Genesis - Commentaries by James M. Freeman

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 99. Why Joseph Could Not See the King

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Genesis 50:4. When the days of his mourning were past, Joseph spake unto the house of Pharaoh.

The reason why Joseph did not himself prefer his request to the king, but solicited the intervention of his friends, is to be found in the fact that, having allowed his hair and beard to grow during the seventy days of mourning, he was not in a condition to appear before Pharaoh in the manner required by the etiquette of the court. See note on Genesis 41:14 (#77).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 571. Marks of Consecration

Ezekiel 9:4. Set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

This mark was to be put on these faithful ones for their protection when the faithless were to be destroyed. It showed that they belonged to God. The allusion is to a very ancient custom. In Egypt a runaway slave was freed from his master if he went to the temple and gave himself up to the god, receiving certain marks upon his person to denote his consecration to the deity there worshiped. Cain had a mark put on him for his protection, as an evidence of God's promise to spare his life notwithstanding his wickedness (Gen. 4:15). To this day all Hindus have some sort of mark upon their forehead signifying their consecration to their gods. Several passages in the book of Revelation represent the saints as having a mark on their foreheads. See Revelation 7:3; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4. The followers of the "beast" are also said to be marked in the forehead or in the hands. See Revelation 13:16-17; 14:9; 20:4. The Romans marked their soldiers in the hand and their slaves in the forehead. The woman in scarlet, whom John saw, had a name written on her forehead (Rev. 17:5).

See also note on Galatians 6:17 (#873).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 92. 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).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 90. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 88. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 87. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 86. 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 Ibreigners 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 82. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 77. 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 be 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 74. 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).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 59. 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; Chinny 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 58. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 55. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 54. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 52. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 48. 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 be usually wore on his head.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 46. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 25. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 23. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 22. 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.”

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 19. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 17. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 14. 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 1:5 (#474).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 12. 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 mariner 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 6. 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.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 5. 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).

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