

## Customs of Bible Times – The Sacred Duty of Hospitality

When a guest is received into an Eastern home, bowing between the guests and host is quite apt to take place. In Western lands such bowing would be of the head only, but in the East there is a more expressive custom of saluting with the head erect and the body a little inclined forward, by raising the hand to the heart, mouth, and forehead. The symbolic meaning of this action is to say something like this: “My heart, my voice, my brain are all at your service.” James Neil, *Pictured Palestine*, London: J. Nisbet, 1904, pp. 64, 65.

But those who are used to this custom on many occasions enter into a more complete bow. They do not wait to do this only for royalty, but when they want to express thanks for a favor, or supplicate for a favor, and at many other times of meeting they often fall on their knees, and then incline the body touching the ground with their head, and kissing the lower part of the other person’s clothing, or his feet, or even the dust at his feet. To those not acquainted with such manners, it would seem that one person was worshiping the other like he would worship God; but ordinarily, worship of this sort is not involved in the action. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–67.

Cornelius is said to have worshiped Peter: “And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet, and worshiped him” (Acts 10:25). Of course, Peter rejected this lest it might involve divine worship. ...

### Greeting

Upon entering an Arab house or a Bedouin tent, the greetings used are something like this: The host will say:

“Salam alakum,” which means, “Peace be on you.” The guest will respond with the words: “Wa alakum es-salam,” meaning, “And on you peace.” John D. Whiting, “Bedouin Life in Bible Lands,” *The National Geographic Magazine*, January 1937, 72.

Knowing that these Arabic customs date back for centuries, how significant then are the instructions of Jesus to His disciples, who were to be entertained in certain homes: “And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house, and if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again” (Luke 10:5, 6).

### Kissing

Guests in Holy Land homes expect to be kissed as they enter. When entertained by a Pharisee, Jesus commented on His reception by saying to the host, “Thou gavest me no kiss” (Luke 7:45). ...

Here men shake hands when they meet and greet, but in Palestine, instead of doing this, they place their right hand on their friend’s left shoulder and kiss his right cheek, and then reversing the action, place their left hand on his right shoulder, and kiss his left cheek. In this country [the United States] men never kiss each other’s faces; there it may be constantly seen. But how the practice lights up the numerous allusions in Scripture which are naturally lost to a Westerner! Once grasp the fact that their kiss answers to our hearty handshake between friends and social equals, and how much—how very much—becomes plain that was before obscured . ... Neil, *op. cit.*, 68.

### Guest Given a Drink of Water

One of the first things done for a guest who has been received is to offer him a drink of water. The doing of this is recognizing him as being worthy of peaceful reception. ... When Eliezer, Abraham's servant, sought a welcome, he did so by requesting of the maiden who came to the well to draw water (Genesis 24:17, 18), "Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher." And when she made answer, "Drink, my lord," it was an indication that he was welcome to be a guest at the nearby home. With this significance attached to a drink of water, the promise of Jesus takes on new meaning (Mark 9:41), "Whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward." H. Clay Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life*, 106, 108, 112.

The Guest Made Lord of the House

An Eastern proverb runs thus: "The guest while in the house is its lord." This is a true statement of the spirit of the hospitality of the East. One of the first greetings a Palestinian host will give his guest is to say, "Hadtha Beitaq;" that is, "This is your house." This saying is repeated many times. Thus, actually, the guest during his stay is master of the house. And whenever the guest asks a favor, in granting it the host will say, "You do me honor." ... Milton N. Lindberg, *A Guest in a Palestinian Home*, a pamphlet, 6, 7.

The host was considered to be a servant, and the guest was lord. Thus Lot spoke of himself and his guests: "Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house" (Genesis 19:2).

Privacy Not Expected by the Guest

An Eastern guest would think he was ill-treated if he were left alone at any time. He does not need privacy at night, because he sleeps with his clothes on. He is happy to have others sleep with him. If a sleeping place is assigned to him in an upper room, then some of the family sons sleep alongside of him that he might have their companionship. He would feel that he was being deserted if treated the way he would be if entertained in the West, just as a Westerner would feel oppressed by the constant attention of an Eastern host. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, Cornell University Library, 1898, 93.

In the lands of the East, when a host accepts a man to be his guest he thereby agrees at whatever the cost to defend his guest from all possible enemies during the time of his entertainment.