Ezekiel - Commentaries by James M. Freeman

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 569. Twigs Used in Heathen Worship

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Ezekiel 8:17. They put the branch to their nose.

According to Strabo and others, when the fire-worshipers prayed before the sacred fire, they held in the left hand a little bunch of twigs called hansom, and applied it to their mouth when uttering prayer. Hengstenberg says: “The nose is derisively mentioned in place of the mouth, according to the leaning to irony and sarcasm, which appears so often in the prophets when they oppose and chastise superstitious folly” (Commentary on Ezekiel).

Some think the reference here is to the custom of divining by rods. See note on Hosea 4:12 (#597).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 568. Posture in Worship

Ezekiel 8:16. Five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshiped the sun toward the east.

This shows their connection with the fire-worshipers. All nations who worshiped the sun prayed with their faces turned to the East. The oldest temples of the fire-worshipers were built in such a manner that the entrance was on the west side, so that the worshipers faced the East on entering. The temple of Jehovah was built with the entrance in the East and the Oracle in the West, so that the worshipers turned their backs on the place of the rising sun. The perverted priests mentioned in the text disrespectfully turned their backs on the Oracle, and faced the East like the fire-worshipers.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 566. Chambers of Imagery

Ezekiel 8:10. So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about.

The vivid description of what the prophet saw in his vision, as recorded in this remarkable chapter, is doubtless an ideal representation. The imagery employed, however, is taken from scenes in actual life, and could find its realization in the temples of ancient Egypt, where the Israelites learned many of their idolatrous practices. The tombs of Egypt, which are now exposed to the view of the traveler, have painted on them, in colors that are still bright, representations of various animals, and also of the gods. Whether or not these tombs were ever used as places of worship is a disputed point. Their painted walls, however, cannot but suggest the “chambers of imagery” mentioned by the prophet. See verse 12. The walls of their temples were in a similar way adorned with pictorial representations of the animals and gods which they worshiped.

In like manner were the temples of other ancient nations ornamented. In the temple of Belus were sculptured representations of men with two wings, and others with four; some having two faces, others the legs and horns of goats, or the hoofs of horses. There were bulls also with the heads of men, and horses with the heads of dogs. It was doubtless similar monstrosities, and other figures too revolting for description, which Ezekiel saw.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 564. Records on Pottery

Ezekiel 4:1. Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and portray upon it the city, even Jerusalem.

Assyrian and Babylonian records were kept, not only on sculptured slabs of stone, but also on pottery. There were “cylinders,” as they are called, some barrel-shaped, and some hexagonal or octagonal. These were made of very fine, thin, and strong terra-cotta, and were hollow. They were from a foot and a half to three feet in height, and were closely covered with cuneiform writing, which was often in such small characters as to require the aid of a magnifying glass to decipher it. These cylinders were placed at the corners of the temples, where many of them have been discovered. They were written in columns, and contain histories of the monarchs who reigned when the temples were built.

In addition to these, clay tablets of various sizes were used, from nine inches by six and a half to one inch by one and a half. These were sometimes entirely covered with writing and pictorial representations. It was on such a tile that Ezekiel was directed to make a representation of Jerusalem.

When the clay was in a soft, moist state, in its mold or frame the characters were put upon it, perhaps in some instances by a stamp, but usually by means of a sharp edged bronze style about a foot long, by means or which each character was traced separately by hand, just as we use a pen. After the completion of the writing or pictures the clay was baked, and such was the perfection of the manufacture that many

of these articles have been preserved from decay for three thousand years.

They vary in color, owing, as some suppose, to the varying length of time they were in the kiln, while others think that some coloring matter must have been mixed with the clay. They are bright brown, pale yellow, pink, red, and a very dark tint nearly black. Usually the cylinders found are of a pale yellow, and the tablets a light red or pink. Some of them are unglazed, and others are coated with a hard white enamel.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 582. Weapons Buried

Ezekiel 32:27. Which are gone down to hell with their weapons of war: and they have laid their swords under their heads.

This is an allusion to an ancient custom of burying the weapons of war with the warrior. Chardin says that “in Mingrelia they all sleep with their swords under their heads and their other arms by their sides; and they bury them in the same manner, their arms being placed in the same position” (Harmer's Observations, vol. 3, p. 55).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 581. Mutilations

Ezekiel 23:25. I will set my jealousy against thee, and they shall deal furiously with thee: they shall take away thy nose and thine ears.

These mutilations were common among the Chaldeans and Persians.

Among the former adulterers were punished in this manner, which fact is doubtless the basis of the reference in the text.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 580. Mural Sculptures

Ezekiel 23:14. She saw men portrayed upon the wall, the images of the Chaldeans portrayed with vermilion.

Here is a manifest reference to those wonderful mural sculptures which, after being buried for centuries amid the ruins of the palaces and temples whose walls they once adorned, have been brought to light by the perseverance and skill of modern explorers. It is not at all improbable that Ezekiel himself once saw the very marbles that the eyes of this generation are permitted to behold.

The Assyrian and Chaldean sculptures were colored. Traces of red, blue, and black still remain on the beard and hair, and on some of the head-coverings. The Assyrian red was more brilliant than the Egyptian. It is almost vermilion in the sculptures of Khorsabad, and a brilliant crimson or lake-tint in those of Nimroud. Bonomi and some others suppose that there were originally other colors used on the sculptures, but that, being more destructible than those which remain, they have disappeared in the lapse of time. There is no positive evidence of this, though it is highly probable.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 574. Babes Salted

Ezekiel 16:4. Thou wast not salted at all.

In ancient times new-born babes were rubbed with salt in order to harden their skin, as this operation was supposed to make it dry, tight, and firm. Galen mentions the practice, and it is also referred to by Jerome in his commentary on this passage. The salt may also have been applied as an emblem of purity and incorruption.

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