

Bible Hospitality.¹

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VERY fortunate is the Bible student who, travelling in Bible Lands, is the guest of the native chiefs in districts untouched by Western things. This good fortune was mine in the land of the Philistines, in the regions beyond Jordan, and in remote nooks in the highlands of Galilee. The customs there have probably not changed since the days of Abraham. As the traveller surveys an Arab tent encircled by ample flocks and herds, the partition walls of millenniums melt away, and he feels transported, as if by enchantment, into a world very unlike his own. He can easily fancy that the stately men around him are Abrahams, Jacobs, Esaus, and Jobs. This inner picture gallery is enriched by *tableaux vivants* of Bible scenes. And his gains are permanent; for *voir c'est avoir*. He finds the past in the present, and is delightfully excited as fresh light flashes again and again upon many a sacred page. He understands Bible incidents because he sees them.

Would the reader care to have a specimen of the exegetical value of such experiences?

The earliest account of ancient hospitality is in Gn 18¹⁻⁸. Let us lay alongside of it the hospitality of a modern Arab chief who has not yielded to Occidental influences. In this one matter, at least, the Arabs of to-day closely imitate their father Abraham.

As the mysterious strangers approached, Abraham 'ran to meet them from the tent door' (v.²). The sheikh's tent is still planted nearest the travelled way, and his tent door looks towards the quarter whence strangers approach. His tent is all door on that side. Job, the Rabbis say, had four doors in his tent, towards the four quarters, so that his guests might not have the trouble of going round. It is held disgraceful to encamp out of the way of travellers. At night the Arabs kindle watchfires and keep dogs to guide wayfarers to their tent. A hospitable man is called 'One whose dogs bark loudly.' The Arab dines at his tent door that he

may invite the passers-by. Abraham sitting at his tent door, the Rabbis would assure us, was on the outlook for guests, and his love-quicken eye, like that of the father of the prodigal, saw them when they were yet a great way off. Millionaire though he was, with three hundred domestics, he ran—such was his joyous alacrity. One day our party approached the encampment of the richest chief on the east of the Jordan. A horseman at full gallop rode up to us and warmly invited us to visit his chief. In a minute or two the chief himself dashed forward in full dress. When there are more chiefs than one, they gallop as for a wager, and each strives to reach the stranger first and claim him as a guest. Often a chief seems beside himself with joy when heaven sends him guests. Many villages on the east of Jordan have guest-houses, where travellers are entertained at the expense of the village, so that all may share the supreme privilege of befriending strangers. Some of these guest-houses I have seen are the best in the village after the chief's house. Abraham 'bowed himself toward the ground.' That was no slender inclination of the head like ours, but an Oriental prostration. And he said, 'My Lord, if now I have found favour in Thy sight, pass not away, I pray Thee, from Thy servant.' Dr. Porter tells us that he has received the same invitation in almost the self-same words. The root-idea of Arab hospitality is that the guest is the lord and the chief his servant for the time being, and that the guest is bestowing a great favour upon the host. One chief article in the Arab's Creed runs thus, 'Every guest while in the house is its lord.' This principle is carried out to all its consequences. The most powerful chief we visited remained standing while we were entertained in his tent. That chief held before us the very image and mirror of Bible times, for v.⁸ says, 'And he (Abraham) stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.' *They*, not he. The host to-day does not eat with his guests, as he esteems it meat and drink enough for him to see his guests regaled in his 'house of hair.' One exception to this rule is, that the host drinks the first cup of coffee to show that it is not poisoned—so says Burton. Not

¹ The best books on this subject are:—Trumbull's *Studies in Oriental Social Life*; Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*; Schumacher's *Across the Jordan*; Burckhardt's *Travels in Arabia*; Palmer's *The Desert of the Exodus*; Burton's *El Medina and Meccah*.

till we asked him to do so did our chief sit down: the tent was ours, and he our humble servant. Christ's rule applies here: the greatest among them is the servant of all. On approaching the tent we saw men and women running to and fro with the greatest haste. They were pitching a new tent for us on a green spot unsoiled by use, and they were furnishing the tent with gaily coloured quilts and cushions. Two stalwart men rushed up to each rider, lifted him off the saddle tenderly as nurses dismount a child, took off his boots, and literally bore him to the tent with a hand under each of his elbows, as if he were a home-coming invalid. This recalled such passages as Ps 91¹², 'And they (His angels) shall bear thee up in their hands.' And does it not help us to illumine such a passage as Lk 16²², 'The beggar . . . was carried (not merely conducted, but literally carried off) by the angels into Abraham's bosom.'

Like Abraham, our chief did not eat with us. Like Abraham too, he would have washed our feet had we not been Westlanders. So highly was this item of hospitality esteemed among the ancient Egyptians, that their basins for footwashing were of solid gold. 'For therefore,' says Abraham (v.⁵), 'are ye come to your servant.' These words have more meaning than we may imagine. The Arabs to-day have a profound sense of the sacred obligations of hospitality. Into it they infuse all their religion. It is the one virtue that has survived their demoralization: the one uncorrupted part of their faith; and so far as it goes, it is perfect; one can scarcely imagine any refinement of hospitality which they do not possess. Yet this does not imply a high standard of virtue, for Palmer tells us that the ancient Arabs prided themselves upon three things—eloquence, hospitality, and plundering. Hence they glorify everything pertaining to this grace. Abraham's words, we can scarcely doubt, mean, 'Ye are sent by God, God has so ordered your journey as to give me the blessed opportunity of entertaining you, and this I esteem as the highest favour.' Under this idea even a dying chief has been known to welcome guests, and to conceal his dying agonies lest he should fail in the supreme grace of hospitality.

Here are some of the favourite texts of the modern Arabs—God is the Host of all and the Giver of all good: the host must act for and like God: every stranger is a guest of God the

Generous and Bountiful: he is an invited guest: he has been sent by God, and is to be treated as God has treated the host: every tent is a guest-tent as soon as a stranger comes in sight: the host is God's representative, and must act for God, not for himself: God's guests in the desert welcome all whom God sends.

Their hospitality is thus a great religious function, and every feast begins with grace before meat: 'In the name of God the Compassionate and Merciful.' They praise the guest who offers no money. No other nation has ever risen to their wonderful conception of hospitality. Probably the ancient Romans came nearest them in this respect; for Jupiter was the patron of hospitality, and the host gave his parting guest a *tessera* or token, which bore the image of Jupiter, as a pledge of friendship. Sometimes it was broken in two and divided between host and guest.

Abraham (vv.^{5,6}) got Sarah to bake quickly cakes upon the hearth. And he ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf, tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hastened to dress it. The Arabs are probably the most expeditious bakers and butchers in the world. An Arab takes two or three handfuls of meal, pours a little water upon it, lays the dough on the hot embers; and turns it, lifts it, and rubs off the adhering ashes with his hand. In a very few minutes his fresh baked cake is ready for eating. He has no girdle: all his baking is done on the hearthstone. An Arab likes to have a big heap of ashes at his door as a proof of his ample hospitality. The catching, fetching, killing, skinning, cooking, and serving of the calf would probably not take more than half an hour: it does not take more to-day. The voice said (Ac 10¹³), 'Rise, Peter; kill, and eat'; as if the eating would begin immediately after the killing. A rich man, like Abraham, dived into his big herd for a calf; but the average Jewish farmer kept a calf ready for possible guests. The witch of Endor had such 'a fat calf in the house' (1 S 28²⁴), and she handled it in the style of Abraham's cook. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, 'the fatted calf' is mentioned thrice. As everybody knew it, the servants did not need any special directions.

The calf is served up with rice on a big tray, which is placed on a low stool; and all the guests recline in a circle around it, exactly as they did, we may believe, in the days of Abraham. The

phrase 'rest yourselves' in v.⁴ is literally, 'rest yourselves by reclining on your elbow.' The Arab's definition of a good feast is 'a heap which cannot be leaped by a cat.'

The arrival of a guest diffuses sympathetic joy through an Arab's household. They never keep flesh over night: all must be eaten on the cooking day. After the guests have eaten, the remains are given to the women, children, and servants. Bread is still the staff of life with the Arabs. Their daily prayer is for daily bread. Very seldom do they taste flesh, and they are very fond of it. 'Ye have nourished your hearts,' says St. James (5⁵), 'as in a day of slaughter'—one of these rare days on which you have a *treat* of flesh. This adds meaning to such phrases as 'a feast of fat things,' and explains why flesh-eating and merry-making go together, as in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Most beautiful and touching are the fruits of biblical hospitality. One day we were accompanied by an armed horseman for several miles. At last he was asked if he did not mean to go back. 'No,' he replied; 'I cannot go back, you have been in Agil Agha's tent, and are his friends. I must answer to him with my life for your safety while you are on this side of the Jordan.' He remained with us five days, and did his utmost for us. In the same spirit the Mohammedans in Egypt convoy a guest home, and believe that every such step is a step in the ascent of paradise.

My first night in an Arab tent gave me some prized exegetical touches. I will hang some of them around the 121st Psalm—the traveller's psalm. As we arrived, the chief greeted us with a biblical benediction, 'Peace be unto you.' His flocks and herds were in an enclosure around his tents; and they kept watch by night as the shepherds of Bethlehem did. But his guests were the

special care of the chief: the old laws of hospitality guaranteed our safety: he could not entrust to others the keeping of his guests. He made 'a wall of fire round about' us (Zec 2⁵); and, armed with his long rifle, he sat at our tent door all night. Whenever I awoke during the night I found him wide awake, and the shadows from the fire dancing upon his immovable features. The great difficulty in the East is to get night watchers who can keep awake. Four are usually assigned to an encampment, so that the two pairs may watch and sleep by turns. One traveller tells that he repeated David's trick and stole the rifles of his drowsy guards. I have read of a chief whose enemy by a clever trick became his guest. He gave him food and said, 'By this act I have pledged every drop of my blood that, while you are in my territory, no evil shall come to you. For that space of time we are brothers.' Arab hospitality implies 'Sanctuary.' But 'He that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is thy Keeper.' The image here is that of a sleepless host who watches over his guests till break of day. The Arab host firmly believes that he must consider his sleeping guest before his own child, and that he must place his life between him and danger. The guest's safety is thus measured by the power of his host. Jehovah is thy Host and thy Keeper. Thou art in His tent, and hast all guest-rights and guest-privileges. His eternal power secures thy eternal weal. 'The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.'

Our host's farewell the next morning was, like most things about him, exquisitely biblical. 'May Allah enlarge you, may Allah make a plain path before you, he said.