Isaiah - Commentaries by James M. Freeman

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 526. Invitation to Buy

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Isaiah 55:1. Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

A beautiful illustration of the customary mode of addressing purchasers in the East is given by Miss Rogers, who thus describes her walk through one of the streets of Jerusalem: “The shopkeepers were crying to the passersby, ‘Ho, every one that hath money, let him come and buy! Ho, such a one, come and buy! ‘ But some of them seemed to be more disinterested, and one of the fruiterers, offering me preserves and fruit, said; ‘O lady, take of our fruit without money and without price; it is yours, take all that you will,’ and he would gladly have laden our kawas with the good things of his store and then have claimed double their value” (Domestic Life in Palestine, p. 49). There is more sincerity in the Gospel invitations than in those of the traders.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 521. Pictures on the Hands

Isaiah 49:16. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.

This is a figurative way of expressing that Jehovah will never forget Zion. The city is represented as graven on his hands, so that its walls are perpetually in his sight, and thus the people of God, who are figured by the city, are kept in everlasting remembrance. Roberts says that a similar form of speech is frequently used in India to express one’s destiny. It is common to say, in reference to men or things, “They are written on the palms of his hands.” Remembrance of an absent one is expressed by a figure similar to the one used in the latter part of the text “Alf, my friend, you have long since forgotten me!” “Forgotten you! Never! for your walls are ever before me.”

Many writers, however, suppose that there is in the text something more than an allusion to a mere figure of speech; that an actual custom is referred to. It is thought that the Jews of that day were in the habit of tattooing on their hands or arms representations of the city or temple in order to keep before them something to remind them of the sacred places. This is Bishop Lowth’s view, and it is accepted by many commentators. We have an illustration of it in modern times. Maundrell tells us that it was customary in his day for pilgrims to Jerusalem to have figures of various kinds marked on their arms as memorials of their visit. These representations were called “ensigns of Jerusalem.” He describes the process as follows: “The artists who undertake the operation do it in this manner: they have stamps in wood of any figure that you desire, which they first print off upon your arm with powder and charcoal; then taking two very fine needles tied close together, and dipping them often, like a pen, in certain ink, compounded, as I was informed, of gunpowder and ox-gall, they make with them small punctures all along the lines of the figure they have printed; and then, washing the part in wine, conclude the work. These punctures they make with great quickness and dexterity, and with scarce any smart, seldom piercing so deep as to draw blood” (Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem, under date of March 27).

See also notes on Leviticus 19:28 (#166) and Galatians 6:17 (#529).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 519. Mode of Carrying Idols

Isaiah 46:7. They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he standeth.

It is precisely in this way that the Hindus of the present day, according to Ward, carry their idols in procession and set them in the temples. There is an Assyrian marble which has on it, in bas-relief, a representation of a procession, in which four idols are carried on the shoulders of men.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 507. Fuel Gathered by Women

Isaiah 27:11. When the boughs thereof are withered, they shall be broken off: the women come, and set them on fire.

In the East it is the business of women and children to gather fuel. This is the reason the statement is so explicitly made here that “the women” shall come and set them on fire. It has an odd sound to us, for the question naturally arises why women rather than men are mentioned; but to the people of Isaiah’s time the expression was perfectly natural, as it is to the people of the East today.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 505. Reserved for Triumph

Isaiah 24:22. They shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall they be visited.

Lowth (W.) suggests that there is a reference here “to the custom of kings, who used to confine the chief commanders of their enemies whom they take prisoners and reserve them for some extraordinary day of triumph, and then bring them out to public punishment” (Commentary in loco).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 499. On the Roofs

Isaiah 22:1. What aileth thee now, that thou art wholly gone up to the house-tops?

This, as Alexander observes, (com. in loco,) is “a lively description of an Oriental city in commotion.” The flat roofs were used not only for promenading (see note on 2 Sam. 11:2, #275), but also as places of general gathering in times of excitement, just as we gather in the streets. From the roofs the inhabitants were accustomed to look down into the streets or afar off on the roads. This they could not do from the windows, as these seldom opened on the street. The prophet represents the entire people assembled on the tops of their houses. The precise object of their gathering he does not state, nor is it here necessary to discuss. Whether for mere curiosity, or to assail the invaders, or to indulge in idolatrous worship, these gatherings on the housetops give a striking illustration of Oriental customs.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 517. Eyes Sealed

Isaiah 14:18. He hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand.

The margin has “daubed” instead of shut, and thus comes nearer to the original, tack, from teach, which Gesenins defines “to spread over, to daub, to besmear, to plaster.” The words convey the idea of something smeared over the eyes to close them. Harmer suggests, as an explanation of the expression, a reference to a custom followed in the East Indies. The Great Mogul once sealed up his son’s eyes for three years as a punishment, and at the expiration of that time removed the seal. This is given on the authority of Sir Thomas Roe’s chaplain, who does not tell us, however, what was put upon the eyes to produce this result. Dr. Russell tells of a Jewish wedding in Aleppo, where the eyelids of the bride were fastened together with gum, and only the bridegroom was to open them. It is possible that in Isaiah’s day there was some mode of causing temporary blindness by smearing the eyes, and that this is referred to in the text.

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