Exodus - Commentaries by James M. Freeman

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 113. Reverence for Rivers Abhorrence of Blood

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Exodus 7:20. All the waters that were in the river were turned to blood.

1. Many ancient nations had great reverence for rivers. The Egyptians, sharing this feeling, regarded the Nile as a sacred stream, and worshiped it as a deity, calling it “the Father of life,” and “the Father of the gods.”

2. The Egyptians, especially the priests, were very particular in their external habits, and there was nothing which they held in greater abhorrence than blood, seldom admitting any bloody sacrifices. Their horror must therefore have been extreme when they found the river, which they worshiped as a god, turned into blood, which they regarded with such utter disgust.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 112. Receptacles for Nile Water

Exodus 7:19. That there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone.

These included all the vessels in which the Nile water was kept for daily use, among which were filtering pots of white earth. There were also stone reservoirs at the corners of the streets, and at other places, for the use of the poor.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 111. Irrigation

Exodus 7:19.... upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water.

For purposes of irrigation canals were cut in various directions, and artificial pools were made to receive the waters of the Nile at its annual overflow. See notes on Deuteronomy 11:10 (#191) and Psalm 1:3 (#426).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 110. Hard Labor a Punishment

Exodus 5:11. Go ye, get you straw where ye can find it: yet not aught of your work shall be diminished.

M. Chabas, a French Egyptologist, discovered some years since a papyrus the writing on which, when deciphered, proved to be the report of a scribe, to the effect that twelve workingmen who had been employed at brick-making had failed in their tasks, and had therefore been appointed to harder work as a punishment. There is no evidence that these workmen were Hebrews, but the fact shows that the cruelty inflicted on the Hebrews by their task-masters was in accordance with the customs of the country. See Bibliotheca Sacra, vol. 23, p. 685.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 145. The Great Altar of Burnt Offering

Exodus 40:6. Thou shalt set the altar of the burnt offering before the door of the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation.

This altar was placed in the court, not far from the entrance to the Tabernacle (Ex. 40:6,29). It was made of acacia wood, and covered with plates of brass. It was five cubits long, five cubits broad, and three cubits high, and had four horns at the four corners. It had brazen rings, and staves covered with brass were provided for moving it. It was hollow, and is supposed to have been filled with earth, thus complying with the command in Exodus 20:24. See also Exodus 38:1-7.

Around the altar, midway from the bottom, was a projecting ledge on which the priest stood while offering sacrifice. This is represented in the word karkob, rendered “compass” in Exodus 27:5 and Exodus 38:4; a word which Gesenius renders margin or border. It is supposed that an inclined plane of earth led to this on one side, probably the south. Thus we may see how Aaron could “come down” from the altar (Lev. 9: 22).

Various views have been entertained in reference to the grating or network spoken of in Exodus 27:4-5 and Exodus 38:4. Some place it at the top of the altar, supposing that the lire and the sacrifice were put upon it; but if the altar was tilled with earth, as we have supposed, there would scarcely have been any need of a grating for such a purpose. Others suppose the altar to have been only half-filled with earth, and that this grating was placed inside of the altar half way to the bottom, for the purpose of holding the earth. Both these theories assume that the grating occupied a horizontal position. Some archaeologists, however, suppose this grating or network to have been perpendicular, and to have dropped from the edge of the karkob, or projecting ledge, to the ground. Thus in Exodus 27:5, it is said, “And thou shalt put it [that is, the “grate of network of brass,” verse 4] under the compass [karkob] of the altar beneath, that the net may be even to the midst of the altar.”

Meyer is very decidedly in favor of this view; indeed we are not sure but he ought to be credited with having first suggested it. After speaking of the karkob, or ledge, he says: “Under the outer edge of this bench was the copper lattice work, which extended from it to the ground on all four sides, just as the body of the chest extended from the inner edge of the bench. It formed, with the bench or the karkob around, an expanding set-oft; by reason of which the under half of the altar, on all sides, appeared wider than the upper. On the karkob, bench, or passage-way, the priest walked in order to attend to the sacrifice, to lay wood upon the altar, or to officiate in other ways....The grating served to preserve the base of the altar from the sprinkled blood of the sacrifices (see Ex. 29:12; Lev. 4:7) and to keep away from the sacred altar men and the beasts to be offered in sacrifice” (Bibeldeutungen, pp. 201-211).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 106. Varied Pasture Grounds

Exodus 3:1. Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the back side of the desert.

In Arabia shepherds do not limit the pasturage of their flocks to places near at home, but wander sometimes long distances, being gone from home for weeks and months in pursuit of new pasture grounds. The Midianites had the principal place of their residence somewhere on the eastern border of Edom, but they pastured their flocks as far as Gilead and Bashan on the north, and on the south they went along both shores of the Atlantic Gulf.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 104. Bathing in the Nile

Exodus 2:5. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river’s side.

It would be quite inconsistent with modern Oriental ideas of propriety for women to bathe thus publicly; but among the ancient Egyptians it was admissible. Wilkinson (Anc. Egypt, vol. 3, p. 389) gives a picture from the monuments representing an Egyptian woman of rank bathing, attended by four female servants. The Nile was regarded as a sacred river, and divine honors were sometimes paid to it. Harmer (Obs., vol. 3, p. 531) gives a quotation from Irwin’s travels, in which the traveler tells of a company of dancing girls who went down to the Nile in the spring of the year to bathe in it, and to sing songs while marching along its banks, in honor of the fact that the waters of the river had begun their annual rise and overflow. It may have been some such sacred ceremony in which Pharaoh’s daughter and her maidens were engaged at the time when Moses was found.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 135. Beaten Oil

Exodus 27:20. Pure oil-olive beaten for the light.

This is supposed to have been oil which was obtained from olives not fully ripe, and pounded in a mortar instead of being put into a press. It was considered the best and purest, having a whiter color and better flavor, and yielding a clearer light than the ordinary oil from the press. Solomon made an annual present of this sort of oil to Hiram. 1 Kings 5:11. It is also mentioned in Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 24:2; Numbers 28:5. It may have been what is known as “cold drawn oil.” See note on Psalm 92:10 (#446).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 133. Forbidden Seething

Exodus 23:19. Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk.

As this injunction is put in connection with sacrifices and festivals, it seems to have referred to some idolatrous practices of the heathen. Cudworth says, on the authority of an ancient Karaite Comment on the Pentateuch, that it was an ancient heathen custom to boil a kid in the dam’s milk, and then besprinkle with it all the trees, fields, gardens and orchards. This was done at the close of their harvests for the purpose of making trees and fields more fruitful the following year. It will be noticed that the injunction of the text is given in connection with the feast of harvest.

Thomson says, that the Arabs “select a young kid, fat and tender, dress it carefully, and then stew it in milk, generally sour, mixed with onions and hot spices such as they relish. They call it Lebnimmu in his mother’s milk. The Jews, however, will not eat it” (The Land and the Book, vol.1, 135).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 132. Annual Pilgrimages

Exodus 23:17. Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord God.

This great and sudden increase in the population of the sacred city—for it was to Jerusalem that the male inhabitants went, after they were settled in Canaan—could be accommodated much more easily than at first might be supposed. Three times a year these pilgrims were looked for, and every arrangement was doubtless made for their reception, while those who could not find room in the houses could pitch their tents in the streets or on the outskirts of the city. When the Mohammedans, in countless numbers, make their great pilgrimage to Mecca, they carry with them provisions enough to last during the journey both ways, and also during their stay in the city. They take from their homes butter,

honey, oil, olives, rice, and bread, besides provender for camels and asses. They dwell in tents until their return.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 127. Thorn Fires - Grain Heaps

Exodus 22:6. If fire break out, and catch in thorns, so that the stacks of corn, or the standing corn, or the field, be consumed therewith; he that kindled the fire shall surely make restitution.

Thorns grow plentifully around the edges of the fields, and intermingle with the wheat. “By harvest-time they are not only dry themselves, but are choked up with tall grass dry as powder. Fire, therefore, catches in them easily, and spreads with great rapidity and uncontrollable fury; and as the grain is dead ripe, it is impossible to extinguish it” (Thomson, The Land and the Book, 1, 529). The farmers are exceedingly careful of fire at such times The Arabs in the valley of the Jordan, according to Burckhardt, put to death any person who fires the grass, even though it be done innocently. After the harvest, and before the autumnal rains set in, it is quite common to set the dry thorns and weeds on fire in order to clear the land for plowing, and to furnish a fertilizer from the ashes.

2. The word “stacks” would be better rendered by heaps, since the grain was not put into stacks as with us; but being left uncut until fully ripe, it was, as soon as cut, gathered into heaps, ready for the threshing floor.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 120. "Third Men"

Exodus 14:7. He took six hundred chosen chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, and captains over every one of them.

The word rendered captains is, literally, third men. Usually each war-chariot carried two men: the charioteer, who was an important character, and the warrior. Sometimes, however, there was a third man, who had direction of the two others. The strength of Pharaoh’s chariot force is seen, then, in this, that he had, besides the usual pair of men to each chariot, a third man or “captain.” Thus one might act as charioteer, one as warrior, and one as shield-bearer.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 117. Shoes Within Doors

Exodus 12:11. Thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste.

1. While it would be quite superfluous to direct us to have shoes on while eating, the Israelites would not put them on without being ordered. This was in accordance with the custom referred to in the note on Exodus 3:5, q. v (#107).

The reason for their violating their ordinary usage is here given: they were in haste.

2. Roberts mentions a sect in India called Urechamanar, who eat their food standing, having their sandals on their feet, and a staff or a bunch of peacock feathers in their hands.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 116. The Outstretched Hand

Exodus 10:21. The Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven.

This is the custom of the Indian magicians when they deliver their predictions. It is done to show that they have favor with their gods.

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