Luke - Commentaries by James M. Freeman

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 756. Books of Prophecy

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Luke 4:17. There was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written.

For a description of books, and the mode of opening and closing (referred to in this verse and in verse twenty) see notes on Job 19:23-24 (#414) and on Isaiah 34:4 (#511).

Each of the prophetical books is supposed to have been in a separate volume, with the exception of the prophecies of the twelve minor prophets, which were perhaps bound together.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 755. Public Scripture Reading

Luke 4:16. He went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.

When the law and the prophets were read in the synagogue those who read were expected to stand. See note on Acts 13:15 (#834). Not only priests and Levites but common Israelites were allowed to read the Scriptures publicly. Every Sabbath seven persons read: a priest, a Levite, and five ordinary Israelites.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 753. The First Day's Journey

Luke 2:44-45. But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day’s journey; and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him.

This does not mean that they traveled an entire day before they missed the lad. An ordinary “day’s journey” varied from eighteen to thirty miles. See note on 1 Kings 19:4 (#315). But when a party started on a journey the first day’s travel was invariably shorter than the usual distance. This is a very ancient custom, and is still practiced. When everything is ready for the caravan to move they slowly march on, but halt for the first night at a distance of from three to eight miles from the place of starting. The reason assigned for this usage is, that if anything has been left behind through mistake or forgetfulness, someone may with but little trouble return and get it in time to join the caravan the next day.

In the ease before us they made the short journey of the first day, and then halted for the night; so that, instead of traveling all day without missing Jesus, they only traveled a few hours. The first stopping-place of nearly all traveling parties who now leave Jerusalem for the north is el-Birch, supposed to be the ancient Beer, or Beeroth. It is only eight or ten miles from the city, and is considered a three hours’ journey. There is a tradition that this is the very place where the caravan, of which the family of Jesus was a part, made their first halt; and it certainly has greater probability in its favor than many other traditions connected with Palestine. Halting here, or not far from it, when the family gathered together they noticed the absence of Jesus, and immediately went back to the city to find him.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 790. Priestly Benediction

Luke 24:50. He led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them.

The priests in blessing the people lifted up their hands. Maimonides states that the ordinary priests raised their hands above their heads; but the high-priest raised his hands to a level with the plate of gold on his forehead, but not above it.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 789. Division of Jewish Scriptures

Luke 24:44. In the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms.

This is the ordinary Jewish division of the Scriptures. The Jews have, first, the Law, which includes the Pentateuch; secondly, the Prophets, in which are included Joshua, Judges, the two books of Samuel, the two books of Kings, and all the prophets except Daniel; and thirdly, the Hagiographa, or Sacred Writings, in which are comprised, in the order here named, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Solomon’s Song, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the two books of Chronicles. This third division was called “the Psalms,” because that book was the first in the division. In the text it is so called by our Lord.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 786. Ornaments of the Temple

Luke 21:5. Some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts.

The temple of Herod was built of stones so exceeding white that Josephus says the building from a distance looked like a mountain of snow. It was also gilded in many places, so that the reflection from the sun's rays was sometimes painful to the eye of the beholder. It was likewise adorned with barbaric spoils taken in war, and with the voluntary offerings of those who desired in this way to express gratitude to God for past favors, or to manifest a hope for future benefits. According to Josephus there were among these costly gifts golden vines from which hung clusters of grapes as tall as a man. See Wars of the Jews, book 5, chap. 5, §§ 4 and 6.

This custom was very common among the heathen. Their idol temples were richly ornamented with valuable articles, such as shields, chaplets, golden chains, and candlesticks, and the spoils of battle. The treasures of many pagan temples today are beyond computation.

For a more complete description of Herod's temple, see note on Matthew 24:1 (#704).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 752. "The Consolation"

Luke 1:25. The same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.

The Consolation was a term used by the Jews of that period, and long after, to designate the Messiah. Lightfoot says that they were accustomed to swear by "the Consolation." When we are told in the text that Simeon was waiting for "the Consolation of Israel," we are to understand that he was waiting for the Messiah.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 784. Smiting the Breast

Luke 18:13. The publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast.

This is one mode of expressing great grief among the Orientals, especially in mourning for the dead; and its insertion in the parable is very expressive of the deep sorrow of the penitent publican. His grief on account of his sins was like the grief of those who mourned for their dead.

Morier gives an interesting account of the ceremonies observed annually in Persia in commemoration of the death of Hossein, the grandson of Mohammed, who was slain. One part of the ceremonies consists in beating the breast as a token of grief. Morier says: "In front of the palace a circle of the king's own tribe were standing barefooted, and beating their breasts in cadence to the chanting of one who stood in the center, and with whom they now and then joined their voices in chorus. Smiting the breast is a universal act throughout the mourning; and the breast is made bare for that purpose by unbuttoning the top of the shirt" (Second Journey, pp. 178-179).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 775. Trees in Vineyards

Luke 13:6. A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard.

Vineyards were not devoted exclusively to vines. Fruit-trees of various kinds were planted within their limits, so that it is perfectly correct to speak of a fig-tree being planted in a vineyard. The ancient Egyptians planted their vines and fruit-trees in the same enclosure.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 772. Family Bedroom

Luke 11:7. Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed.

It is common for a whole family, parents, children, and servants, to sleep in the same room, different beds being made for them on different parts of the divan. See note on 2 Kings 1:4 (#325) and on Matthew 9:6 (#649). " [in bed] may best be rendered by our abed, for at-bed. [with me] does not necessarily imply in the same bed; rather, according to the simplicity of ancient manners, in the same room" (Bloomfield).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 771. Night Traveling

Luke 11:5-6. Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me.

It would, indeed, be a rare circumstance among us to have a friend come at midnight to borrow bread; but in the East, where, on account of the heat, the traveling is often done at night, it might easily occur to an Oriental audience the allusion in the parable would be perfectly natural.

Luke 10:7. In the same house remain....Go not from house to house.

The exhortation to diligence in their work, alluded to in the last note, is repeated in a different form in this text. As salutations are tedious and frequent, so Oriental etiquette requires much visiting from house to house. This consumes time and takes attention from business; hence our Lord commands his disciples not to do it.

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