

The Nomadic Lifestyle



It was a huge change of lifestyle to leave the ease of city life where food, water and shelter was always abundantly available, to instead face the harsh reality of nomadic life, exposed to extreme temperatures and weather, always on the move and always concerned with getting enough food and water to feed the tribe as well as the livestock with them. Nomads had to constantly move from place-to-place in order to find enough grass for their animals. They had to be on the lookout for predators and raiders. They were always vulnerable and needed to be reliant on God for both protection and to meet their daily physical needs, rather than the wealth, security and abundant resources that city life provided.

They remained in Haran until Terah, Abram's father, died. Then God spoke to Abram and commanded him, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1-9). It was at this point, that they began the nomadic lifestyle.

Abram was told by God, "I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 12:2-3). But at this time Abram was childless, which was looked at as a curse by God, by all the people around him. Yet, he remained faithful:

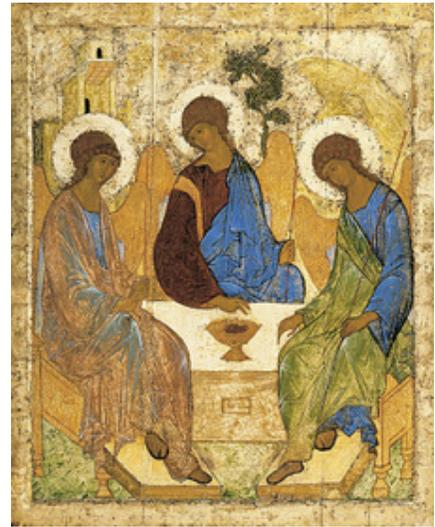
Therefore, it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickens the dead, and calls those things which be not as though they were. Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So, shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore, it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification. ~Romans 4:16-21

Food:

Nomads were intimately concerned with, and dependent on their animals. They had to make sure there was always enough grass and water for their livestock, while the livestock provided much of what they needed in meat, milk, fiber and skins. Though meat was an important part of their diet, they did not eat it every day. They could not afford to maintain so many animals to allow that. Meat was reserved to be served on special occasions like when Abram showed hospitality to the three strangers (Gen. 18:1-8). The story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:20-24 offers another example of this.

They would either roast their meat over a fire, or boil it in a stew. Though they did not raise poultry, they would sometimes harvest eggs and meat from wild desert partridges, pigeons and quail, and hunt and eat a number of species of wild birds. They would also at times hunt gazelle in the lowlands, and Nubian ibex, a wild species of goat, and rock hyrax, a large rabbit-sized rodent, both found in the higher elevations.

They often followed a seasonal routine. During different times of the year, they would either plan to stay in a location that could sustain their livestock for a long enough period of time, to be able to raise some grain, legume and vegetable crops, or otherwise stay where they had perennial plants locally available, ready for harvest. These locations provided seasonal food sources such as dates, grapes, figs, apricots, pomegranates, olives, pistachios, almonds, black mulberries, blackberries, etc. They also could trade for these items when needed. Lentils, beans (likely chickpeas), millet, wheat and barley were their primary sources of food. They would grind their wheat between two stones called a quern and grinding stone. They would bake their bread by building a clay ring around the fire (clay could be found in river bottom lands) and stick rounds of flattened dough on the inside of this ring next to the fire. The heat would bake it and when it would begin to darken, they would remove it. Another method would be to place a rounded pan that looked similar to a modern wok over the fire, with the curved side up creating a dome over the fire, propped on stones to allow air flow to the fire. They would stick flattened rounds of dough to the outside of this. It is this method referred to in Leviticus 2:5 and is still used by Bedouin in the Middle East today. Besides making bread (particularly flat bread), they popped grain, like popcorn, on a metal pan over the fire. This was often translated as ‘parched corn’ in Scripture (Sam. 17:17; 25:18). Grains and legumes could be easily transported and stored for year-round use. Mint, oregano, thyme, onions and other herbs could be found wild close to waterways and could be transplanted to grow closer to camps with year-round springs or flowing water that they would periodically inhabit. Likewise, wild sources of fruits and nuts could also be



FAMOUS ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY
OR ABRAHAM'S HOSPITALITY TO
THE THREE STRANGERS

transplanted next to seasonal camps. Often, figs and dates were already growing wild in the vicinity of desert oases and provided an important source of food. They would also be aware of any wild bee hives near camps on their route and that would be a very special treat.

They milked their sheep, goats, camels and cattle and either drank it immediately, or made cheese, yogurt and butter out of it. They made cheese by pouring milk, cultured with a little yogurt for flavor, into the stomach of newborn ruminant animals (or place a piece of the stomach inner lining in a leather bag with the milk) which contained an enzyme, rennet, that would naturally curdle the milk into cheese. Cheese is made with this same enzyme today, though rennet is now manufactured in a laboratory. Another, faster way to make cheese that they implemented, is vinegar cheese. It was made by heating milk over a fire, then adding vinegar just as it began to simmer. It would then separate into curds and whey and the whey would be drained, leaving a soft cheese. This cheese could be flavored with salt and herbs. They would turn milk into yogurt by adding a little previously made yogurt to the fresh milk, in order to introduce beneficial bacteria, and then keep the milk in a warm place to culture for a day or two. Both cheese and yogurt were ways of preserving the milk without refrigeration and made it easier to transport. To make butter, they would pour cream in an animal skin bag and would shake it until butter formed. They would press out the whey, leaving the butter in the bag.

Salt is a very important flavoring and preservative, and it was abundantly available from the Dead Sea, on dry lake beds in the desert, and from the sea coast. They would trade for more exotic spices and olive oil, since it was difficult or impossible to grow or make these things or then transport them in quantity during moves. Spice merchants who traveled as far as India for spices such as cinnamon, regularly passed through Haran and onto Egypt and other significant locals of trade (Gen. 37:25). For this reason, cinnamon has become a major flavoring in Middle Eastern cuisine though it is made from the bark of a tropical tree and must be imported from India.

There were only two significant meals a day, breakfast and an evening meal. But breakfast would be just that, a quick break from the overnight fast, with an easy to carry meal of pita bread with cheese, olives, and/or fruit. The evening meal would usually consist of flat bread and lentil stew (Genesis 25:29-34). They would eat, sitting cross-legged on a rug on the ground with everyone using their bread to scoop stew from the central common pot. They had no forks, spoons, knives or bowls for individual use, which simplified what they had to clean afterward. Water was precious, and space was also precious on their pack animals. For this reason, it was important that they had their hands clean. In traditional Bedouin culture, you would use your right hand only for eating, which was considered the 'clean' hand. The left hand was used for all necessary 'unclean' activities. But both hands would be cleaned before and after meals.

Water was the most important resource for survival for them and their animals in this arid land. Larger nomadic tribes, like that of Abraham, would be capable of

digging new wells when traveling in uninhabited or unfamiliar territory. But as they became established in a land, they would become familiar of the various locations of wells and plan their camping sites accordingly. When they would leave a well, they would put a stone, called a capstone, over it to keep sand and debris out. They commonly drank tea with their meals, which sterilized the water through heating and hide any off-flavors in the water. Some of the wells were high in bad-flavored minerals and salt, so tea was essential to make it more palatable. Drinking tea has continued to be an important social past-time within Bedouin culture, even until this day. They were aware of medicinal benefits of some herbs, like sage for cough, peppermint for an upset stomach, etc., and used herbal teas as an important treatment for some ailments.

Wine and vinegar was made by fermenting juice, particularly grape juice, which would happen naturally in the warm climate with yeast already living on the fruit. The nomads could make small quantities of wine and vinegar.

VOCABULARY WORDS:

Nomad: a member of a people who have no fixed residence but move from place to place usually seasonally and within a well-defined territory. ~Mirriam Webster Dictionary

Enzyme: any of numerous complex proteins that are produced by living cells and catalyze specific biochemical reactions at body temperatures. ~Mirriam Webster Dictionary

Rennet: the lining membrane of a stomach of an un-weaned calf used for curdling milk. ~Mirriam Webster Dictionary

Bacteria: are tiny little organisms that are everywhere around us. We can't see them without a microscope because they are so small, but they are in the air, on our skin, in our bodies, in the ground, and all throughout nature. ~Science for Kids (www.ducksters.com/science/bacteria.php)

Yeast: a microscopic fungus consisting of single oval cells that reproduce by budding, and are capable of converting sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide.

Bedouin: a nomadic Arab of the Arabian, Syrian, or northern African deserts. ~Mirriam Webster Dictionary

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

- Cook flat bread over an inverted wok propped over a fire.
- Make cheese, either vinegar cheese and/or rennet-based cheese.
- Make yogurt and/or butter.
- Eat a nomadic style meal on rug on the ground consisting of lentil stew, pita, figs, dates and/or other Middle Eastern foods.
- Serve herbal teas using herbs found in the Middle East such as sage or peppermint (Egyptian sage traditionally used in tea can be purchased at a Middle Eastern food store).
- Make wine and/or vinegar
- Do a unit study on yeast and bacteria and learn how there are both beneficial and harmful organisms and how ancient man learned to use these for good.