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BIBLE CUSTOMS & MANNERISMS

STUDY GUIDE



BIBLE CUSTOMS & MANNERISMS

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Much of the biblical teaching that is presented is taught from a western bias because customs and mannerisms are not taken into consideration.
- B. It is imperative to recognize that the Bible was written by people who lived in cultures quite different from our own.
- C. The Old Testament was written in the Hebrew/Chaldean (Aramaic) language, and the New Testament was written in the Greek language.
- D. The languages of both the Old and New Testaments are saturated with phrases and terminology that are peculiar to the culture; consequently, one who is not familiar with the culture cannot possibly understand the message the writer is attempting to convey.
- E. Attempting to interpret teachings from an eastern culture through a western mentality is destined for error.

II. CUSTOMS AND CULTURES

- A. A custom is a practice that is followed by a particular group of people that is peculiar to the region in which they live or from which they originate.
- B. According to *The New American Heritage Dictionary*, culture is defined as “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.”
- C. The Bible reveals many customs that are not practiced in the western culture; therefore, it is imperative that we learn the various cultural practices found in the Bible.
 - 1. Polygamy was a common practice in biblical times. Men had multiple wives and concubines. (A concubine is a paramour, which is a mistress.)
 - a. Abraham had more than one wife. (The secondary wife [Hagar] was called a concubine.)

- b. Jacob had four wives from whom came the twelve tribes of Israel.
 - c. Elkanah had two wives—Hannah and Peninnah. (I Samuel 1:1-2)
 - d. David had multiple wives. (II Samuel 5:13)
 - e. Solomon had a thousand wives; seven hundred were princesses and three hundred were concubines. (I Kings 11:3)
 - f. Rehoboam had multiple wives; he had eighteen wives and sixty concubines. (II Chronicles 11:21)
2. Marriage customs were different in biblical times than those to which we are accustomed.
3. Abraham married his half sister; Sarah was the daughter of his father, but not of his mother. (Genesis 12:11-19; Genesis 20:2-16)
- a. Later, when the law was given to Moses, a man was forbidden to marry his sister or half sister. (Leviticus 18:6-11; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22)
 - b. The law of Moses also forbid marriage to close relatives—father, mother, grandchild, uncle or aunt, son or daughter-in-law, and brother or sister-in-law. (Leviticus 6-17)
 - c. Lot had sex with both his daughters; Reuben had sex with his father's concubine; Judah had sex with his daughter-in-law. These events occurred before the law of Moses was given.
 - d. The law of Moses forbid incest of any kind.
4. Jacob married sisters. (Genesis 29:16-30)
- a. The law forbid a man to marry sisters while they were both living. (Leviticus 18:18)
 - b. The law did not come into being until many years after the death of Jacob. We must remember that where there is no law there is no transgression. (Romans 4:15)

5. According to Laban's statement to Jacob, their culture did not allow a younger woman to be married before her first-born sister. (Genesis 29:25-26)
6. The law of Moses required the brother of a deceased man, who was married and had no children, to marry his brother's widow and to raise up seed for his brother. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)
7. The clothing worn in biblical times was different from the clothing we wear today.
 - a. The biblical comments about clothing were made from an eastern, not western perspective.
 - b. Instead of pants and shirts, the men of biblical times wore tunics, cloaks.
 - c. A tunic was a garment made somewhat like a sack with openings for the head and arms.
 - d. A girdle was a belt that one fastened around the middle of the tunic.
 - e. To "gird up the loins" refers to taking the bottom of the tunic and tucking it under the belt to give more freedom and mobility for the legs to move. (II Kings 4:29; II Kings 9:1)
 - f. Girding up the loins also referred to preparing oneself—get ready again. When Peter said "...gird up the loins of your mind," he was speaking metaphorically; he was talking about preparing the mind. (I Peter 1:13)
 - g. A cloak was an outer garment that was worn over the tunic. When Bartimaeus cast away his garment, he did not expose himself; he removed an outer layer of clothing. (Mark 10:46-50)
 - h. A loin cloth served the same purpose as today's underwear.
 - i. The basic shoe of the day was a sandal that was tied around the ankle.
 - j. Losing the sandal meant more than just taking off one's shoe. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Ruth 4:1-12; Mark 1:7)

- k. The custom of a host in biblical times was to wash his guest's feet. This act was one of courtesy and kindness. (Luke 7:36-50)
 - l. Head attire was also a significant custom in eastern culture. A woman who covered her head signified that she was under another's authority. (Genesis 24:64-65; I Corinthians 11:1-15)
 - (1) In certain cultures, a head covering is mandatory for women; in another culture, a head covering is considered as fashion and is optional.
 - (2) One who comes from a culture that considers a head covering fashionable and optional cannot truly understand the head coverings of a culture that mandates covering the head.
 - m. In some cultures, beards are somewhat mandatory for men; in other cultures, men wear beards as a preference, not a mandate. In order to understand why people do what they do, we must study the culture and customs from which these practices originate. (II Samuel 10:4-5; Isaiah 15:2-3)
8. In biblical times, people lived in both tents and houses. In the time of Abraham and the journeys of the Israelites, tents were the common dwelling. Once the children of Israel entered into the Promised Land, they no longer needed a mobile dwelling. They begin to dwell in permanent dwellings—houses they had not built; they inherited them.
- a. The houses were generally made from limestone blocks or sun-dried mud bricks.
 - b. It is believed that in the era of Solomon square stones were introduced.
 - c. The houses had flat roofs that could be accessed from a set of stairs that generally were located on the outside of the house. (Joshua 2:4-8; Judges 16:27; II Samuel 11:2; Nehemiah 8:14-17; Proverbs 21:9; Proverbs 25:24; Matthew 24:17; Acts 10:9-20)
 - d. The houses were illuminated with a candle or some type of oil lamp, depending upon the time period. (Matthew 25:1-4)

- e. Heating and cooking were done primarily on an open fire. Dried animal manure, sticks, dried grass, thorn bushes, etc. were the type materials used as fuel for the fire. (Numbers 15:32-33; I Kings 17:10-12; Ecclesiastes 7:6; Ezekiel 4:12-15; Matthew 6:30; Acts 28:3)
 - f. Many of the houses did not have chimneys so the roof would be blackened from the smoke of the fires within the house.
9. Water was not as accessible then as it is today. Often a public well was used by the community to supply water.
- a. By understanding the method of obtaining water, we can gain insight into some of the problems and situations that people faced when getting water. (Genesis 24:12-14; Genesis 29:6-10; Exodus 2:15-17; John 4:6-11)
 - b. Private wells and cisterns were a blessing. These wells and cisterns were dug and built by hand. (Genesis 21:25-30; Genesis 26:19-22)
 - c. A well provided water from an underground vein; a cistern was more like a reservoir that stored water.
 - d. Joseph's brothers put him in a cistern that had no water in it until he was sold into slavery. (Genesis 37:23-24)
 - e. The phrase "drink ye every one the waters of his own cistern" refers to each person having a desirable place to live. (II Kings 18:31; Isaiah 36:16)
 - f. In Proverbs 5:15, Solomon used the phrase "drink waters out of thine own cistern and running waters out of thine own well" metaphorically. He was referring to limiting sex to the marital relationship.
 - g. Because the water, especially in cisterns, could easily become contaminated, wine was often the substitute or preferred drink. (I Timothy 5:23)
10. Crops of corn, wheat, and barley, fruit trees, vineyards, flocks, and herds provided most of the food consumed in biblical times.

- a. Because utensils were not normally used, water was provided for washing the hands both before and after the meals.
 - b. The phrase “poured water on the hands of Elijah” relates to one of the services that Elisha did for Elijah. Because the meals were eaten with the hands, this service was important. (II Kings 3:11)
 - c. With the exception of a few, the sacrifices offered by the priests provided food for both the priest and the one who offered the sacrifice.
 - d. Meat from cows, sheep, and goats were a major part of their diet.
11. Travel in biblical times was much more difficult than it is our culture today. Generally speaking, people did not travel for pleasure; they traveled out of necessity. Traveling was considered dangerous, and people generally did not travel alone. (Luke 10:30; II Corinthians 11:26)
- a. The most common means of travel in biblical times was walking, or in many cases, it meant taking a ship to get to a particular destination. Ship wrecks were common occurrences.
 - b. Think of the many miles Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob walked as they journeyed through the land God promised to give to their descendants. For forty years, Israel walked from place to place as they journeyed in the wilderness. Chapter thirty-three of Numbers names forty-two different places that Israel traveled to and dwelt for a certain period of time.
 - c. Think of the many difficulties that came with walking: cold; heat; dust; rain; wind; etc. These various elements could make travel and life itself very hard.
 - d. The Israelites walked to the Jordan River, crossed it on foot, went into the Promised Land, and drove out its occupants. Walking was a major part of their lives.
 - e. The Romans are credited with initiating and developing a good road system, which has evolved over the years.

- f. Animals also played a major role in travel, especially in the transportation of goods. (Genesis 24:61; II Samuel 18:9; II Kings 4:24; Luke 10:34; Acts 23:24)
12. Inviting travelers to eat and stay in one's home was common in biblical times. (Genesis 18:1-8; Genesis 19:1-3; Judges 19:14-21; Acts 10:5-6, 21-23; Hebrews 13:2)
13. Sometimes a family would build an extra room onto their house to accommodate guest. (II Kings 4:8-10)
14. Greetings were also an important part of biblical culture. Greeting with a kiss was probably the most common means of welcoming one. (Genesis 27:26; Genesis 31:28; II Samuel 20:9; Matthew 26:48; Luke 7:45; Romans 16:16; I Peter 5:14)
15. Farming was a common occupation in biblical times. Harvesting was done differently than it is in the western culture. Harvesting was done by hand with what we would consider today as primitive tools. In biblical times, "thrust in thy sickle" had a more comprehensive meaning than it does today. By understanding the harvest and the tools used to cut and gather the harvest, we can gain insight into the narratives that use harvest metaphorically. Threshing, winnowing, sifting, and storing were all a part of harvesting.
16. Husbandry was also another common occupation. Understanding the vintage and the various procedures involved bring revelation to certain passages of scripture. The winepress played a major role in the vintage.
17. Shepherding was a common trade in biblical times. There are many scriptural references that refer to shepherding. Jacob and his sons were shepherds. Rebekah and Rachel were shepherdesses. Moses was a shepherd. David was a shepherd. Jesus is called the Good Shepherd.
18. Pottery was another trade in biblical times. God sent Jeremiah to the potter's house to illustrate His love and concern for Israel.
20. Carpentry, metal fabricators, jewelers, pharmacist, perfumers, fabric makers, etc. were typical trades in biblical times. These craftsmen were craftsmen in deed because most things were made by hand, without the help of sophisticated machinery.

21. Markets containing the various tradesman's wares were common. In these markets, buyers and sellers bartered. Money was also used as a monetary medium.
22. People in biblical times divided themselves into various social, religious, and political groups just as they do today.
 - a. The **Essenes** (es SEENZ) withdrew themselves from the people of the world and formed their own communities. The commune setting probably originated with this group. Although the Bible does not mention the Essenes, they are described by several ancient historians. The Essenes are an important part of the background to the New Testament because they show the beliefs and practices of one of the Jewish religious groups at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus.
 - (1) The Essenes were also known for their careful observance of the laws of Moses as they interpreted them. They were more strict about keeping the Sabbath than any other Jews, even the Pharisees. They were concerned about being ritually clean and about eating food that was ritually pure. Because of this belief, they had priests to prepare their food.
 - (2) According to *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* written by Ralph Gower, anyone who wanted to become an Essene was required to turn over all he owned to the community. He would then be given the typical Essene white robe. Only after he had shown that he was trustworthy for a full year would he be allowed to use the community's special water for purification. He had to prove that he was reliable for two more years before he could become a full member. After promising to keep the Essene rules, he became a full member and was allowed to take part in the community meals. Anyone breaking the Essene rule would be expelled from the community.
 - b. The **Hellenists** came into existence as a result of Greek influence. The Greek empire was very strong and influential upon Israel as well as the rest of the world. The Greek language and life-style was introduced and accepted in Israel. Through the language and lifestyle Greek thoughts and ideas infiltrated the Jewish minds. From this influence emerged a group that were identified as Hellenist.

- (1) These Jews spoke Greek instead of Hebrew; consequently, they were not accepted by all Jews. The orthodox Jews believed that this culture was corrupting their religious beliefs.
 - (2) The first deacons were appointed to handle a problem that had arisen with the Hellenist widows. (Acts 6:1)
- c. The **Herodians** supported the family of Herod as rulers. The Herodians were appreciative of the temple that Herod the Great had built in Jerusalem. Like the other religious and social groups, they did not embrace Jesus. (Matthew 22:15-16; Mark 3:6)
- d. The **Pharisees** were zealous for their religious faith.
- (1) They wanted to be legally pure and separate from any form of defilement; they emphasized the letter of the law.
 - (2) The name “Pharisees” means “separated ones,” or “those who separate themselves.”
 - (3) Because the law did not give specific details on many things, the Pharisees added much of their interpretation to the law, thereby developing a set of regulations which placed great demands on people.
 - (4) Because of the Pharisees misinterpretation of the law, they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. They accused His disciples of violating the tradition of the elders, which they viewed as proper interpretation of the law.
 - (5) The Pharisees were very prideful people. Before his conversion, the apostle Paul was a Pharisee. (Philippians 3:5).
 - (6) The Pharisees were also politically active and very influential.
- g. The **Sadducees** were a wealthy ruling class that were represented by the priesthood. (Acts 5:17)
- (1) They were prone to embrace Greek thought and culture.

- (2) The Sadducees were happily reconciled to the world in which they lived and placed their emphasis on the present world; they did not believe in the resurrection, judgment, or life after death.
 - (3) The Sadducees accepted only the first five books of the Bible; they rejected the remaining Old Testament scriptures.
 - (4) The Sadducees denied or defied anything that did not appeal to common sense, such as angels and spirits. (Acts 23:8)
 - (5) They believed that good and evil derived from human decisions rather than godly or ungodly influence.
 - (6) During the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, the Sadducees made up the majority of the members of the Sanhedrin. Jesus' teaching was certainly contrary to their doctrine of no resurrection.
- h. The **Samaritans** were a group of people who took their name from the city "Samaria."
- (1) The Samaritans and the Jews were hostile toward one another, and refused to intermingle in both their faith and social life. Both groups could be considered prejudice and racist.
 - (2) The Samaritans were viewed as outcast by the Jews because they were a mixed race—the Jews had intermarried with people that were not descendants of Isaac. (II Kings 17:28-29; Luke 10:30-37; Luke 17:11; John 8:48)
 - (3) It appears that the people in Ezra 4:1-10 who wanted to help with the rebuilding of the temple were Samaritans. In Ezra 10:10-12, we can read where the Jews who had returned from exile had also intermarried with the heathen of the land.
- i. The **Zealots** were known for their zeal to oppose and fight against their enemies.
- (1) Their name means "devoted supporter" or "to be jealous."

- (2) Some believe that the Zealots were founded in AD 6 by Judas of Galilee. They were involved in the revolt that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.
 - (3) Their last stand against the enemy was at Masada in AD 73/74. They were utterly destroyed.
 - (4) One of Jesus' disciples, Simon the Caananite, was a Zealot. In Luke 6:15, he is referred to as "Simon called Zelotes."
 - (5) The Zealots were devoted to Jewish law and religion. They were against paying taxes to the Roman emperor.
23. There are different forms of government revealed in the Bible.
- a. In the early times, the head of the family ruled, such was the case with Abraham.
 - b. In Genesis 14, we are introduced to kings who ruled cities.
 - c. The predominant rule of biblical days was some form of monarchy. The rulers went by different titles. Some were called kings, some were called leaders (Moses & Joshua), some were called judges, some were called Pharaoh, some were called Herod (a family name), some were called emperor or Caesar, who appointed people to positions such as tetrarch (ruler of a fourth part), governor, prefect, or procurator. Regardless of the title, the form of government was a type of monarchy and in some cases, dictatorship.
 - d. These various rulers would select or appoint people to certain positions to assist them in their rule.
 - e. In the Bible, we find no form of democratic rule among nations.
 - f. The Romans did have a senate made up of men of great influence, but the population, as a whole, did not have a vote.

- g. There were times recorded in the book of Judges when everyone did right in their own eyes, which brought about the demise of Israel.
 - h. God's form of government is theocracy, which simply means that God rules through His appointed leadership.
 - i. Not only does He desire the nations to follow His rule, He also desires the Church to submit to this type government.
24. Warfare in biblical times was much different than it is today. The weapons were primitive by today's standard, and combat, for the most part, was hand to hand.
- a. They depended upon animals, not modern machinery, for transportation and the transporting of supplies.
 - b. Chariots played a major role in many wars.
 - c. These cultures were innovative in making weapons of war.
25. Music, sports, and various festivities were and are a part of most cultures.
- a. Although modern technology has changed the styles and types of these arts and activities, the basics are still the same.
 - b. People are still people, and they enjoy entertainment.
 - c. The major difference between entertainment today and in the biblical times is the amount of emphasis and money that is given to these various events.

D. Israel was influenced by many cultures.

- 1. Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldeans, which is the southern region of Babylonia. He moved from this location to Haran, which was a city in northern Mesopotamia (western Asia).
- 2. From Haran, Abraham journeyed through the land of the Caananites.

3. He spent some time in Egypt and some time in Gerar—an ancient Philistine city in southern Palestine.
 4. Abraham's journeys would have exposed him to various cultures that probably had some influence upon him and his descendants.
 5. Jacob (Israel) was called a Syrian (Aramaean) in Deuteronomy 26:5. According to Genesis 25:20, Jacob's mother, Rebekah, was a Syrian.
 6. Israel grew and multiplied until it became a nation while living in Egypt.
 7. Judah spent seventy years in Babylonia captivity before returning to its homeland. During this time-period, the Medes and Persians overthrew the Babylonia empire; consequently, Israel was not only exposed to the Babylonia culture, but also to the culture of the Medes and Persians.
 8. In the New Testament times, Israel was exposed to both the Greek and Roman cultures.
 9. Originally, the Bible was written in Hebrew/Chaldean/Aramaic and Greek. The language of each of these nationalities was influenced by culture and custom; therefore, it is imperative that we not violate the cultures when interpreting the Bible.
 10. Western interpretation of eastern culture produces many errors.
- E. Although the basic fundamentals of life are experienced in every culture, not every culture uses the same methods. We must learn to appreciate and respect various cultures without compromising or violating the Scriptures.
 - F. As we have already learned, customs are often revealed through dress and conduct. Through diligent research, we can learn why people do what they do, which is usually the result of culture or custom.
 - G. It is to our benefit to go beyond the surface of what people do, or how they appear, and learn why they do what they do.

III. MANNERISMS

- A. A mannerism is a distinctive behavioral trait that is peculiar to a particular culture.
- B. Practicing a particular mannerism in a culture not familiar with the mannerism can convey a wrong message. For example: The normal western greeting is a handshake, while a normal eastern greeting may be a kiss on the cheek or neck. One who is not familiar with the mannerism of greeting with a kiss can be offended or confused by one who practices this mannerism.
- C. When interpreting the Bible, it is imperative that we learn the concepts and principles behind the practices; otherwise, mannerisms will mean very little to us.

IV. IDIOMS AND COLLOQUIALISM

- A. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, an idiom is a speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements.
- B. In the area in which I live, we say, “That dog won’t hunt.” In reality, we are not talking about dogs or hunting; consequently, a word study will not reveal the message that we are attempting to convey. Through this idiom, we are saying that whatever has been told to us cannot or will not happen and we will not believe it.
- C. Colloquialism is speaking a word or phrase that is characteristic of or appropriate to the spoken language or to writing that seeks the effect of speech. (*The American Heritage Dictionary*)
 - 1. Generally speaking, colloquialism is used in daily communication but purposely avoided in formal communication.
 - 2. For example: In our daily conversation we may say, “I was flabbergasted at his response,” but if we were writing about the incident, we would probably say, “I was very surprised or astonished at his response.”
- D. Many idioms and much colloquialism was used by those who wrote the Bible. We must, therefore, understand that studying the Bible requires more than just word study; we must also learn the cultural meaning of certain phrases and actions.

V. PRACTICES PECULIAR TO CULTURE

- A. Although we may understand the meaning of “gleaning,” the western culture, as a whole, does not practice gleaning; therefore, our concept of gleaning is not as broad as that of one who lives in a culture that practices gleaning.
- B. The practice of “footwashing” in the western culture is different from that of an eastern culture, where this practice was a hospitable gesture toward a guest whose mode of transportation was walking. To the western mind, footwashing is little more than a religious practice that is generally equated with humility.
- C. Our mode of transportation is different from that of biblical times, where walking was the most common mode of transportation; consequently, we generally do not consider the difficulty and inconvenience of traveling from one place to another. Our lack of experience or indifference often hinders us from fully realizing the message conveyed in the dialogue.
- D. Understanding the biblical customs for engagements and weddings is imperative to understanding the meaning of certain passages of scripture. Western engagements and marriages differ greatly from those of biblical days.
- E. Many of the daily practices that occurred in biblical times are not comprehended by the western culture; consequently, we can easily miss key principles that are hidden in the biblical culture.
- F. Things seen by the prophets were described from their vocabulary and cultural perspective. The writings of the apostles also came from a cultural perspective and vocabulary peculiar to the time.
- G. When interpreting scripture, we must not distort interpretation by disregarding the culture in which the scriptures were written.

VI. INTERPRETING SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT

- A. In order to properly interpret a scripture, we must follow some basic guidelines by asking ourselves the following questions:
 - 1. Who is doing the speaking in the narrative?
 - 2. To whom is the narrative addressed?
 - 3. What issue, problem, or event is being discussed?

4. What prompted the discussion?
 5. What instruction is given?
 6. What solution is offered?
 7. What principle can we glean from the narrative that will apply to our culture and time?
- B. Understanding the natural interpretation of a scripture sets safe parameters for gleaning the spiritual principles incorporated in the context.
- C. Violating the natural interpretation of a scripture will result in spiritual misinterpretation.

VII. SUMMARY

- A. Attempting to interpret teachings from an eastern culture through a western mentality is destined for error.
- B. A custom is a practice followed by a particular group of people that is peculiar to the region in which they live or from which they originate.
- C. Culture is defined as “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.” (*The New American Heritage Dictionary*)
- D. A mannerism is a distinctive behavioral trait that is peculiar to a particular culture.
- E. An idiom is a speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements.
- F. Colloquialism is speaking a word or phrase that is characteristic of or appropriate to the spoken language or to writing that seeks the effect of speech.
- G. When interpreting scripture, we must not distort interpretation by disregarding the culture in which the scriptures were written.
- H. Violating the natural interpretation of a scripture will result in spiritual misinterpretation.

VIII. CONCLUSION

- A. By acknowledging the various differences in cultures, it is obvious that we must interpret scripture through the cultural practices of that particular time.
- B. Scriptural interpretation that violates the culture in which it was written produces error.
- C. When used properly, word studies are of great value. When used wrongly, word studies can miss the whole concept of the message.
- D. When interpreting scripture, follow the basic guidelines that have been given and do not violate the context or culture.