

CHAPTER 12

UNDERSTANDING BIBLE CUSTOMS THROUGH PERSIAN CULTURE

Those of you who were born and raised in Iran already know of most of the customs mentioned in this chapter. However, those of you who were born outside of Iran or left Iran as a child may not realize that many of the customs and aspects of living in the Bible are clearly seen in Iran. As a person coming from outside the Persian culture and living in Iran from 1962-1978 it helped me tremendously in understanding different parts of the scriptures.

Let's look at some aspects of the culture:

THE HOME

A. THE ROOF

1. Is the roof of the place where you are living flat and does your house have a wall around it? In Deut. 22:8 God was interested in safety and commanded that a low wall (parapet) be built on the flat roof so that no one would be guilty of bloodshed if someone fell off the roof. Since most of the roofs of the houses in Iran were flat, they had walls on the outer edges.
2. Is grass growing on your roof? (Psalm 129:6; Isa. 37:27). Seed falls on the flat mud village roofs in Iran, sprouts, and is green for a short season until the hot summer sun scorches it. God's enemies may prosper at first, but they soon are scorched and wither away.
3. Is your roof leaking? (Prov. 19:13; 27:15) The constant dripping of water is compared to a quarrelsome wife.
4. How do you spend your time on your roof? In Acts 10:9 Peter prayed on the roof. However, in II Sam. 11:2 David commits adultery in his heart by watching Bathsheba bathe on her roof.
5. Do you need an extra bedroom? The roof is a good place to put extra guests in the summer. (I Sam. 9:25-27) In Tehran and many other cities many people sleep on the roof or the balcony in the summer to catch the cool breezes coming from the Alborz mountains to the north. I can remember sleeping many nights on balconies and occasionally on roofs during our time in Iran.

B. OTHER SECTIONS OF THE HOUSE

1. Christ used the upper room for his Last Supper. (Luke 22:7-14) In a culture

where hospitality is important a special room is often set aside for guests even when the living quarters are tight. Frequently, this was a room upstairs in a home. In previous American culture they had a "parlor room" which was set aside for a meal with guests. However this is rarely true today.

2. Jesus tells a story in Luke 11:5-8 about a traveler arriving at a friend's house at midnight asking for bread. Did the people in this parable live in one room? (Luke 11:5-7) A census in the 1970's showed that at that time 40 percent of Iranians in Tehran lived in one room.
3. Thieves can break through mud walls. (Matt. 6:19) The walls in the villages in Iran are still made with mud.
4. When we first arrived in Iran we were told to make sure to sit in the chairs closest to the door when we visited in a home where people were gathered. Then the host might ask us to move up to a place further away from the door. The place farthest from the door would be the place of honor. Of course, there is much polite talk about whether or not one should move up. Luke 14:7-11 talks about the religious leaders in Jesus' time going into a room and immediately sitting farthest from the door in the chief place of honor. Jesus warned these leaders that this showed their pride and that they would be humbled if someone more important came into the room and they were forced to go to a less important seat. Some feel that the most important seat was the farthest one from the door because one would not be bothered by cold breezes coming in through the door in cold weather or people walking in front as they came into the room.

C. FOOD AND BUYING

1. BARGAINING

- a. What is it worth? (Proverbs 20:14) People in most countries in the world including Iran bargain over prices. The buyer generally knows the accepted price, but the buyer and seller argue back and forth until they come to a fair price. In the American culture the only accepted time to bargain is when we buy something at a garage sale or purchase a new house.
- b. In many parts of the world such as Iran the rich are expected to pay more for a product than the poor. Being an American, this was hard for me to understand this a certain incident happen. I tried to buy some cloth one time and went to many different stores in Tehran to find out what was the accepted price. One store tried to charge me almost double the price for the cloth I wanted. I drove away in my car thinking that shop keeper must be dishonest because he wanted double the price from me since I was a

Westerner. After driving several miles, I realized that I had left my briefcase there. That same briefcase had the passports and work permits of several of my friends as well as some blank checks and savings account information. With great fear I returned to the shop which I thought was “dishonest”. I asked the shop keeper, “Did you see my briefcase?” The man said, “Oh yes. I kept it here.” He gave it to me. To my great joy as I looked inside everything was there. I was so happy that I wanted to give him a reward, but he said, “No. I felt obligated to protect your property because it was in my shop. I am an honest man.” Bargaining is a way of enjoyment and life in many countries. You find instances of this even in the Bible.

- c. Did Abraham bargain in a subtle way when he bought a burial plot for Sarah? (Gen. 23:3-16) At first glance the negotiations between Abraham and Evron, the Hittite, seem like a normal conversation with Evron being very generous in offering to give the land away. However, that was not the case.

Abraham talked to the Hittite in a general way telling him that he needed a burial plot for the dead. The Hittite responded in a polite way telling him, “Pick whichever tomb you want”. Abraham already had his eye on the piece of land he wanted and asked Evron to sell him the cave of Machpelah at the end of his field. When Abraham asked the price of the burial site, Evron replied, “Not only will I give you the cave but I will also give you the field”. Then in front of witnesses he said, “But the land is worth 400 shekels of silver and why should that hold us up?” Abraham took the hint and paid 400 shekels of silver according to the coinage standard set by the merchants.

Recent archaeological discoveries which revealed prices of land in the area show that Abraham really paid a very high price for the burial site since he needed to bury Sarah and was desperate. Also, according to some ancient records, since he owned the field and the trees as well as the cave he was responsible for paying the taxes due on the land. If he had just purchased the cave he would not have had to pay taxes. Did Abraham get taken?

D. FOOD AND WATER

1. Bread is the “staff of life”. (Matt. 6: 11; John 6:35) How true this is for the poor in Iran who survive by eating the nourishing bread sold at a cheap price because of the government’s subsidy.
2. When bread is first cooked it is hot and delicious. One of the joys of living in Iran was having fresh baked bread at almost every meal. Baking of bread in villages over hot coals has continued for 1000’s of years. (I Kings

3. Sometimes in Iran when a Christian visited a home or even a restaurant as a courtesy he would be served a meal. However, since Christians are considered to be “unclean”, his dishes would be ceremonially washed or even broken after he left. Jesus in his teachings said that he has fulfilled the Old Testament laws about clean and unclean food. No longer are there clean and unclean food. Rather people are unclean because of the bad things coming from their hearts such as bad thoughts of sexual immorality, lying, and stealing.
“After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”) He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”
Mark 7:17-23

E. EATING

1. Wash your hands! Have someone pour water over them. (2 Kings 3:11)
 - a. In some of the villages I visited in the Kermanshan area water was very precious. There were irrigation ditches being supplied by pumped water from the river. Each farmer was allowed to have one hour’s worth of water to help irrigate his crops. There was a person responsible to stop the water after an hour and direct it to another irrigation ditch for another farmer to get his water. I was told that there are more fights and court cases over water rights than any other legal matter because water was so precious. This helps one understand the meaning of Proverbs 21:1 which states, “The king’s heart is in the hands of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.” The word watercourse really means irrigation ditches. God is the one who is in control of governments. He can control kings, presidents, dictators, and religious rulers so that the final result will be for his own honor and glory, just as water can be directed in the irrigation ditches.

F. HOSPITALITY

1. Compel your guests to attend! (Luke 14:23; Acts 16:15) How important it is for Iranians to have guests and how honored they are when guests visit! There is a popular saying that “a guest is a gift of God.”
2. Each place at a banquet table shows a person’s position. (Matt. 22:8-14; Luke 14:7-11; Matt. 23:6) Usually, the head of the table was the highest position and the closest seat to the door the lowest one. As a guest in a Persian home you would

sit in the lowest position close to the door until asked to move to a different seat.

3. A Persian proverb states, “A guest is a gift of God.” (Gen. 18:1; Rom. 12:13) The word hospitality literally means “love to strangers.” (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8) It was an important requirement for all Christians and especially, the church leaders to be hospitable. If you are a church leader, are you willing to have guests, especially Christian workers, in your home?
4. After spending our first five years in Iran, my wife and I returned to her home city, Ventnor, New Jersey. Around lunch time we went to visit her pastor. He is a man my wife and I have greatly respected. He was the one who presented the good news of salvation when my wife Diane accepted Jesus as her Savior at the age of 11. Also, he was the one who married us. Over the years he prayed for us faithfully, wrote notes, and prayed for our Iranian friends. He set an example of a godly and holy life through his entire 94 years until he died in October 2001 and is now with his Savior in heaven. In spite of all of this background, he was still an American and did many things the American way. When we arrived at his house about noontime, the dear brother said, “Allyn and Diane, it’s so good to see you. Welcome back. Excuse me but we are eating lunch right now. Could you come back in an hour?” That is American culture. We went back in an hour and enjoyed the fellowship together. However, in Iran if a friend or even a stranger came to your house at meal time you would immediately invite him in. If there was not enough food you would run out and buy more food for him.
5. Suppose you were on an interstate highway in Germany or America and had a flat tire with no spare tire. What would you do? One time in Iran our family traveled from Tehran past Ghom on our way to Isfahan. On a lonely stretch of highway I had a flat tire and when I looked in my car trunk the spare was flat as well. We were about 50 miles from a city where a flat could be repaired. It was hot and my wife and my three children were in the car. What could I do? Knowing Persian hospitality, I flagged down the next car and asked the driver if I could borrow his spare tire. He said that I could and waited while I put his spare tire on my car. We both drove to the next city where I had both of my flats repaired and gave him back his tire. Interestingly enough, just the opposite had happened to me several weeks before. On my return trip to visit believers in Semman. I was stopped by someone who asked to borrow my spare tire. It was good to be in a country where people helped each other, even strangers.