

HOME AND FAMILY IN BIBLE TIMES

Guests in the Home

The home was for family, but it was also for guests. In Bible days, hospitality was of great importance. Guests of the house were most frequently invited for meals. It was viewed as much more enjoyable to eat with guests than without them. Job once commented refusing guests at mealtime: "If I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless . . . then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint." Guests were welcomed into the home with much excitement and treated to the best the host had to offer.

Even Strangers and Enemies

Guests at a house would sometimes be friends of the family, but would not necessarily have to be.

Strangers were welcomed frequently. Remember how Abraham entertained the LORD and two angels without recognizing at first who they were. Gen 18:1-3 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them . . ." While we might hesitate to open the door to someone we do not know, it was common practice in the days of the Old Testament.

Additional Scripture

Does it sound ridiculous to allow your enemies to come to dinner? See what Jesus has to say about your enemies:

Enemies were also allowed to enter as guests. "One remarkable feature of Oriental hospitality is that sometimes an enemy is received as a guest, and as long as he remains in that relationship, he is perfectly safe and treated as a friend" (*Wight*, p. 70).

Greeting the Guest

When a guest arrived, greetings could be exchanged in one or more of the following ways:

Verbal Greetings An example of a verbal greeting would be Mary's greeting of Elizabeth in Lk 1:40-44. *Rejoice, Greetings, and Peace be with you* were common phrases of greeting.

Kissing A formal kiss was used in greeting one another as well. This was the equivalent of our "shaking hands." They would kiss the right and then the left cheek. The formal kiss was most often used between good friends or social equals. Examples in the Bible of the kiss of greeting are frequent. 1 Sam 10:1; Gen 27:27; Ex 4:27; Lk 15:20). The Apostle Paul in closing his letter to the Romans sent his greetings by telling them to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (16:16).

Bowing If the host were entertaining an especially honored guest, he would bow when the guest arrived. Rather than a simple bowing of the head, the formal bow would sometimes include even a bowing to the ground as if in an act of worship (Ac 10:25).

What Do You Think?

What do you think bowing might reveal about the relationship between a particular host and guest?

What do you think of the following Bible verses related to bowing:

Ps 22:27
Ps 72:9-11
Ps 138:2
Rev 3:9

Treatment of the Guest

Guests were treated with the utmost care and diligence. A guest enjoyed the full protection and attention of the host. Upon entering the house, a guest would remove his shoes so as not to make things dirty inside. Then a servant would *wash the feet* of the new arrivals. On Maundy Thursday evening, Jesus created quite a stir in the upper room by washing the feet of His disciples. Since this was a job typically attended to by a servant, Jesus was not expected to do it. He wanted to remind His disciples that night that He had come to *serve them* by giving Himself as a ransom for all.

The custom of *anointing the guest's head with oil* was also done as in Ps 23:5, "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. "

The guest was cared for with respect to the physical needs of water and food.

Often a visitor would have traveled a distance before arriving at the home of his evening host. He would be quite thirsty after such a journey and water would be placed before him immediately. The giving of a drink of water became a way of promising friendship to a person (Gen 24:17-18; Mk 9:41).

Insight

Knowing that the sharing of meal commonly had such significance, does it give you new appreciation of these special meals?

The Lord's Supper
(Mt 26:26-29)

The "Banquet"
in Heaven

The meal which host and guest shared together was often more than a simple social experience. It could frequently be taken as a symbol that those eating were in a peaceful relationship with one another. Promises between parties were routinely confirmed by the sharing of food together (Gen 26:30).

Where Would the Guest Stay?

Earlier in this series, we examined the different types of dwelling places used in Bible times. We learned that a family living in a typical tent usually slept together at night in the same room. An overnight guest at a tent would sleep right along with the rest of the family. Wealthier families, however, might have a separate room in the tent for guests.

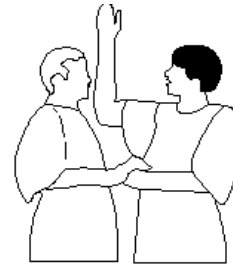


Guest Room

Wight

Villages and towns would sometimes have community guest "rooms." These could be in an upper room (2 Kgs 4:10), on a roof (1 Sam 9:26), or even under a tree. In multi-room houses, private guest rooms might be set aside.

Make Yourself at Home!



Greeting

Gibson

"My house is your house!" We frequently use words like these with our guests. We indicate to them that for as long a time as they are among us, we will do whatever we can to give them anything they want. We want our guests to be comfortable and enjoy their stay with us.

This was also the way of hospitality in Bible times. The guest was considered the "lord of the house" and the host was happy to serve. A respectful guest, of course, would be careful not to abuse the level of hospitality shown to him by unreasonable or malicious requests. Judas the betrayer ate at the table with Jesus and then turned around to hurt Him (Jn 13:18).

For Further Thought

In one of our common tables prayers we say, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest." What hospitality can we show to Jesus?

How do we greet him?

How do we treat him?

Where does He stay?

How is He made Lord of the house?

Is it a joy and blessing to have Jesus as our guest?

Resources

Manners and Customs of Bible Lands by Fred H. Wight
Bible Times and Customs by Tim Gibson