Matthew - Commentaries by James M. Freeman

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 644. The Two Hands

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Matthew 6:3. When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.

This is a proverbial expression, found also in classic and Rabbinical authors. We know of no custom alluded to in this proverb save the general habit of giving with the right hand, as it is more conveniently used than the other; but Mr. Jowett speaks of a custom lie noticed in Palestine, which, if it existed in our Lord's time, might have suggested the saying of the text. In giving an account of his visit to Nablous, Mr. Jowett says: "The manner in which the Samaritan priest desired me, on parting, to express our mutual good-will, was by an action, than which there is not one more common in all the Levant. He put the forefinger of his right hand parallel to that of his left, and then rapidly rubbed them together, while I was expected to do the same, repeating the words, 'right, right;' or, in common acceptation, 'together, together.' It is in this manner that persons express their consent on all occasions: on concluding a bargain, on engaging to bear one another company, and on every kind of friendly agreement or good understanding" (Christian Researches, p. 209).

The idea of the text may be, that alms-giving is not to be a matter where the hands are put together in token of an understanding with someone else, but it is to be done privately.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 642. Compulsory Help

Matthew 5:41. Whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.

There is reference here to an ancient Persian custom, which was adopted by the Persian government. The Persians introduced the use of regular couriers to carry letters or news. See note on Job 9:25 (#407). The king's courier had absolute command of all help that was necessary in the performance of his task. He could press horses into his service, and compel the owners to company him if he desired. To refuse compliance with his demands was an unpardonable offense against the king.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 711. The Acquitted and the Convicted

Matthew 25:33. He shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Some think there is a reference here to a custom in the Sanhedrin of putting the acquitted prisoners on the right of the president, and those who were convicted on his left. If so, the illustration of the text is derived from two customs; the separation of the two classes being taken from the shepherds, and their position from the Sanhedrin.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 689. The Children's Song

Matthew 21:15. The children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the son of David.

The Jewish children, when very young, were taught to wave the branches of palm and boughs of myrtle and willow bound together, which were used at the Feast of Tabernacles; and also, while shaking them, to join in the chorus of Hosanna. It is a fact worth noticing, we think, that these children shouted Hosanna, not simply in childish imitation of the multitude. (verse 8,) but in recollection of what they had been taught to do; and although this was not the Feast of Tabernacles, yet when they heard the shout of Hosanna they were ready to respond. The point which the text illustrates is, the custom of early training the Jewish children in the worship of God. Lightfoot (Horae Hebraicae) quotes on this subject from the Gemara: "The rabbis teach that so soon as a little child can be taught to manage a bundle he is bound to carry one; so soon as he is known how to veil himself; he must put on the borders; as soon as he knows how to keep his father's phylacteries, he must put on his own."

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 684. The Market Place

Matthew 20:3. He went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market place.

The place for trading was often at the gates of walled cities. See note on 2 Kings 7:1 (#339). Here, also, laborers went to seek employment, and employers went to seek laborers. Sometimes, in Oriental cities, a large public square is used for similar purposes. Morier says: "The most conspicuous building in Hamadan is the Mesjid Jumah, a large mosque now falling into decay, and before it a maiden or square, which serves as a market-place. Here we observed every morning, before the sun rose, that a numerous body of peasants were collected with spades in their hands, waiting, as they informed us, to be hired for the day to work in the surrounding fields" (Second Journey through Persia, p. 265).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 682. Hiring Laborers

Matthew 20:1. Went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard.

Lightfoot (Hone Hebraicae) gives several citations from Jewish writers to show that the customary time of working was “from sun-rising to the appearing of the stars, and not from break of day.” The laborers, however, may have been hired before sunrise.

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 673. Binding and Loosing

Matthew 16:19. Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Lightfoot gives a large number of citations from rabbinical authorities to show the common usage in the Jewish schools of the words “bind” and “loose,” and also the meaning of these figurative terms. To “bind” is to forbid; to “loose” is to allow. Rosenmuller says: “Binding and loosing—that is, prohibiting and permitting—were, in the Aramaic language, which Jesus used, a customary expression to denote the highest authority.” So in the Syriac Chronicle of Gregory Bar-Hebraeus, or Abul-faraj, it is said (p. 593): “The Jew who yesterday was the highest ruler, could bind and loose, and wore royal garments, today wore a smock-frock. His hands were no longer blackened with writing, but with painting. He was a beggar, and no more lord” (Morgenland, vol. 5, p. 67).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 665. Wickedness at Night

Matthew 13:25. But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.

Roberts states that the exact counterpart of this nocturnal villainy may be found in India at the present day. A man wishing to do his enemy an injury, watches for the time when he shall have finished plowing his field, and in the night he goes into the field and scatters pandinellu, or “pig-paddy.” “This being of rapid growth springs up before the good seed, and scatters itself before the other can be reaped, so that the poor owner of the field will be some years before he can rid the soil of the troublesome weed. But there is another noisome plant which these wretches cast into the ground of those whom they hate: it is called perum-pirandi, and is more destructive to vegetation than any other plant. Has a man purchased a field which another intended to buy, the disappointed person declares, ‘I will plant the perum-pirandi in his grounds.’” (Oriental Illustrations, p. 530).

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