

## AGRICULTURE

**VII. Agricultural Symbols.** The Bible abounds with agricultural symbolism. For example, we read that a blessed man is one whose life is watered by God's Spirit as an irrigation stream waters a fruit tree (Ps. 1). God's favor comes like the dew on the grass (Prov. 19:12). An evil man is sifted like chaff (Ps. 1:4). Men faint for God while living in life's dry, barren deserts (Ps. 63:1). And forsaking God is like living with a leaky cistern (Jer. 2:13).

Jesus often used agricultural symbols in His teaching. He described a sower scattering his seed (Mark 4:1–20) and laborers who answered a call to work in a vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16). He compared false prophets to trees that bear bad fruit (Matt. 7:15–20) and warned that “every tree is known by his own fruit” (Luke 6:43–44). Jesus promised to give His followers “living water” from everlasting wells (John 4). He used seeds, vines, trees, fruit, and other agricultural metaphors to express the truths of God.

The early Christian writers also used the common knowledge of agriculture to convey their message. For example, Paul recalled the unmuzzled ox at the threshing floor when he asked churches to support their spiritual reapers (1 Cor. 9:10). John described the angel of judgment thrusting in his sickle, “for the harvest of the earth is ripe” (Rev. 14:15). Seldom was a preacher or writer better understood than when he used the simple things of nature to illustrate his message.

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**E. Fertility of the Land.** A tourist to Palestine from the fertile plains of America might wonder if Moses was in his right mind when he described the Promised Land as “... a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of the valleys and hills; A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil, and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; ...” (Deut. 8:7–9). But Moses addressed those words to a people who had just spent 40 years in the desert! The earliest American pioneers, crossing the desert into the coastal plain areas of California, might have found similar soil conditions and geographical contrasts. The Promised Land held boundless possibilities in contrast to the harsh, dry regions of the Sinai, Negev, and Arabah.

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<sup>1</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

However, the Promised Land was no Garden of Eden. The Israelites may have envisioned endless valleys of crops and hillsides adorned with grasses, herbs, and flowers; but that is not what they found. Thorns and thistles cover the rocky land. During summer months a dull reddish-brown color on the slopes indicates parched vegetation. Nevertheless, the land is highly fertile compared to the surrounding deserts.

The Promised Land offered good opportunities for making a living with its water and tillable soil. But the Israelites discovered that it was not easy to take advantage of those opportunities. They had to tame the land. The Israelite farmer had to deal with rocks, thorns, thistles. He feared the sun, which scorched young seedlings that were not rooted deeply enough to draw water from a depth. He learned dependence on the Lord, "... for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

Jesus nicely illustrated the farmer's plight with His parable of the sower. The sower spread the seed all over the field, but only the seed which fell on "good soil" produced a crop. The remaining seed fell on rocks and among thistles and soon died (Matt. 13:3-8). What the Israelites could accomplish with the soil of Palestine depended entirely on their relationship with the Lord. He promised to bless them materially for their obedience: "The Lord shall open unto thee his good treasure, the heaven to give the rain unto thy land in his season, and to bless all the work of thine hand: ..." (Deut. 28:12). Disobedience, however, would bring material judgment: "But ... if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, ... thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron. The Lord shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust" (Deut. 28:15a, 23-24). "Thou shalt carry much seed out into the field, and shalt gather but little in; for the locust shall consume it. Thou shalt plant vineyards, and dress them, but shalt neither drink of the wine, nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them" (Deut. 28:38-39). If the Israelites did not heed the Lord, they would lose the very land God promised to them: "... Ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest to possess it" (Deut. 28:63b). Sadly, that very thing happened.<sup>2</sup>

## AGRICULTURE...FLAX

EX 9:<sup>31</sup> (Now the flax and the barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. <sup>32</sup> But the wheat and the spelt were not ruined, for they are late in coming up.)<sup>3</sup>

The flax and barley were ruined, but not the wheat because it had not yet been planted (Ex. 9:31-32). This would suggest early February as the time of this plague.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>3</sup>*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

<sup>4</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised*

**EX 9:31–32.** These notations about which crops were smitten (flax and barley) perhaps indicate that the time of the year was between January and February.<sup>5</sup>

Joshua 2:<sup>6</sup> She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof.<sup>6</sup>

Judges 15:<sup>14</sup> When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him; and the spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands.<sup>7</sup>

Isaiah 42:3...KJV...**Smoking flax** refers to the burning wick and is used symbolically of those who are endangered. The idea of the passage is that the Servant will take mercy on the weak.<sup>8</sup>

Proverbs 31:<sup>13</sup> She seeks wool and flax,  
and works with willing hands.<sup>9</sup>

Isaiah 19:<sup>9</sup> The workers in flax will be in despair,  
and the carders and those at the loom will grow pale.<sup>10</sup>

Hosea 2:<sup>5</sup> For their mother has played the whore;  
she who conceived them has acted shamefully.  
For she said, “I will go after my lovers;  
they give me my bread and my water,  
my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.”<sup>11</sup>

Hosea 2:<sup>9</sup> Therefore I will take back  
my grain in its time,  
and my wine in its season;  
and I will take away my wool and my flax,  
which were to cover her nakedness.<sup>12</sup>

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*edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.*

<sup>5</sup>Jerry Falwell, executive editor; Edward E. Hinson and Michael Kroll Woodrow, general editors, *KJV Bible commentary [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1994.*

<sup>6</sup>*The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.*

<sup>7</sup>*The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.*

<sup>8</sup>Jerry Falwell, executive editor; Edward E. Hinson and Michael Kroll Woodrow, general editors, *KJV Bible commentary [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1994.*

<sup>9</sup>*The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.*

<sup>10</sup>*The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.*

<sup>11</sup>*The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.*

Joshua2:6. These stalks of **flax**, which had been soaked in water, would have been laid out in short piles on the **roof** to dry. The use of flax in ancient Canaan is confirmed by its mention in the famous Gezer Calendar, variously dated between the eleventh and ninth centuries B.C.<sup>13</sup>

An early Hebrew inscription from the 10th century B.C., found at Gezer and known as the “Gezer Calendar,” lists various agricultural activities through the months of the year. Its purpose is unknown, although it is often thought to have been a child’s exercise tablet. The approximate translation is as follows: “Two months of harvest. Two months of sowing. Two months of late planting. Month of reaping flax. Month of reaping barley. Month of reaping and measuring. Two months of vine tending. Month of summer fruit.”<sup>14</sup>

Schoolboys in ancient Israel learned their farm calendar as set out in a poem found at Gezer in 1908. Some schoolboy learning to write at about Solomon’s time recorded this breakdown of the farmer’s year:

1. *His two months are (olive) harvest,*
2. *His two months are planting (grain),*
3. *His two months are late planting,*
4. *His month is hoeing up of flax,*
5. *His month is harvest of barley,*
6. *His month is harvest and feasting,*
7. *His two months are vine-tending,*
8. *His month is summer fruit.*

In ancient Israel, September and October were a harvest time for olives, grain, and grapes. In November and December, farmers planted grains and vegetables. In January and February, they sowed grains and vegetables for a later crop. In March, April, and May they harvested flax, then barley, wheat, and vegetables. Israelite farmers celebrated the end of the harvest with a time of feasting and praise to God. The hot, dry summer months produced little, so the farmer used that time to care for his vines and orchards; some orchards gave him fruit in August.<sup>15</sup>

Linen was a versatile fabric that could be made coarse and thick, or very fine and delicate. The Egyptians had a wide reputation for their fine linen, which was nearly

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<sup>12</sup>*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Nelson, Inc., *King James Version Study Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1988 by Liberty University.

<sup>14</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson’s new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson’s illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>15</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

transparent. They also made coarse linen that was so heavy that it could be used for carpets to cover the floors.<sup>16</sup>

Along the northern section of the Mediterranean coast could be found the **murex shell**, used to make a very valuable dye called **purple** (see “**The Trade in Purple**” at Acts 16:14). Extensive **textile industries**, using both wool and the **linen** made from **flax** grown on the coastal plain, produced the distinctive Tyrian **purple cloth** that was in great demand throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>17</sup>

In the ancient world, wool and flax provided most of the raw material for creating fabric. The more rural the household, the more likely that spinning and weaving were done in the home. Urban households probably depended on merchants for material and even finished garments. Cleaning and dyeing eventually developed into distinct occupations.

**Among the Greeks, spinning, weaving, and decorating cloth were so much the responsibility of females that those skills became metaphors for “women’s wiles.” Women in Roman cities were likewise encouraged to occupy their time working with wool. The task was synonymous with being a virtuous wife and mother. In fact, Emperor Augustus (27 A.D.—A.D. 14) was so eager to reestablish traditional Roman values that he wore woolen clothes made by his wife to encourage women to return to their looms. Among the Jews, some men but mostly women made fabric. Jews who intended to strictly observe the Law were careful not to mix wool and flax in the same garment, following the prohibitions of Deut. 22:11 and Lev. 19:19.<sup>18</sup>**

In biblical times cloth was made from the hair of goats, sheep, and camels and from linen, flax, hemp, and silk. Certain goats grew long black hair that produced a heavy waterproof cloth for making tents and outer garments.

Goat-hair and camel-hair garments, being dark in color, were worn especially during a time of mourning and were called sackcloth (Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31).

Judea was the wool-producing center, while Galilee was known for flax and linen.

The rule against priests wearing wool suggests that woolen tunics (undergarments) were the garb of the common people (Ezek. 44:17).

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<sup>16</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible* [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Nelson, Inc., *Word in Life Study Bible* [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1996.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Nelson, Inc., *Word in Life Study Bible* [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1996.

Although cotton was known at an early time in China and India, most scholars question its use in ancient Canaan. They conclude that what is translated “cotton” in some Old Testament translations was really cloth made of flax or hemp.<sup>19</sup>

Cord or rope made from flax was especially strong and durable. It was often used to make fish nets.<sup>20</sup>

**Flax.** A plant growing one meter (three feet) tall with pale blue flowers, and used for making linen. When mature, the entire flax plant was pulled and placed in water to separate the fibers from the stems. It was then laid on housetops to dry (Josh. 2:6), and later woven into linen. Twisted flax was also used as wicks for lamps in Bible times (Is. 42:3). Also see *Reed/Rush*.<sup>21</sup>

Lamps burned olive oil or fat. Those with a single wick would burn from two to four hours. Occasionally the flax wick would have to be trimmed. WICK TRIMMERS were used for this purpose.

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The weaving of linen fabric began with the lowly flax plant. These plants were usually pulled out by the roots, dried in the sun, then pounded until the fibers separated. Then the fibers were washed and bleached. This produced a fine fiber that at times was nearly invisible. Israel had craftsmen skilled in weaving fine linen, although the craft probably was first learned in Egypt (Ex. 35:35; 38:23). Guilds of linen weavers also existed in

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<sup>19</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>20</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>21</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>22</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

Bible times (1 Chr. 4:21). Palestinian weavers were so skilled that their fine linen was often preferred to that produced in Egypt.<sup>23</sup>

the common dragnet of the Egyptians (Is. 19:8; Hab. 1:15–17), which was made of cords of flax. <sup>24</sup>

**Weaver.** One who fashioned threads into cloth. Weaving was known in the ancient world from about 2000 B.C. Almost every household had a loom, and women spent much time at this task (Prov. 31:13, 19, 22, 24). A woman sat before her loom and passed the shuttle back and forth through the warp thread while manipulating the loom. She also made her own yarn or thread from animal hair or plant fibers. For instance, flax was made into linen. In other countries, such as Egypt and Assyria, weaving was done by men. Such professional weavers worked in urban areas. Even urban areas in Israel boasted professional weavers.<sup>25</sup>

By the time of Jesus, the scribes were a new upper class among the Jewish people. Large numbers of priests in Jerusalem before A.D. 70 served as scribes. One of these was JOSEPHUS, the Jewish historian. Some scribes came from among the SADDUCEES. Others came from the ordinary priestly ranks. But the largest group of scribes came from among every other class of people, including merchants, carpenters, flax combers, tentmakers, and even day laborers, like HILLEL, who became a famous Jewish teacher.<sup>26</sup>

**SPINNING** — the art of twisting natural fibers and converting them into yarn or thread for making cloth. Among the Hebrew people, as in many ancient cultures, spinning was

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<sup>23</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>24</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>25</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>26</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

the work of women. Spinning was done by hand, because the spinning wheel was unknown at that time. In hand spinning the **DISTAFF** and **SPINDLE** were used. The wool or flax was wound on the distaff, which was stuck upright in the ground or held under the arm, and the thread was drawn out by hand. The spindle, which had a circular rim to steady it when revolving, was attached to the thread being drawn out from the distaff. By rotating the spindle, the spinner twisted the thread.<sup>27</sup>

**SPINDLE** — a round stick with tapered ends used to form and twist the yarn in hand spinning. The spindle and the **DISTAFF** are the most ancient of all instruments used in the craft of spinning (Prov. 31:19). About 8 to 12 inches long, spindles were used to guide the thread as it was fashioned into cloth. The weaver sometimes turned the spindle by rolling it across her thigh. Also see **CLOTH**.<sup>28</sup>

**DISTAFF** — a staff that holds unspun flax or wool for spinning into thread (Prov. 31:19).<sup>29</sup> Exodus 35:25

**TOW** — KJV word for the refuse of flax produced in the manufacture of linen (Judg. 16:9; yarn, NKJV; Is. 1:31, KJV; tinder, NKJV, NIV).<sup>30</sup>

The root contains an oil, and after the oil is expressed is used as a food for cattle. Egypt was celebrated for the culture of flax and the manufacture of linen. The spinning was anciently done by women of noble birth. It seems probable that the cultivation of flax for the purpose of the manufacture of linen was by no means confined to Egypt, but that, originating in India, it spread over Asia at a very early period of antiquity. That it was

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<sup>27</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>28</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>29</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>30</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

grown in Palestine even before the conquest of that country by the Israelites appears from Josh. 2:6.<sup>31</sup>

Today, linseed oil is extracted from flax seeds. We do not know whether this was done in Bible times.<sup>32</sup>

**E. Flax.** The Hebrews made linen cloth and rope from flax (Judg. 15:14; Hos. 2:5, 9), which they harvested in March and April. Farmers used their hoes to chop off the stalks at the ground so that none of the valuable plant would be lost.<sup>33</sup>

**J. Flax.** Egypt produced fine linens from the flax plants that grew so well along the Nile Valley. The Egyptians had a secret way of softening the flax fibers to make the linen more comfortable to wear; this made their products more popular. They placed the stalks of flax into water until it started to rot; then they dried the stalks and beat them to separate the fibers. Expert weavers spun the fibers into thread and wove it to make cloth. The Israelites grew flax near Jericho and in the area of Galilee. They used dew water instead of running water to soften the stalks; this was easier, but it didn't give their linen the fine quality that Egyptian linen had. The Israelites learned the art of weaving from the Egyptians and the Bible often mentions how they used this skill. Sinai women made linens for the tabernacle (Exod. 35:25); priests and kings wore linen clothes (Exod. 28:39; 39:27–29; 1 Sam. 2:18; 2 Sam. 6:14; 1 Chron. 15:27–28). An angel who appeared to Daniel was dressed in linen (Dan. 10:5). Rich men like Mordecai wore linen (Esther 8:15); the rich man who spoke to Lazarus was dressed in fine linen (Luke 16:19). And remember that the body of Jesus was wrapped in linen for burial (Luke 24:53).<sup>34</sup>

Papyrus (from which we get the word *paper*) was a sturdy writing material made from flax pulp, woven together with beaten strips of papyrus reed.<sup>35</sup>

The Israelites used their roofs as a place of retreat and meditation (Neh. 8:16; 2 Sam. 11:2; Is. 15:3; 22:1; Jer. 48:38). They dried linen, flax, corn, figs, and other fruits on the

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<sup>31</sup>William Smith; revised and edited by F.N. and M.A. Peloubet, *Smith's Bible dictionary [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997.

<sup>32</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>33</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>34</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

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rooftops (Josh. 2:6). Sometimes they pitched tents on their roofs and slept there at night (2 Sam. 16:22).<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, lamps were very common. They burned olive oil, pitch, naphtha, or wax, and they had wicks of cotton or flax. (A Jewish tradition says that the priests made wicks for the lamps of the temple from their old linen garments.)<sup>37</sup>

## AGRICULTURE...THRESHING

**C. Winnowing and Threshing Tools.** Grain was threshed and then winnowed by throwing it against the wind, which blew away the chaff. Farmers still use this method in much of the Near East.

Ancient threshing places were high, flat summits 15 to 30 m. (50 to 100 ft.) in diameter and open to the winds on every side. Each year farmers would level and roll the dirt to keep the threshing floor hard. Often a village had only one threshing floor and each farmer took his turn in a fixed order.

The sheaves were piled in a heap and the grain was beaten out by a machine or by the trampling of oxen's feet. The threshing machine was a square wooden frame holding two or more wooden rollers. On each roller were three or four iron rings, notched like sawteeth. Oxen pulled the machine, and the driver sat on a crosspiece fastened into the frame. As the rollers passed over the grain, it was crushed out on every side and the straw was shredded for fodder. The threshing machine was a symbol of violence and destruction (cf. Amos 1:3).

Another threshing tool was a wooden plank 90 cm. (3 ft.) wide and 2 to 3 m. (6 to 8 ft.) long. On the lower side were many holes 2.5 to 5 cm. (1 to 2 in.) in diameter, where the farmer fastened pieces of stone, flint, or iron that projected from the board as teeth, tearing the grain loose. Unmuzzled oxen pulled the board behind them across the threshing floor, with the driver standing on the plank.

The grain and chaff gradually formed a big heap at the center of the floor. During the days of threshing, the owner slept nearby to protect the grain from thieves (cf. Ruth 3:2–14).

Farmers winnowed their grain with a fan, which was a semi-oval frame about 90 cm. (3 ft.) in diameter with a surface of woven hair or palm leaves. A worker would hold the fan by hand while others poured the mixture of grain and chaff upon it. Then the winnower tossed the grain to the winds so the chaff would be blown away and the heavier

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<sup>36</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

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kernels would fall to the ground (Ps. 1:4). Winnowing was done in the evening, when sea breezes blew the strongest.<sup>38</sup>

**D. Sieves.** The first winnowing process did not remove all the unwanted material, so a final step—sifting—was necessary. Amos 9:9 and Isaiah 30:28 describe two kinds of sieves: the *kebarahin* Amos and the *naphahin* Isaiah. We are not sure which type of sieve is meant in either passage. One type of sieve now used in the Near East has a fine mesh that retains the good grain and lets the dust pass through. Another kind, with coarse mesh, allows the desired grain to fall through and retains the larger husks and pods, either to be thrown out or to be rethreshed.

**E. Mills and Presses.** Corn and other grains were ground with mortar stones. One or two persons in a household ground grain daily for the family's meals.

Vinedressers cut grapes from the vine with sickles and carried them in baskets to a winepress. This was usually a large stone vat with a small channel that allowed the grape juice to pour out the side into a tub. The grapes were trodden by foot, then pressed by machine. Farmers stored the grape juice in skin bottles, pitchers, and barrels, where it fermented into wine. They also obtained olive oil with presses.<sup>39</sup>

Ancient threshing places were high, flat summits 15 to 30 m. (50 to 100 ft.) in diameter and open to the winds on every side. Each year farmers would level and roll the dirt to keep the threshing floor hard. Often a village had only one threshing floor and each farmer took his turn in a fixed order.<sup>40</sup>

## COMMUNITY

**C. Care of the Poor.** The welfare of the individual was primarily the responsibility of the family. The closest male relative, known as the kinsman-redeemer, was the protector of the individual. He was to “avenge his blood” and redeem his kinsman from indebtedness (Num. 35:12, 19; Lev. 24–26).

The most notable example of the kinsman-redeemer was Boaz, who bought from Naomi all that had belonged to her husband and married her widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth. Thus Naomi was no longer obligated to Ruth and Boaz for her daily provision. Her property was eventually given to the child of Ruth, the heir of Naomi's son, Mahlon. (See also “Marriage and Divorce.”)

<sup>38</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>39</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>40</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

Any crops that grew during the sabbatical year and the Year of Jubilee were set aside for the poor to gather. This made the poor responsible to gather their own grain. Thus they preserved their personal dignity and self-respect.

The Law called upon the people in each community to take personal interest in the poor and give them individual encouragement. The third-year tithe was to be stored for the poor of the community, so that they “shall eat and be satisfied; that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest” (Deut. 14:29b; cf. 12:11–12; 26:1–19). Thus the Jewish congregation showed interest in the needy. This practice also helped to prevent division between the comfortable middle-class farmer and the gleaning poor.

The Law told individuals how to deal with neighbors in progressive stages of poverty (Lev. 25:35–43). If a poor man lost all sense of security, his neighbor was to treat him with hospitality, as if he were a stranger or sojourner (Lev. 25:23). If a poor man needed to borrow money, he was not expected to pay interest or return more goods than he borrowed. If the poor man became so indebted that he had to sell himself as a bond servant, he was to be treated as a hired servant. (See “Laws and Statutes.”) He remained a free man (cf. Deut. 15:18), and in the Year of Jubilee he would be freed. Further, the master was obligated to share with him grain, livestock, and wine (Deut. 15:14).

The Law calls the poor man “your brother” (Lev. 25:35, 39). He was a fellow Israelite; but more importantly, he was a brother in God’s covenant. For this reason, an Israelite was not to begrudge the bond servant his freedom nor the goods he gave him.

The fourth commandment required a man to let his servants rest on the Sabbath, just as he refreshed himself. He was to pay his hired servants at the end of the day (Lev. 19:13).

The Lord promised that if Israel faithfully obeyed His commandments, there would be no poor in the land because He would bless them (Deut. 15:1–5). But notice the condition of the promise: “There shall be no poor among you; for the LORD shall greatly bless thee ... Only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God” (Deut. 15:4–5). If God’s people listened, they would be so prosperous that they would lend their wealth to many nations (15:6).

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**H. Laws of Benevolence.** Many biblical laws called for humane treatment of the poor and helpless, as well as kindness toward animals.

The law said that every animal was useful, and the Israelites were to feed each animal according to the work it did (Deut. 25:4). God did not allow his people to beat their animals cruelly. In fact, they had to let their animals rest on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8–11; 23:12).

One law said that when an Israelite found a beast carrying a load that was too heavy for it—even if the animal belonged to his neighbor—he should take part of the burden himself (Deut. 22:1–4.) The Israelites were supposed to leave gleanings in the field for wild animals to eat (Lev. 24:4–7). Also, an Israelite could not take a mother bird and her eggs on the same day, nor a cow and its calf, nor a ewe sheep and its lamb (Lev. 22:28;

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41 James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

Deut. 22:6–7). God’s Law respected the source of life and demanded humane treatment of all animals.

Scripture directed God’s people to care for the widow, orphan, and foreigner (Ex. 22:22–24). These people did not receive handouts, however; they were supposed to be able to earn their own living (Deut. 24:19–22). The Israelites respected and cared for their elders (Lev. 19:32). They could criticize a neighbor they did not like, but they were not allowed to hold a grudge against him (Lev. 19:17–18). They could not inflict excessive punishment on a criminal (Deut. 25:1–3). In every way, God expected His people to love their neighbors.

If an Israelite loaned someone a coat or some other necessary item, it had to be returned at nightfall. An Israelite could not enter someone’s house to collect a bad debt (Deut. 24:10–13). God honored the right of the creditor, but He also guarded the right of the debtor.

The Law allowed travelers to enter a field and gather food to eat, but they could not carry off an extra supply (Deut. 23:24–25). A man had to pay wages to his hired hands every day, since they needed the money to buy their food (Deut. 24:14–15). He had to lend them money without interest in an emergency (Lev. 25:35–37). If a person could not make a living on his own, he could sign a contract to become another man’s servant. His master had to treat him kindly, though (Lev. 25:39–43). A freeborn person could not be kidnapped and sold as a slave (Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7). And an Israelite had to protect a runaway slave from another country, making sure that his owner didn’t harm him (Deut. 23:15–16). Each person could expect fair treatment under the legal system of Israel.<sup>42</sup>

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40).<sup>43</sup>

parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>44</sup>

In biblical times, a man who did not provide adequately for his family was guilty of a serious offense. A man who failed to do this was shunned and mocked by society (cf. Prov. 6:6–11; 19:7). Paul wrote, “If any provide not for his own, ... he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim. 5:8).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>43</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>44</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>45</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

**3. National Responsibility.** As we have seen, God's Law wasn't the private property of the upper class; each person knew the Law and the penalty for breaking it. Often the whole community punished the lawbreaker, because all of the people had to uphold the Law (Ex. 21:22–23).

Judges represented God, but they also represented the law-abiding community.

Executioners meted out punishment on behalf of the total community. Thus a murder case required evidence from two or three witnesses, and the verdict was announced publicly at the city gate. Sometimes the witnesses executed a murderer (Deut. 13:6–10; 17:7). Sometimes the victim's next of kin did it (Deut. 19:11–12), and sometimes the whole community took part (Num. 15:32–36; Deut. 13:6–10).<sup>46</sup>

**V. The Evening Circle.** The evening meal in a Jewish village was eaten about two hours before sundown. Afterward, all of the men gathered in an open-air meeting place, where they sat or lay in a large circle with the older or more respected men in the center. On the outer edges the older boys could stand and listen as the men related the events of that day or long ago.

The circle served as the evening “newspaper.” We know what sort of things took place. The men discussed such things as the birth of a child, the illness of a villager, the appearance of a lion or bear in the vicinity, or national events. Then their thoughts probably turned to plans for the future. They might discuss the prospect of a bountiful harvest, the first signs of a plague of locusts, or the amount of rain that had fallen. We can imagine that as the young men walked home, each reflected on what he had heard. Some stored important information they wanted to remember. Others found their hearts strangely stirred by the tales of daring men of old. Others had simply been entertained by the gossip and proverbs they had heard. But collectively their stock of wisdom and insight had increased, and so their lives had been enriched.<sup>47</sup>

## GEOGRAPHY

The third hottest temperature on world record (72° C. or 129° F.) was taken in this area on June 21, 1942. You would think no one would want to live where temperatures are so high, precipitation perhaps 5 cm. (2 in.) per year, and the scenery so bleak. Yet people have settled in the Dead Sea region from ancient times.<sup>48</sup>

## JACOB'S WELL

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<sup>46</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>47</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>48</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

**JA'COB'S WELL**, a deep spring in the vicinity of Shechem (called *Sychar* in Christ's time and *Nablus* at the present day). It was probably dug by Jacob, whose name it bears. On the curb of the well Jesus sat and discoursed with the Samaritan woman. John 4:5-26. It is situated about half a mile southeast of Nablus, at the foot of Mount Gerizim. It is about nine feet in diameter and 75 feet deep. At some seasons it is dry; at others it contains a few feet of water.<sup>49</sup>

The population of *Nablus* consists of about 5000, among whom are 500 Greek Christians, 150 Samaritans, and a few Jews. The enmity between the Samaritans and Jews is as inveterate still as it was in the days of Christ. The Mohammedans, of course, make up the bulk of the population. The well of Jacob and the tomb of Joseph are still shown in the neighborhood of the town. The well of Jacob lies about a mile and a half east of the city, close to the lower road, and just beyond the wretched hamlet of *Balata*. The Christians sometimes call it *Bir es-Samariyeh*—"the well of the Samaritan woman." The well is deep—75 feet when last measured—and there was probably a considerable accumulation of rubbish at the bottom. Sometimes it contains a few feet of water, but at others it is quite dry. It is entirely excavated in the solid rock, perfectly round, 9 feet in diameter, with the sides hewn smooth and regular. Of all the special localities of our Lord's life, this is almost the only one absolutely undisputed. The tomb of Joseph lies about a quarter of a mile north of the well, exactly in the centre of the opening of the valley between Gerizim and *Ebal*.<sup>50</sup>

The well is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Known today as *Bir Ya'qub* ("the well of Jacob"), it is near *Tell Balatah*, the site of ancient Shechem.<sup>51</sup>

Jacob's Well is one of the few sites visited by Jesus that is identifiable today.<sup>52</sup>

Today some 300 Samaritan descendants live in Nablus, site of ancient Shechem.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>William Smith; revised and edited by F.N. and M.A. Peloubet, *Smith's Bible dictionary [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997.

<sup>50</sup>William Smith; revised and edited by F.N. and M.A. Peloubet, *Smith's Bible dictionary [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997.

<sup>51</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>52</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations [computer file], electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

The Roman emperor Justinian (ruled A.D. 527–565) suppressed the Samaritans and brought them almost to extinction, a condition from which they never recovered. But two small units of Samaritans survive until the present time—one group in Nablus (ancient Shechem) and a second group near Tel Aviv.<sup>54</sup>



## MARRIAGE

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<sup>53</sup>Thomas Nelson, Inc., *Word in Life Study Bible* [computer file], *electronic ed.*, Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1996.

<sup>54</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, consulting editors, *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary: An authoritative one-volume reference work on the Bible with full color illustrations* [computer file], *electronic edition of the revised edition of Nelson's illustrated Bible dictionary*, Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

The submission of a Jewish woman to her husband did not depreciate her abilities or demote her to a secondary place in society. The “excellent” wife of the Old Testament (Prov. 31) enjoyed the confidence of her husband and the respect of her children and neighbors. She had a great deal of freedom to use her economic skills to provide for her family. She was recognized as a person of wisdom and a gracious teacher. She was as far as possible from being a chattel slave, which is how a woman was regarded in other Near Eastern cultures.<sup>55</sup>

The New Testament describes the church as the bride of Christ, preparing herself for life in the eternal kingdom (Eph. 5:23).<sup>56</sup>

**II. Biblical Marriage Customs.** In biblical times, the first step in marriage was taken by the man or his family (Gen. 4:19; 6:2; 12:19; 24:67; Ex. 2:1). Usually the couples’ families made the marriage arrangement. Thus Hagar, as head of the family, “took him [Ishmael] a wife out of the land of Egypt” (Gen. 21:21). When Isaac was 40 years old, he was quite capable of choosing his own wife (Gen. 25:20); yet Abraham sent his servant to Haran to seek a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24).

Abraham gave his servant two strict orders: The bride must not be a Canaanite, and she must leave her home to live with Isaac in the Promised Land. Under no circumstance was Isaac to return to Haran to live according to their former way of life.

Abraham’s servant found the Lord’s direction in his choice (Gen. 24:12–32). Then, according to Mesopotamian custom, he made arrangements with the girl’s brother and mother (Gen. 24:28–29, 33). He sealed the agreement by giving gifts (a dowry) to them and to Rebekah (Gen. 24:53). Finally, they sought Rebekah’s own consent (Gen. 24:57). This procedure was very similar to Hurrian marriage practices described in ancient texts from Nuzi.

Under different circumstances, both of Isaac’s sons—Jacob and Esau—chose their own wives. Esau’s choice caused much distress to his parents (Gen. 26:34–35; 27:46; 28:8–9); but Jacob’s choice met with approval.

Jacob was sent to Laban, his uncle in Haran, where he acted on his father’s authority to arrange to marry Rachel. Instead of giving Laban a dowry, he worked for seven years. But it was not customary to allow the younger daughter to marry first, so Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Rachel’s older sister, Leah. Jacob then accepted Laban’s offer to work seven more years for Rachel. In that region, a man who had no sons often adopted a male heir, giving him his daughter as wife. The adopted son was required to labor in the household. If a natural son were born later, the adopted son lost his inheritance to the natural heir. Laban ma

y have intended to adopt Jacob; but then sons were born to him (Gen. 31:1). Perhaps Laban’s sons grew jealous of Jacob because they feared he might claim the inheritance. At any rate, Jacob left Haran secretly to return to his father in Canaan.

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<sup>55</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

<sup>56</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

Rachel took along the household gods of her father. Since the possession of these gods was a claim to inheritance, Laban followed in hot pursuit; but Rachel concealed the idols so that Laban did not find them. To pacify his uncle, Jacob pledged not to mistreat Laban's daughters or take other wives (Gen. 31:50).

We should especially note the Old Testament tradition of the "bride price." As we have seen, the husband or his family paid a bride price to the father of the bride to seal the marriage agreement (cf. Ex. 22:16–17; Deut. 22:28–29).

The bride price was not always paid in cash. It might be given in the form of clothing (Judg. 14:8–20) or some other valuable item. A most gruesome one was demanded by Saul, who asked David for physical proof that he had killed 100 Philistines (1 Sam. 18:25).

The giving of a bride price did not indicate that the wife had been sold to the husband and was his property. It was a realization of the economic worth of the daughter. Later the law recognized the practice of buying a female servant to become a man's wife. Such laws protected women from abuse or maltreatment (Ex. 21:7–11).

At times, the groom or his family gave gifts to the bride too (Gen. 24:53). Sometimes the bride's father also gave her a wedding gift, as Caleb did (Josh. 15:15–19). In this connection, it is interesting to note that the Egyptian pharaoh gave the city of Gezer as a wedding gift to his daughter, Solomon's wife (1 Kings 9:16).

The feast was an important part of the marriage ceremony. It was usually given by the bride's family (Gen. 29:22), but the groom's family might give it too (Judg. 14:10).

Both the bride and the groom had attendants to serve them (Judg. 14:11; Ps. 45:14; Mark 2:19). If it were a royal wedding, the bride gave her attendants to her husband to add to the glory of his court (Ps. 45:14).

Even though the bride would adorn herself with jewels and beautiful clothing (Ps. 45:13–15; Is. 49:18), the groom was the center of attention. The Psalmist focuses, not on the bride (as modern Westerners might do), but on the bridegroom as being happy and radiant on the wedding day (Ps. 19:5).

In other Near Eastern nations, the groom customarily went to live with the bride's family. But in Israel, the bride usually went to her husband's home and became part of his family. The right of inheritance followed the male. If an Israelite had only daughters and wanted to preserve his family inheritance, his daughters had to marry within their tribe, because the inheritance could not be transferred to another tribe (Num. 36:5–9).

One of the most important aspects of the marriage celebration was the pronouncement of God's blessing upon the union. This is why Isaac blessed Jacob before sending him to Haran to seek a wife (Gen. 24:60; 28:1–4).

Although Scripture does not describe a marriage ceremony, we assume that it was a very public event. Jesus attended and blessed at least one marriage ceremony. He referred to various aspects of the wedding festivities in His lessons, thus showing that marriage ceremonies were familiar to the common person (Matt. 22:1–10; 25:1–13; Mark 2:19–20; Luke 14:8).

Both families were involved in planning the marriage. The bride's family also assumed responsibility for keeping evidence that she was a virgin on the wedding day, in case her husband later maligned her (Deut. 22:13–19).

**III. Levirate Marriage.** The Israelites felt that it was very important for a man to have an heir. To preserve the property inheritance that God had given them, they had to convey it through family lines (cf. Ex. 15:17–18; Ps. 127-128).

A woman who was unable to have children often felt the rebuke of her neighbors (Gen. 30:1–2, 23; 1 Sam. 1:6–10; Luke 1:25). She and her family would then retreat into earnest prayer (Gen. 25:21; 1 Sam. 1:10–12, 26–28).

A more serious situation arose if her husband died before she had borne an heir. To solve this problem, the practice of *levirate marriage* was begun. First mentioned in connection with the family of Judah (Gen. 38:8), levirate marriage later became a part of the Law of Moses (Deut. 25:5–10). When a woman was widowed, her dead husband's brother would marry her according to levirate law. The children of this marriage became the heirs of the deceased brother, in order that "his name be not put out of Israel" (Deut. 25:6). If a man refused to marry his widowed sister-in-law, he was publicly disgraced (Deut. 25:7–10; cf. Ruth 4:1–7).

The most familiar example of this was the marriage of Boaz to Ruth. In this case, the nearest of kin was unwilling to marry Ruth; so Boaz, as the next-nearest of kin, acted as the kinsman-redeemer. Having paid the indebtedness on Elimelech's inheritance, he took Ruth to be his wife "to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place" (Ruth 4:10). David was the third generation from this marriage, and from this line later came Jesus Christ (Ruth 4:17; Rom. 1:3).<sup>57</sup>

**IV. Violations of Marriage.** Although God ordained marriage as a holy relationship between one man and one woman, it soon was corrupted when some men took two wives (cf. Gen. 4:19). Inter-marriage with foreign people and the adoption of pagan ways compounded the problem.

Scripture records that Abraham followed the heathen custom of begetting a child to be his heir by a slave girl, because his wife was barren. "I pray thee go in unto my maid," Sarah asked her husband. "It may be that I may obtain children by her" (Gen. 16:2). The slave girl, Hagar, soon bore a son for Abraham. Later, Sarah also gave birth to a son. Hagar's arrogance vexed Sarah and caused her to treat Hagar harshly. When Sarah observed Ishmael making fun of her own son, she decided she had endured enough. She demanded that Abraham send Hagar away. Because Hagar had borne him a son, Abraham could not sell her as a slave. He gave Hagar her freedom and sent her away with a gift (Gen. 21:14; 25:6).

Jacob was another Hebrew patriarch who followed pagan marriage customs. Jacob took two wives because his uncle had tricked him into marrying the wrong woman (Gen. 29:21–30). When Rachel realized that she was barren, she gave Jacob her maid "that I may also have children" (Gen. 30:3–6). Leah became jealous and gave Jacob her own servant to bear more children in her name (Gen. 30:9–13). Thus Jacob had two wives and two concubines, but he gave equal status to all his children as heirs of the covenant (Gen. 46:8–27; 49).

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<sup>57</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

Beginning with David, the kings of Israel indulged themselves with the luxury of many wives and concubines, even though God had specifically commanded them not to do this (Deut. 17:17). This practice gave them social status and enabled them to make various political alliances (2 Sam. 3:2–5; 5:13–16; 12:7–10; 1 Kings 3:1; 11:1–4).<sup>58</sup>

**B. Jesus' Teachings.** In Jesus' day, there was much confusion about the grounds for divorce. The rabbis could not agree on what constituted the "uncleanness" of Deuteronomy 24:1. There were two opinions. Those following Rabbi Shammai felt adultery was the only grounds for divorce. Those who followed Rabbi Hillel accepted a number of reasons for divorce, including such things as poor cooking.

The Gospels record four statements by Jesus concerning divorce. In two of these, He allowed divorce in the case of adultery.

In Matthew 5:32, Jesus commented on the position of both the woman and her new husband: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." In another statement, Jesus spoke of the position of the man who divorced his wife: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another committeth adultery" (Matt. 19:9).

These two statements seem to allow divorce on the basis of unfaithfulness. However, in two other contexts, Jesus appears to give no sanction at all to divorce. In Mark 10:11–12 He said, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery." In Luke 16:18, Jesus makes a similar statement: "Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery."

How do Jesus' statements allowing divorce for infidelity harmonize with the statements that seem to forbid it entirely?

The first clue is found in Jesus' conversations with the Pharisees (Mark 10:5–9; Luke 16:18), in which He is making the point that divorce is contrary to God's plan for marriage. Even though the Law of Moses allowed divorce, it was only a provisional and reluctant allowance. Jesus put "teeth" into the Law by declaring that, even if the divorced couple had not been sexually unfaithful to each other, they would commit adultery in God's sight if they now married other partners.

Note that Jesus' statements belong in conversations with the Pharisees about the Mosaic Law, which they believed sanctioned divorce on grounds other than adultery (Deut. 24:1–4). Jesus' main point was that divorce should never be considered good, nor should it be taken lightly. So in His statement quoted in Luke 16:18, He did not even broach the subject of adultery. (Apparently, Mark 10:5–9 records only the words of Jesus that bore on the main point of the conversation.)

In the two passages from Matthew (one of them a fuller account of what is recorded in Mark 10), Jesus allows divorce for one reason only—"immorality," or illicit sexual intercourse. His thought is plainly that a person dissolves his marriage by creating a sexual union with someone other than the marriage partner. In that case, the decree of

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<sup>58</sup>James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

divorce simply reflects the fact that the marriage has already been broken. A man divorcing his wife for this cause does not “make her an adulteress,” for she is one already. Divorce for unchastity usually frees the innocent partner to remarry without incurring the guilt of adultery (Matt. 19:9), but sometimes this is questioned.

Although Jesus allowed divorce for adultery, He did not require it. Just the reverse: Insisting that divorce disrupts God’s plan for marriage, He opened the door to repentance, forgiveness, and healing in an unfaithful marriage, as He did in the case of other sinwracked relationships. Reconciliation was Jesus’ way of solving marriage troubles.

God had demonstrated this way of reconciliation and forgiveness when He sent Hosea to marry a harlot, then told him to buy her back after she had sold herself to another man. God forgave Israel in just this manner. When the people of Israel continued to worship idols, God sent them into captivity; but He redeemed them and brought them back again to Himself (Jer. 3:1–14; cf. Is. 54).

**C. Paul’s Teachings.** In 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul says that a Christian whose mate has deserted the marriage should be free to formalize the divorce: “... If the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases.” Yet Paul encourages the believer to keep the marriage together, in hopes that the unbelieving partner might be saved and the children will not suffer. Apparently, Paul is thinking of people who were married before they were converted, because he directs believers never to marry unbelievers (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14–18).

Notice that this situation is quite different from the one Jesus addressed in the episode narrated by Matthew 19 and Mark 10. Jesus was speaking to the teachers of the Law—in fact, the misinterpreters of the Law—while Paul was speaking to Christians, many of them Gentiles who had never lived under the Law of Moses. Paul’s readers had changed their way of life since they had married, and were trying to influence their spouses to do the same. They were bound to think, not only of their own welfare, but of their spouses’ and children’s as well. For these reasons, and for the fact that monogamy is God’s plan, marriages should be kept together.

Paul sought to discourage divorce, despite its undoubted commonness in the Graeco-Roman culture of pagan Corinth. In so doing, he showed himself to be a true and loyal spokesman of the Law.

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Rachel’s cry, “Give me children, or else I die!” (Gen. 30:1), expressed the feelings of every bride. And no doubt many a concerned husband agreed with Jacob’s response: “Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?” (Gen. 30:2).<sup>60</sup>

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59James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

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Adoption was another way of overcoming the infertility of the wife. The childless couple could adopt an infant or even an adult as their own child. Eliezer of Damascus was a grown man, but Abraham told God that he was to be his heir (Gen. 15:2). The fifteenth-century B.C. tablets discovered at Nuzi show that Abraham was following a common practice for Semitic cultures, although we have few biblical references to it. Adoption solved many problems: The adopted son would care for the couple in their old age, provide them a proper burial, and inherit the family property. However, if the couple had a natural son after one had been adopted, he would become the rightful heir. Note that after Bilhah's baby was born, it was placed in Rachel's lap. This act was the central part of the adoption ceremony. The baby was then adopted by Rachel as her own (cf. Gen. 30:3). Other references to adoption are in a foreign setting: Pharaoh's daughter adopted Moses (Ex. 2:10—Egypt) and Mor-decai adopted Esther (Esth. 2:7, 15—Persia).<sup>61</sup>

Considering the poor living conditions, infant mortality must have been very high. Demographic studies in Egypt and other ancient cultures show that the infant mortality rate was as high as 90 percent. The many infant burial sites uncovered at various archaeological sites in Israel tend to support this assumption. Also, it is important to remember that the redemption ceremony of the firstborn male was not performed until the child was 30 days old. If he had survived the first month, his chances of growing to adulthood were good.<sup>62</sup>

### **Delivery**

Immediately following the delivery, several tasks had to be performed. Until recently, a custom could be seen in Palestine that may reflect the procedure in biblical times. First, the umbilical cord was cut and tied. Then the midwife picked up the baby and rubbed salt, water, and oil over its entire body. The infant was wrapped tightly in clothes or clean rags for seven days, then the process was repeated. This continued until the child was 40 days old. The prophet Ezekiel mentioned salt, cleansing, and swathing bands in reference to the birth of a child (Ezek. 16:4). Luke noted that Mary "brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes" (Luke 2:7).

The midwife's duties were finished when she handed the baby to the mother to be nursed. It was considered both a privilege and a duty for the Jewish mother to breastfeed her infant. Infants were nursed at the breast for their first year or more. But sometimes a mother was not physically able to nurse her child. When that happened, a wet nurse was secured. This wet nurse was another nursing mother (usually unrelated to the baby) who fed the baby her own breast milk.

Scripture relates something about three of these nurses. Pharaoh's daughter found the infant Moses among the reeds on the River Nile's bank. One of her first orders was to get

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a woman from among the Hebrew women to nurse the child. Moses' wet nurse was his own natural mother (Ex. 2:7–8). The Bible describes a touching scene that shows the high esteem given these nurses: “But Deborah Rebekah’s nurse died, and she was buried beneath Beth-el under an oak: and the name of it was called Allonbachuth [or “Oak of Weeping”]” (Gen. 35:8). Another wet nurse worked with the royal family in Jerusalem. She risked her life by hiding the young prince, who was to inherit the throne when he was old enough to become king (2 Kings 11:1–3).<sup>63</sup>

### **Naming Children...**

After the Exile, the meaning of a name was of less importance. A child might be given the name *Daniel* not because of its meaning, but to honor the famous servant of God. But there were exceptions, even during this time. For example, the name *Jesus* is a Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*, which means, “salvation of Yahweh.” The child’s name was given by one or both parents. Scripture indicates that the mother usually named the infant.<sup>64</sup>

Many of the names in the Bible are *theophoric*. This means that a divine name was joined with a noun or verb, producing a sentence for a name. For example, *Jonathan* means “The Lord has given.” The name *Elijah* refers to the prophet’s loyalty: “My God [is] the Lord.” This was true of many hea-then names as well. Many names of the Old Testament contain the word *Baal*. King Saul’s grandson was called Meribbaal (1 Chr. 8:34).<sup>65</sup>

Often the name referred to a personality trait that the parents hoped would describe the child as he reached adulthood. Names like *Shobek* (“Preeminent”) and *Azzan* (“Strong”) can best be understood in this light. Yet in other cases, the name seems to be the exact opposite of what the parents would want the child to be. *Gareb* suggests a “scabby” condition and *Nabal* means “fool.” Some cultures believed that demons want to possess attractive children, so they gave infants names that sounded distasteful. Perhaps names like “Scabby” and “Fool” were given to ward off evil spirits.<sup>66</sup>

### **Circumcision**

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The Hebrew word for “circumciser” and “father-in-law” is the same. This probably goes back to precovenant days when a young man was prepared for marriage by his future father-in-law.<sup>67</sup>

The Jewish boy, as we saw, was to be circumcised on the eighth day. God first delivered this commandment to Abraham (Gen. 17:12) and repeated it to Moses in the wilderness (Lev. 12:3). In earlier periods, the Israelites did not always obey this command. But after the Exile, the law was carefully observed. This practice continued through New Testament times (cf. Luke 2:21) and remains a hallmark of Judaism today. When the eighth day fell on the Sabbath, the circumcision rite was still performed—in spite of many rules and regulations about suspending everyday activities that had been developed to keep the Sabbath holy. Recent studies have confirmed that the safest time to perform a circumcision is on the eighth day of life. Vitamin K, which causes blood to coagulate, is not produced in sufficient amounts until the fifth to seventh day. On the eighth day the body contains 10 percent more prothrombin than normal; prothrombin is also important in the clotting of blood.<sup>68</sup>

### **Growth**

By studying the skeletons of adult Israelites, scientists have found that their average size was from 160 to 170 cm. (63 to 67 in.). Their small size was due in part to a poor diet. Drought and locust plagues reduced their crop production drastically. (*See* “Agriculture.”) This caused frequent famines among the people (Amos 4:6–10).<sup>69</sup>

**C. Color of Skin and Hair.** The name *Esau* means “reddish-brown.” The descendants of Esau were the reddish-brown people called the Edomites. By contrast, the skin of the Israelites was lighter and more yellowish in color. In our day, Israelis seem to be dark-skinned people because of their constant exposure to the sun.

Young Israelite girls considered light skin to be beautiful, and they avoided the sun’s rays as much as possible. We read in the Song of Solomon that the bride-to-be begged her handmaidens to “look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun has looked upon me” (Song 1:6). She was embarrassed that her skin was not as light as the skin of the other girls.

The ancient Israelite youth had dark brown or black hair. Song of Solomon 5:11 describes it as “black as a raven.” In the same song, a youth’s hair is likened to a flock of goats moving down a hillside (Song 4:1 ; 6:5); the native goat was black.

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Archaeologists have found headbands at various sites in Israel dating from Old Testament times. These relics indicate that men as well as women wore their hair long. Absalom (2 Sam. 14:26) and Samson (Judg. 16:16–19) both had long hair.

Canaanite parents often shaved the heads of their young sons, leaving a lock of hair on top (Lev. 19:27). This was an Egyptian custom that the Israelites were not allowed to follow. The apostle Paul urged women not to shave their heads and men not to wear long hair (1 Cor. 11:14–15); short hair implied that a woman was a prostitute. Hair styles were often a cultural matter; what one generation accepted, another did not. (See “Clothing and Cosmetics.” )<sup>70</sup>

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