Faber maintains the identity of Baal with the Hindu deity Jagan Nath, the “lord of the universe,” who is represented by his followers as sometimes wrapped in profound meditation, sometimes sleeping, and sometimes taking long journeys. He says, “Elijah is not simply ridiculing the worship of the idolatrous priests; he is not taunting them, as it were, at random; but he is ridiculing their senseless adoration, upon their own acknowledged principles” (Origin of Pagan Idolatry, vol. 2, p. 503).