

SELECT BIBLICAL CUSTOMS
IN LIGHT OF THE CULTURAL PRACTICES OF THE RWALA BEDOUIN TRIBE

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INTRODUCTION

Biblical texts often describe cultural practices that perplex the modern reader. This is particularly true of the Old Testament, where the ancient Middle Eastern context presents the modern western mind with cultural elements that can be difficult, if not impossible, to understand. This article seeks to shed light on some of these cultural matters by comparing certain biblical customs with the cultural practices of a nomadic tribe of Arabs, the Rwala bedouin.

The Rwala bedouin (Arabic for "nomads") comprise one of a number of tribes of nomadic Arabs whose practices seem to draw on cultural roots that are similar to much of biblical culture. Written descriptions of the Rwala¹ and their practices contain dozens of parallels and similarities to scriptural elements. This author's personal experiences interacting with various bedouin during years of living and traveling in Israel² further support the idea that a study of bedouin culture can shed light on biblical practices.

After describing the books used as sources for this study as well as the Rwalan³ tribe itself, this article will describe the tribal customs that appear similar to biblical customs. The comparisons are organized in the broad categories of cultural values, marriage and family, basics of living (food, water, tents, etc.), and miscellaneous.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION, DESCRIPTION OF THE RWALA

This article takes its information about the Rwala from three books. The most romantic and colorful of the three is *Black Tents of Arabia: My Life Among the Bedouins* (sic⁴), published by Carl Raswan in 1947. Raswan, a German, began traveling in the Middle East before World War I to buy Arabian horses for European traders. He served in the German army during WW I and at one point was nearly killed by British Col. T. E. Lawrence, better known as “Lawrence of Arabia,” with whom he later became good friends. In the book’s introduction Raswan clearly states that he intended to write about matters of human interest from the perspective of one whose “soul is bound up in this romantic ‘Arabia Deserta’” (Raswan 1947: xiii).

The other two books present more detached accounts of the Rwala. *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* was written by Alois Musil, a professor of oriental studies at Charles University in Prague. Musil traveled and camped with the Rwala extensively between 1908 and 1915 and afterward published extensive descriptions of the Rwala that are “scholarly, accurate and sympathetic” (Lancaster 1997: 3). The final book comes from William Lancaster, an anthropologist, who, along with his wife, lived among the Rwala for nearly four years (Lancaster 1997: 3, 6). Lancaster published *The Rwala Bedouin Today* in 1981 (revised in 1997) as an anthropological study of a pastoral tribe living in the heartland of Arabia. His work presents a rather detached and objective description of the Rwala and their practices.

These three books describe the Rwala, the largest nomadic tribe in the northern Arabian Desert (see Lancaster 1997: xiv for map). The Rwala have been called “the most bedu” (Lancaster 1997: 3) of the various bedouin tribes and “the only true Bedouin tribe of northern Arabia” (Musil 1928: xiii). Traditionally they herded camels and lived in tents in extended companies of kin, sometimes concentrated in groups of up to 12,000 tents. Estimates of the total

numbers of Rwala in the 20th century range from 35,000 to half a million⁵ (Raswan 1947: 4, also see photo preceding p. 49; Lancaster 1997: 8). They supported themselves almost exclusively by the herding, raiding and selling of camels until ca. 1950. At that time the use of motorized vehicles and a major drought forced them into other occupations such as military duty, working in oil fields and farming. Many Rwala also reportedly engage in other means of supplementing income like smuggling luxury goods and trading in hashish (Lancaster 1997: 8-16, 99-111).

CULTURAL VALUES

Middle Eastern cultural practices such as those exhibited by the Rwala often puzzle the modern western mind since Middle Eastern cultures often use a hierarchy of values that differs markedly from that used in the west. The western mind may value order, logic and fairness, but the Rwala embrace traditional bedouin virtues such as honor, hospitality, bravery and virginity. This section will discuss each of these values in turn.

Honor

The Rwala, like many other Middle Eastern cultures, value honor above all else. A Middle Easterner must always consider how their words and actions preserve honor or respect for themselves, their family, and those with whom they deal. Showing intentional disrespect is the greatest of insults and obligates the offended party to act to regain their honor regardless of the consequences.

Cutting off Beard

One can see the effect of intentional disrespect in the practice of cutting off an enemy's beard. The book of 2 Samuel recounts such an incident in the ancient Near East including the response, paralleled by a similar story in Rwalan lore. In 2 Samuel 10, King David sent a group

of men on a diplomatic mission to a new Ammonite king to offer condolences regarding the death of the previous king. Suspecting intrigue, the Ammonite king “seized David's men, shaved off half of each man's beard, cut off their garments in the middle at the buttocks, and sent them away” (v. 4). This foolish act insulted the envoys and gravely offended a more powerful foe. Before sending an army to exact retribution on the offending Ammonites, David acted to help restore the honor of the insulted envoys. He “sent messengers to meet the men, for they were greatly humiliated. The king said, ‘Stay at Jericho till your beards have grown, and then come back’” (v. 5). Shaving the beards in insult must have been particularly humiliating.

Rwala custom seems to parallel this thinking. Author Musil writes that when a Rwala catches a thief from an unfriendly tribe, the thief has acted dishonorably and is treated accordingly. He is let go with a rebuke that includes the warning, “If I catch thee again, I surely will cut off thy chin beard.” Musil explains, “To cut a man’s chin beard is, in the popular idea, as bad as cutting off his head. It is much easier for the relatives of a murdered man to forgive the slayer than for the kinsmen of a Bedouin insulted by having his beard cut off to be reconciled with the culprit” (1928: 116). Musil then tells the story of a single Rwala who was insulted when another group cut off half his beard. His insulted kinsmen took vengeance in which they “captured more than a hundred men, cut off their beards with sabers and daggers, made the Rwala mark on both cheek and ear of every man, and took all their herds” (1928: 116-17). Such a forceful response reflects the culture’s value of honor and the gravity of intentional insult.

Vengeance for Killing

The preceding description mentions the offense suffered by the relatives of a murdered man. Although an intentional insult may be more serious, having a kinsman murdered also serves as a grave breach of honor that must be avenged. When a Rwala is murdered, news of

the death spreads through the clan to the entire tribe. The nearest female relatives tear their clothing, scratch their faces, and smear themselves with ashes and sand. The men rush to the body and discuss the situation, then prepare for revenge.⁶

Bedouin culture binds all kin to mutual protection of both life and honor, both for the murdered and murderer. The avenger proper is usually the nearest adult male relative of the murdered man, and his relatives must join him in exacting revenge. They seek vengeance from the murderer and his kin.⁷ A three day cooling period follows the murder, after which the avenger and a group of near relatives ride out to seek the murderer. If they happen to meet any relatives of the murderer along the way, the avenging party kills them.

The murderer seeks refuge from the avenging party not within his own tribe, but from a powerful chief of another group who uses his position to help resolve the matter. The chief must offer protection to the guilty man for a limited amount of time, and when the avenging party arrives, the chief helps the guilty party negotiate a blood price with them to satisfy the demand for revenge. A typical price would be 50 female camels plus a camel-rider's complete equipment (rifle, saber, dagger, saddlebag, and hunting falcon and greyhound). One third must be paid immediately, and the rest as soon as possible (Musil 1928: 138, 489-93; also Lancaster 1997: 93).

This bedouin custom of vengeance bears striking resemblance to certain biblical customs. The role of the Rwalan avenger is nearly identical to that of the avenger of blood גֹּאֵל הַדָּם (gō'ēl haddām) in Numbers 35:6-34 and Deuteronomy 19:1-13, who pursues the killer of his kinsman. The sanctuary offered by bedouin chiefs compares somewhat to the sanctuary a killer could seek in the cities of refuge described in the passages above. The biblical practice differs from the Rwalan custom in that the people from the biblical city of refuge were to conduct a trial

to determine if the killing was an accident or a murder. If accidental, the manslayer would be protected from the avenger in the city, whereas a murderer was to be turned over to the avenger to die. In the Rwalan custom, by contrast, sanctuary and blood price seem to be offered regardless of the intentionality of the killing. Either way, the death caused a breach of honor for which the offended must seek vengeance and a restoration of honor.

Hospitality

As with murder and vengeance, the values of honor and protection also play major roles in the Middle Eastern custom of practicing hospitality (see photo in Lancaster 1997: pl. 6). Bedouin and other Middle Easterners practice hospitality characterized by grace, self-sacrifice, and if necessary, protection for their guest(s) at all costs. Raswan refers to “the inviolable rules of Bedouin hospitality” (1947: 147) on which he relied to keep himself alive when visiting different Arab groups who fought between themselves. Raswan knew he could expect bedouin to respect his life as a guest, and he could also expect to be treated well. During one season he was traveling with the Rwala as they migrated during a terrible drought and famine. Since he was a guest of the Rwalan chief, he ate the best the desert had to offer (eggs, milk, butter and bread, often supplemented with various types of meat) during a time when most of the Rwala, including the chieftains, often went hungry (Raswan 1947: 88).⁸

Just as bedouin are bound to supply adequate food, so they must do their utmost to protect their guests from discomfort or harm. Lancaster (1997: 45) tells of one Rwalan woman whose eldest son was killed in a riding accident. Although she learned of the incident while she was receiving guests, she did not let it affect how she treated them. On another occasion the same woman had guests who were staying overnight, and two of her children died during that

same night. She hid that sad fact so well that the honored guests only learned of her misfortune much later.

As highly as Bedouin value the comfort of their guests, their safety is even more important. Raswan describes one incident in which he, a guest, was lightly wounded by a Rwalan boy who accidentally hit him with a slinged stone that ricocheted.⁹ The boy demanded that Raswan set the price the boy had to pay for wounding him. The boy had unintentionally violated “the unwritten Bedouin law that secures to the stranger absolute safety and inviolability, even in the tent of the humblest nomad.” Raswan further noted that “the blood-price of a guest is reckoned twice as high as that of a man killed in fight—fifty camels and four mares” (1947: 7-8).

Biblical stories likewise reflect a high value on hospitality and protection. In Jesus’ parable recorded in Luke 11:5-10, the host caught without bread for his guest will bother a friend even at midnight in order to obtain food. When three visitors arrived to Abraham’s tent in Genesis 18, Abraham hurried to his tent, ran to his herd, and hurried to prepare the expected food for his guests. In the very next chapter, Abraham’s nephew Lot urged two visitors to Sodom to partake of his hospitality, then went to extreme lengths to protect those guests. Lot’s offer of his daughters to a hostile crowd may well have been inappropriate, but it does appear to reflect that ancient Middle Easterner’s concern to protect his guests at all costs.

Bravery

Along with hospitality and other ways of promoting honor, bedouin culture also places high value on the closely related custom of bravery. Preserving or winning honor for oneself or one’s group leads to great acts of bravery, even if it comes at a high price. Traditional Rwalan culture allowed men to demonstrate their bravery through the dangerous practice of raiding other groups to take their camels and other property, to be discussed more fully in a later section (see

numerous photos in Raswan). In traditional Rwalan culture, four-fifths of the men died in raids or as a result of wounds suffered during raids. For example, a certain prominent chieftain, Emir Nuri Sha'alan, had 39 sons and 43 daughters from his 70+ marriages. Thirty-seven of his thirty-nine sons died before marriage, mostly in raids (Lancaster 1997: 137; Raswan 1947: 4). They demonstrated their bravery at the cost of their lives.

Likewise, biblical stories also reflect great acts of bravery. A brave young shepherd named David faced a giant foe in 1 Samuel 17. That shepherd later became king, and his mighty men likewise demonstrated their bravery through feats such as killing a lion in a pit on a snowy day and snatching a spear from a mighty enemy warrior and killing him with it (2 Sam 23:8-39). Such brave feats won these men fame and honor, both then and down through time.

Virginity

The final manifestation of honor to be discussed in this section is a woman's virginity. "Among Bedouins of pure race, a girl's chastity has been, and still is, the most sacred rubric in the tribal code of honour. For its violation a father may kill his daughter, a brother his sister, and have her flesh cut in pieces." So states Raswan (1947: 24) as he describes a Rwalan shepherdess who rested a dagger in her lap to remind two honored visitors, including her future husband, of the sanctity of her virginity (see also Lancaster 1997: 44).

Biblical culture also clearly valued a woman's virginity. The laws in Deuteronomy (22:13-29) prescribed capital punishment for those who violated it (but tempered by Jesus in John 8:1-11), or at least prescribed marriage for the man and woman involved (Exod 22:16). Priests were only to marry virgins (Lev 21:13-14). Prince Amnon violated his virgin half-sister Tamar, then further disgraced her by not marrying her. Tamar's brother Absalom avenged this dishonor by taking the part of avenger (2 Sam 13), as discussed earlier. In Matthew 1, God had

to dissuade righteous Joseph from divorcing his fiancée, Mary, when it appeared that she was no longer a virgin.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

As the preceding discussion indicates, cultural practices common to the Rwala and the Bible include those that involve marriage and the family. Along with virginity, Rwalan customs overlap with biblical customs in matters such as courtship and marriage, multiple wives, children, family decisions, and inheritance. This section will discuss each of these.

Courtship and Marriage

Whom the Rwalan marries can be guided by custom or by love. According to custom, a young girl must marry the nearest permitted male relative, usually the son of her father's cousin. The Rwalan practice of camping in extended three-generation family groups helps to promote such matches.¹⁰ This male relative has first claim to the girl in question, but she may seek release to marry someone else by paying a negotiated price (Musil 1928: 137-40).

Regardless of whether a couple's affection begins by custom or by choice, young Rwalan in love look for ways to spend time together. Although the sexes are closely watched to ensure the girls' virginity, contact is possible, particularly since the girls help with the herding and watering of the animals. Thus, wells become a frequent place of contact for interested parties (Musil 1928: 135; Lancaster 1997: 47, 54).

In the Bible one also finds young people marrying relatives, and couples meeting at wells. Abraham married his half-sister, Sarah (Gen 20:12), and their son Isaac married his cousin's daughter, Rebekah (Gen 11: 26-29; 22:20-24). Their son Jacob married his second cousin's daughters, Leah and Rachel. At least two of these relationships grew from meetings at

wells. Jacob and Rachel met at the well at Haran as she watered her family's animals (Gen 29:1-14), perhaps the same location where Abraham's servant had earlier met Isaac's future wife, Jacob's mother (Gen 24). Later Moses would also meet his wife at a well in Midian (Exod 2:15-21).

However a Rwalan couple meets and whatever their reasons for wanting to marry, the marriage is usually arranged through relatives who serve as mediators—often a father, brother, uncle or cousin.¹¹ These relatives make sure the potential spouse and family are suitable¹², and the girl's mediator often, but not always, consults the girl to see if she agrees. The mediators then negotiate a bride-price, the payment from the groom's family to the bride's family which makes a public statement about how much the bride's family values the new relationship (Lancaster 1997: 50-52).

Such arrangements also appear in the patriarchal narratives in Scripture. Before Abraham's son Isaac marries in Genesis 24, his father's servant acts as his mediator to find a suitable bride and takes along the necessary goods to offer as a bride-price. The future wife's father and brother negotiate on behalf of Rebekah and consult her only at the end of the process. Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob found himself separated from family when he wished to marry, so his negotiation proceeded in a more unusual fashion. Jacob had to act as his own mediator when asking for permission to marry Rachel, and he had no goods to offer for a bride price. Thus he committed to years of labor instead (Gen 29:1-20).

When Rwala marry, they do so with little fanfare. Little, if any, special ceremony marks the union, and the only gift is a present from the groom's father to his new daughter-in-law. Friends or relatives prepare a bridal chamber for the couple either in a separate tent or in a

portion of the family's tent. The bride's relatives escort her to the chamber, and a little later the groom enters and the chamber is closed (Musil 1928: 228-9¹³).

Some of the patriarchal weddings seem to fit elements of this general pattern. When Rebekah arrives to Canaan to marry Isaac, the text does not describe a wedding ceremony. Rather the author states that Isaac simply "brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife" (Gen 24:67). When Jacob marries, he is given the sister of his intended wife and does not discover it until morning (Gen 29:21-28). Perhaps a closed chamber at night provided enough darkness to conceal the identity of a woman who may have preceded him to the place.

Multiple wives

However Jacob came to be deceived, he ended up with multiple wives, a practice rather common to the Rwala. As noted earlier, one wealthy Rwalan married more than seventy times, but the norm is one or two (Lancaster 1997: 132¹⁴). Even if a man marries a woman he loves, Rwalan men often grow restless when the wife reaches her sixth or seventh month of pregnancy. If she bears him a coveted son, her husband's affections may well return and he does not think of taking another wife. But if she does not bear a son or she displeases him for some other reason, he may take another. If so, the first wife often abuses the second for a time until they learn to live in peace (Musil 1928: 230).

When a Rwalan husband has two wives, he alternates evenings spent with each of them. On their designated days, each wife in turn cooks for their husband. Typically he eats and then sleeps with her, since it is her right. If the husband does not love that wife, he need not have sexual intercourse with her, but he must not sleep with the other, favored wife. The two wives may negotiate for the rights to the husband on a particular night. Musil (1928: 230-1) portrays

such a conversation as follows: “‘Let me have the man tonight!’ ‘What wilt thou give me for it?’ If they come to an agreement, the woman who has the right of sleeping with the man that night says to him: ‘I grant thee furlough, now go to thy wife over there!’”

Genesis 30:14-16 records a remarkably similar conversation between Leah and Rachel as they quarreled over their husband, Jacob. “Then Rachel said to Leah, ‘Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.’ But she said to her, ‘Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son’s mandrakes also?’ So Rachel said, ‘Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes.’ When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, then Leah went out to meet him and said, ‘You must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son’s mandrakes.’ So he lay with her that night.” Two generations earlier, Sarah found herself in a situation something like that of double wives after giving her handmaid Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate mother. Sarah treated her rival harshly before coming to terms with the situation (Gen 16). Scriptural culture and Rwalan culture both allow for multiple wives, but they reflect problems associated with the practice.

Divorce

Both cultures also make allowances for divorce. A Rwalan husband who wishes to divorce his wife dismisses her verbally. She leaves with her belongings, and as soon as she reenters her parents’ tent, the divorce becomes final. He may change his mind and remarry her up to three times, unless he has declared, “Thou art divorced three times.” In that case, the divorce is final (Musil 1928: 233). Scripture, by contrast, stipulates that the husband must provide a written certificate of divorce and does not allow the husband to remarry her if she subsequently remarries and then is widowed or divorced (Deut 24:1-4).

Children

Rwalan custom places great pressure on its young people to marry and have children, since procreation is a way of supporting the clan. “This duty is laid upon him by his connection with his kinsmen. The more numerous these are, the more power and influence they possess. The individual who refused to defend the rights of his kin would be expelled, and whoever deliberately declined to multiply its defenders would meet the same fate. Without his kin, the Bedouin would be the most wretched of beings” (Musil 1928: 135; also Lancaster 1997: 45¹⁵).

Scripture reflects a similar desire and need for people to have children. Psalm 127:4-5 states, “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.” In 128 the psalmist says to the blessed man that “your children will be like olive shoots around your table” (128:3). Such desire for offspring probably helped fuel the competition between Leah and Rachel to provide sons for their husband. Unlike her sister, Rachel could not bear and expressed her frustration to Jacob with the words, “Give me children, or else I die” (Gen 30:1). God later granted her two sons, and the two wives plus their handmaids eventually fathered twelve sons for Jacob, whose descendants formed the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel.

When Rwalan children are born, the mother names the child, often using names that describe a circumstance of the birth, an answered prayer, or some animal or plant. One woman delivered a son during a heavy rain and named the child “Rain.” Another bore two daughters, then prayed for a son which she subsequently bore and named him “The Granting of Favor.” Others give names such as “Donkey” or “Cow” (Musil 1928: 243-4).

In Scripture, one finds similar practices. Mothers named some children after significant events, like “Ichabod” (“No Glory”), who was born shortly after the Israelites lost the Ark of the

Covenant to the Philistines (1 Sam 4:21-22) or “Benjamin,” whom Rachel originally named “Ben-Oni” (“Son of My Trouble”) as she died in childbirth (Gen 35:17-18). Rachel’s sister Leah remembered acts of God through names such as “Judah” (“Praise”) and “Asher” (“Happy”) (Gen 29:35; 30:13). Other children bore names of animals like “Rachel” (“Ewe”), “Jonah” (“Dove”) or the Ammonite “Nahash” (“Snake”) (Gen 29:6; Jonah 1:1; 1 Sam 11:1; names translated from Hebrew).

Inheritance

Middle Easterners desire children, especially sons, as their male-oriented societies favor sons in a number of ways that include inheritance. In Rwalan custom, only sons have rights to inherit property (Musil 1928: 664). Scriptural custom seems similar, with the inheritance given to Zelophehad’s daughters (Josh 17:3-6) as the exception that proves the rule.

Similarly, both cultures give the first-born a larger share in the inheritance. For the camel-herding Rwala, the larger share means one extra camel for the first-born (Musil 1928: 663). In Scripture, the first-born received a double portion of the inherited goods (Deut 21:15-17; Gen 25:29-34). Thus if a man had three sons, at the man’s death his property would be divided into four equal shares, and the oldest son would get two.

If a Rwalan expects to die and leave young children, he appoints a guardian. Often he chooses a faithful slave for this role (Musil 1928: 669-70), perhaps similar to Abraham anticipating that his servant, Eliezer of Damascus, would succeed him when Abraham had no adult heir (Gen 15:2).

Family Unit

Regardless of the numbers of children or wives or the family's exact makeup, the extended family functions as a unit for the Rwala, and they make their major decisions as a group. When a matter must be decided, each gets to voice his opinion, and the matter is resolved by consensus (Lancaster 1997: 77, 87-8, 96).

Likewise Scripture often portrays organization by family, clan or tribe, and actions carried out by those units. The decision-making process is not so clear in Scripture, though the matter of communal punishment may be related. When someone committed an offense, often their families were punished with them (Korah—Num 16:27, 33; Achan—Josh 7: 24-25; Daniel's enemies—Dan 6:24). If those families had helped make the decisions to commit the acts, then corporate punishment seems more fitting.

BASICS OF LIVING

In addition to the cultural values and marriage and family practices described above, many Rwalan customs pertaining to basics of living bear similarities to cultural practices found in the Bible. This section will describe customs such as the preparation of food, the use of water, making and living in tents, etc.

Food

Nomads such as the Rwala or the biblical patriarchs lived a lifestyle that was highly susceptible to famine. The Rwala traditionally lived in the Arabian Desert, and migrated seasonally to the edge of arable lands. Likewise, the biblical patriarchs lived in the dry Negev or northern Sinai (Gen 13:1; 20:1), and sometimes spent time in the more fertile hill country of Canaan (Gen 12:6-9; 13:18; 33:18; etc.). Both the Rwala and the patriarchs feared drought,

particularly since they lived in such marginal regions. “All the Rwala are familiar with hunger and fear it . . .” (Musil 1928: 86). The patriarchs faced famine in each generation and twice migrated to Egypt to escape it (Gen 12:10-20; 26:1-6; 42-47).

In normal times when rain supplies adequate pasture, the Rwala and people of the Bible relied heavily on their animals for milk to meet many of their nutritional needs. [Camels’] “milk is the chief nutriment of the Rwala. Many families live exclusively on it for months at a time.” Each female camel can give one to seven liters of milk a day, which the Rwala drink or use to make dairy products such as curds, butter and cheese (Musil 1927: 87-90). Though not so clear in Scripture, milk and milk products may have comprised an equally important part of the Israelite patriarchs’ diet, though perhaps from sheep and goats more so than camels. Abraham served curds and milk to his three visitors in Genesis 18. The common biblical description of Canaan as a land “flowing with milk and honey” may reflect the importance of milk to the Israelites.

In addition to milk, the other staple for both the Rwala and the Israelites was grain, often wheat or barley.¹⁶ The Rwala do not grow their own; they trade for or simply take the grain they need from the farmers who lived on the edge of the desert. When the Rwala depart for the desert, they take approximately 150 kg of wheat per person to last the season. They grind or beat it with a mortar or mill and cook it to make various kinds of bread products, mostly unleavened (Musil 1927: 90-3). Scripture contains hundreds of references to grain and grain products, both during the patriarchal period and later during their settled existence when grain was arguably their chief crop. Unlike the Rwala, the biblical patriarchs sometimes raised grain themselves (Gen 26:12¹⁷), but it is not always clear how they procured their supply of this vital food.

Other foods supplement milk and grain in the diet. The Rwala also consume dates as well as various types of meat (camel, birds, lizards, gazelle—Raswan 1947: 21-22, 60, 89; Musil 1948: 96-7), but meat is a luxury for most Rwala, as it probably was for most ancient Israelites. Poorer Rwala consume quantities of locusts, which they roast over coals. They can be ground into powder which is then used like wheat to make various food products, or they can be eaten whole (Musil 1928: 93-4). Raswan comments, “Boiled, I did not like locusts . . . roasted, I found them more palatable; crisp outside, and inside something like tender spinach. . . . They are clean animals and as food not at all unpleasant, but one soon gets very tired of them, when one has to eat nothing else day after day” (1947: 74-5). In the Bible, locusts are a creature permissible to eat (Lev 11:22), as John the Baptist did (Matt 3:4), but most of the references to them refer to their destructive capability (Joel 1:4, etc.).

Rwala cook and serve their meals in the family tent. Family members eat in the women’s compartment where the food is prepared, but guests eat in the men’s compartment with the host. When the men have washed, the host calls to his child or slave to bring the meal. If the guest is particularly important, the host will help serve the meal as Abraham did for his guests in Genesis 18. The diners sit in a circle on the floor and eat from a common dish, often using pieces of bread to help bring the food to the mouth (Musil 1928: 97-100; Lancaster 1997: 161). Scriptural accounts of Ruth eating with Boaz’ harvesters (2:14) and Jesus sharing the last supper with his disciples (Mark 14:20) reflect this use of a common dish.

Water

Along with food, water represents another necessity that must be tended to daily. Rwala women draw water from a well if it is nearby, or rely on herdsmen to bring it if the well is located at a distance. As one would expect of people living in the desert, the Rwala do not waste

water. When they find themselves in a situation where they lack adequate water, the Rwala ration very carefully, sip the dew in the morning, and drink water from a camel's paunch if absolutely necessary. To do this they kill one or more camels, cut out the paunch, squeeze the liquid into a leather bag, and drink it or suck it into their throats through their nostrils (Musil 1928: 94-5, 368). Although one does not see that particular practice in the Bible, one often finds passages of people nearly dying of thirst (Hagar and Ishmael—Gen 21:14-19; the Israelites in the wilderness—Exod 17:1-7) or drawing necessary water from wells (John 4:4-10), cisterns (2 Kgs 18:31) or springs (Jer 2:13).

Like their human masters, animals also need water, though perhaps not as often. Camels need to drink every one to 30 days, depending on the heat and the food on which they graze. The Rwala water their camels at wells or rain ponds. If a rain pond is available, the animals can come right up and drink. If water must be drawn from a well, the herdsman lowers a leather bucket attached to a rope down into the well, and one or more men pulls it back up. The Rwala sometimes also use a simple water hoist that places a pulley over the well to help with the drawing (see Musil 1928: fig. 36). After he draws the water, the herdsman pours it into a bucket-shaped trough or a pit dug in the earth and lined with leather, from which the animals drink. Wells are usually two to five meters deep and must be cleaned or re-dug after each heavy rain (Musil 1928: 338-41).

As discussed earlier, one can find a number of biblical passages that speak of watering animals at wells or other sources of water. Rebekah's willingness to water the ten camels of a stranger demonstrated that she was the right woman for Isaac (Gen 24:13-20), perhaps because of her gracious attitude and willingness to work hard drawing water. Later Jacob helped Rachel

water her flock, perhaps at the same well (Gen 29:10). In Psalm 23, a good shepherd leads his flock to peaceful waters for them to refresh themselves (v. 2).

Tents

As mentioned earlier, the Rwala traditionally lived in tents, as did many of the biblical characters portrayed in the patriarchal narratives and the stories from the sojourn in the wilderness. The tents mentioned in the biblical stories seem similar, if not identical, to those used by nomads such as the Rwala (see Musil 1928: fig. 3).

The tent is made from material typically woven from black goats' hair, plus poles and ropes. The material is woven in strips approximately two feet wide and 40 to 150 feet long, at least eight of which are sewn together to make the tent (see Lancaster 1997: pl. 16). A typical tent with one main pole is approximately 13 x 40 feet, though many are larger. Tents need to be replaced every four to five years (Musil 1928: 61; cf. Lancaster 1997: 159).

Once the tent is sewn, a family's sons, servants or women spread and raise it, and hang a central partition to divide the tent into compartments for the men and women. Women and slaves carry the cooking utensils and sacks and vessels of foods to the women's side. They cover the ground on the men's side with carpet, then place cotton-filled quilts and pillows or a camel's saddle where people may rest (cf. Rachel hiding her father's idols in a camel saddle and then sitting on it in Gen 31:34). Sons or slaves dig a pit in the men's side for the fire, and use dried roots, plants or camel dung for fuel. Around this fire they prepare coffee and entertain guests, a practice of utmost importance to every nomadic family (Musil 1928: 61-68; Raswan 1947: 76, also see photos following p. 144).

Cleanliness, Medicine

Life in the desert allows the Rwala to pay only limited attention to matters of cleanliness. They use water only for drinking and cooking, so they clean themselves by rubbing their hands and faces with clean sand. Only when they find a large rain pond can they wash clothes and take baths. Lice are common; soap is not. Though Rwalan women bathe their children and take special care of their own hair, they do so in ways that offend Western sensibility¹⁸ (Musil 1928: 134, 117-18). Likewise, medical practices include customs that appear both repulsive and ineffective. These include using urine to clean wounds and treating fever and head pain by burning the head and temples of the afflicted with a red-hot iron (Musil 1928: 666-70). Biblical material gives little indication of medical and washing practices, though one may surmise that hygienic practices would not measure up to modern Western standards.

MISCELLANEOUS

The final section of this article will discuss several other Rwalan customs that appear similar to biblical practices. These include the use of poetry, lying, tribute/bribes and raiding. The final element will be a description of a massive Rwalan exodus that parallels the biblical exodus in many respects.

Poetry

Rwala like to use poetry, particularly love poetry. Musil's book includes a number of love poems (1928: 140-213), many of which contain elements similar to poetry found in the Bible. For example, one poem includes the following:

When she smiles, she uncovers teeth like white snow,
As white as cleft pearls . . .
She lets one lock of hair after another—
The fine braids of her hair—fall down her back . . .

To us she came, stepping with care like the gazelle leading her flock,
Upon whom the expressive black eyes [of her flock] are turned.
She is like a white gazelle emitting the fragrance of amber
And leading gazelles in pairs”

(Musil 1928: 174; cf. Raswan 1947: 26, 35 for similar poetic elements in a lover’s conversation).

Compare that passage with these lines from the Song of Songs:

Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing,
all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved. . . .
Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle,
that feed among the lilies. (4:1-2, 5)

Lying

Poetry is not the only part of Rwalan culture that resembles the speech of biblical characters. Untruths and half-truths are a common part of Middle Eastern society, both modern and ancient. Lancaster tells of one tribal leader who interceded in behalf of a known tribal member who had no driver’s license and was in an accident with a truck that had no registration. When asked to appear before the officials with the guilty driver, the tribal leader “denied all knowledge of the affair and said that the young man had nothing to do with him, and was only passing through” (all untrue), though he did offer to mediate for the man. Lancaster continues, “The police knew that the [leader] was lying and he knew that they knew—both parties also knew that the young man’s family relied on the truck to water their sheep and that he was the only one who could drive.” Since the leader persuaded the young man to pay for the damage and get the papers and licenses in order, the matter of lying was overlooked (1997: 78). Lying can be an acceptable means to a desired end for these modern Middle Easterners.

Likewise in Scripture, one often finds ancient Middle Easterners lying to accomplish more important ends. The book of Genesis records two accounts of Abraham telling half-truths

about his wife to protect his life (Gen 12:11-13; 20:2), as did his son Isaac (Gen 26:7). Jacob lied twice to Isaac to gain his father's blessing (Gen 27:1-19). Even David, the man after God's own heart, lied repeatedly about his activities to protect himself from his Philistine overlord (1 Sam 27:8-12). Although they may acknowledge that it is wrong to lie, Middle Easterners often consider many other matters more important.

Extortion and Bribes

Just as David engaged in lying, so he practiced what modern westerners might call extortion. 1 Samuel 25 tells the story of David and his band of outcasts interacting with a wealthy herdsman named Nabal. David asks Nabal for food for his men on the grounds that David's band has protected Nabal's animals out in the Judean wilderness and not stolen anything. David makes this request even though there is no indication that Nabal requested or agreed to this "help." When Nabal responds to David's demand for what might be called "protection money" with an insulting refusal, David swears to kill all the males in Nabal's household. Only the wise intercession by Nabal's wife Abigail averts bloodshed. Was David trying to extort supplies from Nabal?

Later David practices something akin to bribery when he gives spoils from some of his raids to the inhabitants of the cities around Hebron (1 Sam 30:26-31). Then shortly after Saul's death, David and his men settle in that same region, and the people make David king over Judah (2 Sam 2:1-4). Were the earlier gifts bribes to get himself named king, or was David simply practicing the Middle Eastern custom of using goods to make friends before he needed them? The answer may depend on one's cultural perspective.

To the Rwala, David's actions would probably seem highly appropriate, since the Rwala practice similar customs. Lancaster explains that the Rwala get payments from townsmen, and

in return the Rwala do not raid the towns, which apparently the Rwala view as their right and an acceptable means of earning a living. In return for abstaining from raiding, the townsmen must pay a negotiated sum, though Lancaster stresses that the money “is not a tax, it is not bribery” (1997: 121-25). Raswan calls it “tribute” or “protection money” (1947: 51). Westerners may not be able to see that this is not extortion, but modern and ancient Middle Easterners apparently considered the practice acceptable. Likewise the Rwala give and accept payments and gifts for things that look questionable or downright inappropriate to western eyes. Lancaster comments, “They could be payments, gifts, hand-outs or bribes, according to one’s point of view” (1997:112).

Raiding, Warfare

As mentioned above, both David and the Rwala raided or threatened to raid people living nearby to help support themselves. 1 Samuel 27:9 describes David’s activities as follows: “David attacked the land and did not leave a man or a woman alive, and he took away the sheep, the cattle, the donkeys, the camels, and the clothing.” He raided to support himself and his group, and the text makes it clear that he killed his victims to cover his actions. The text also describes how he then lied to his superior about the identity of his victims. The text seems to portray David as a skilled operator doing what he needed to do under the circumstances, and was more clever than his gullible overlord who believed his lies.

In a similar fashion, the Rwala and other groups of bedouin often raided one another to take camels and other property and to prove their bravery and skill. “Without war a [Rwalan] could not live. War gives him an opportunity of displaying his cunning, endurance, and courage” (Musil 1928: 504). Rwalan warriors carried out most attacks on their animals. Though they had both horses and camels, they rode the slower but more durable camels to their

destination with horses in tow, then switched to the faster horses to carry out the raids themselves.¹⁹ Parties of raiders could number in the hundreds and could sing for hours when on the march (cf. 2 Chr 20:21-22). The march might last for days, taking the raiders to their destination where they fought their opponents with guns, spears and swords, and took as much property (camels, horses, tents, furniture) as possible (Raswan 1947: 38-50; Musil 1928: 504-661; 131-4).

Musil's book contains more than 150 pages describing various aspects of Rwalan warfare as well as accounts of particular battles. These often parallel elements of biblical warfare. These include tales of warriors "classed with the heroic men" (p. 593) like the Bible tells tales of warriors included among David's "mighty men" (2 Sam 23:8-39). Just as three of David's mighty men broke through enemy lines to bring their leader water that he particularly craved (2 Sam 23:14-17), so a Rwalan warrior broke into an enemy camp to take for his chief a stud horse that the chief longed to use to mate with his mare (pp. 638-9). The Rwalan accounts also include a lament for a warrior fallen in battle (p. 634) as 2 Samuel records David's lament over the Saul and Jonathan when they fell in battle (1:17-27).

The Rwalan practice of warfare resembles biblical warfare in many other ways as well. Rwalan leaders seek direction from a seer or sorcerer, through whom Allah communicates by dreams that contain signs of success or failure (Musil 1928: 509). Likewise the ancient Israelite kings often sought direction from God before going to battle, either directly or through prophets (1 Sam 23:1-5; 1 Kgs 22). Rwalas who take part in a successful raid divide the plunder afterward, the division of which can lead to problems (Musil 1928: 511; 1 Sam 30:20-25). Young husbands in their first year of marriage usually stay behind when the others go off to battle (Musil 1928: 508; cf. Deut 24:5).

Success in battle increased one's prestige, both in Rwalan society and in Scripture. A Rwalan who proved himself in battle would likely be named leader in future raids, causing a potential conflict with the tribal chief. When a rival arises, "the chief generally tries to gain [the warrior's] favor, marries his daughter to him, and adopts him into his kin, but likewise may bring about his death on finding that the commander does not wish him well. For a leader who rises in such a manner usually deposes the reigning kin and becomes chief himself" (Musil 1928: 507). In Scripture, the careers of Saul and David follow this pattern closely. Saul had the position of chief/king, but David showed himself a more skilled warrior. This earned David both acclaim from the people and suspicion from the king. Saul tried to kill David both by direct attack and by giving him dangerous military tasks. Saul also gave one of his daughters to David as his wife but continued to try to kill his perceived rival (1 Sam 17-18). Ultimately David took Saul's position as king.

Exodus

The final sub-section of this paper will describe a massive migration of the Rwala that took place during one of the periods that author Raswan spent with them. This exodus bears a number of striking similarities to the accounts of the biblical exodus, as described below.

The general pictures drawn by the biblical and Rwalan accounts are similar. Biblical stories of the Israelite exodus tell of a people that travels through a desert over 100 miles wide to arrive to a new homeland. Raswan's account of the Rwalan exodus describes how war, drought and famine forced that bedouin nation to make a similar journey. The Rwala had to abandon their traditional grazing lands and cross some 260 miles of desert in hopes of finding grazing lands that they hoped would literally save their lives—"a gamble with life and death as the stakes" (Raswan 1947: 83, 86). The Rwala faced great danger from the deprivations of a desert

during drought, plus the threat of skirmishes or outright war. The Israelites, likewise, had to face dangers from nature, attacks from nomadic enemies, and, finally, unfriendly nations who lived along their route.

Raswan's description of the Rwalan tribe as it set out on its exodus may bear a great deal of similarity to the exodus described in the biblical texts, apart from the major role played by the camels and horses of the Rwala:

Unceasingly, the stream of camels welled up from the basin to unite in an immense tidal wave more than five miles wide. The great columns of the camel trains began to take shape. With tireless energy, in all this heat, dust and noise, riders on sweating horses galloped from side to side, directing the herders where to fall in with their charges, mother camels and baby camels. The air resounded with the roaring, braying and squealing of the camels, the neighings of horses, the calls and curses of the herders, the shrieking of women and the whining of children. Scattered here and there among the ever-widening lines of advancing camels rode armed men, convoying their families. Thus out of apparent chaos arose the disciplined order of a general tribal migration, pushing forward into the uncertain wilderness. . . . Not a trace of vegetation survived their passage. They left behind nothing but naked, trampled earth, and over it a veil of dust and mist that hung in the still air for hours (Raswan 1947: 84-5, 97)²⁰.

As they journeyed, both the Israelites and the Rwala followed an Ark that represented God's presence going with them to watch over them. The Israelites followed the Ark of the Covenant (Num 10:33), and the Rwala followed the Ark of Ishmael, a large framework of acacia wood decorated with ostrich feathers. Only one such ark existed in Arabia, and was a prize of war sought by the various bedouin tribes. Possession of the Ark meant safety and power, whereas the tribe that lost it in battle expected disaster and dispersion (Raswan 1947: 141; cf. also the Israelites' experience with their Ark in 1 Sam 4). The Rwala fasten the Ark to a special camel saddle, and before it they make their normal votive and thank offerings. During a crisis such as this exodus, the Rwala looked to the Ark for direction. They expected Allah to communicate through the Ark. "Sometimes, in a dead calm, the ostrich feathers adorning the

[Ark] begin to flutter. At other times the litter leans to the right or left, but suddenly straightens itself . . . by the power of Allah, who sends them help . . .” (Musil 1928: 571-4).

As the Rwala and the Israelites each drew near their destinations, they sent out scouts to investigate the land and bring back reports of what they found. In the case of the Rwala, a party of four scouts traveled by car to their objective and brought back bunches of grass and flowers to testify to the land’s fertility (Raswan 1947: 101-4). The Israelites sent a party of 12 into Canaan, which returned with a large bunch of grapes to bear witness to Canaan’s fruitfulness (Num 13). The Rwalan report encouraged their people to continue, whereas the Israelite scouting party gave a report that effectively discouraged their nation from entering Canaan at that time.

Both the Rwala and the Israelites also needed permission to pass through areas to reach their goal. For the Rwala, they needed permission from other bedouin tribes that were suspicious and hesitant, but ultimately granted passage (Raswan 1947: 114-16). The Israelites also requested permission to pass through lands on their approach to Canaan, but ended up fighting and defeating the peoples who refused safe passage (Num 21:21-35). The biblical text tells that the Israelites successfully reached their Promised Land, as the Rwala also managed to arrive to their destination.

CONCLUSION

The many parallels between Rwalan and biblical practices detailed in this article demonstrate great similarities between those cultures. Both appear to share common Middle Eastern customs that often differ markedly from modern western culture. This cultural gap between east and west can make it difficult for a westerner to understand some of the cultural practices described in the Bible. However, comparing biblical culture with a Middle Eastern culture like that of the Rwala bedouin suggests that biblical practices often fit well within their

own world, and the comparison can help explain biblical practices that may otherwise seem quite strange.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Name spelled “Ruala” in Raswan.
- ² The author of this article lived in Israel from 1984-85 and 1987-94, during which time he observed and interacted with various bedouin. One such bedouin was Ahmed, a shepherd who lived with his family just over a mile from the author’s home outside of Tiberias. Ahmed would regularly graze his flock of sheep just across the road, and became friends with the author’s family. The author and his wife knew something of the Arabic language and customs from having lived for a year in Bethlehem (now an Arab city in the West Bank) and thus could interact with Ahmed. The family was invited to Ahmed’s tent to enjoy traditional Middle Eastern hospitality. The author’s children watched Ahmed help his sheep give birth, and received a homemade flute from him as a farewell gift just before the family returned to the U.S.
- ³ The adjectival form of “Rwala” in Arabic is transliterated “Rueyli” or “Rweyli” in the sources, but this article will use “Rwalan.”
- ⁴ “Bedouins” is a double plural. “Bedou” means “nomad” as noted earlier, and “bedouin” is the Arabic plural.
- ⁵ Note the wide range of estimations, perhaps due in part to the apparent disinterest by the Rwala in counting themselves. If the ancient Israelites had a similar disinterest in numbers, this may suggest some of the reason why biblical numbers for the population of Israel are so problematic.
- ⁶ Though such vengeance is usually carried out quickly, should circumstances prohibit it, avengers can wait years if necessary (Raswan 1947: 3, 15). Lancaster (1997: 67-68) explains that boys as young as eight years old are expected to avenge a father’s death, or at least try. He tells one story of an eight-year-old armed only with a penknife who attempted to storm the main prison in Damascus to free his uncle. His kin considered the action “correct and laudable, if somewhat misguided.”
- ⁷ Musil also notes that should the murderer die a natural death before retribution is enacted, his next of kin becomes liable (1928: 489-90).
- ⁸ Note Raswan’s description of the Rwalans’ generosity during famine—“It was touching to see a tribesman, himself half-starved, bring to his *sheykh*’s (leader’s) tent a hare or a gazelle, or other game, as an offering for the sustenance of his chieftain’s guests. Even children and women came by every day, and from a clothes-bundle laid down a handful of truffles or a wild pigeon. Once a boy brought me a large, fat lizard which he had killed with a stone, and later a rock-badger and a yellow-headed vulture. The boy asked if, in such time of famine, he might presume to offer me such animals for food” (1947: 89). Raswan also describes a lone shepherdess who dutifully offered two visitors all her food, then prepared to kill a lamb as well “because she feared . . . the reproach of her father for not according [her guests] Bedouin hospitality in full measure” (1947: 21-22).
- ⁹ Raswan notes that the group of Rwalan boys could hit a target as small as a tent peg from a distance of thirty paces “with astounding accuracy” (1947: 7). Compare David’s accuracy with the sling when facing Goliath (1 Sam 17:48-49) as well as the seven hundred Benjamites who “could sling a stone at a hair and not miss” (Judg 20:16).
- ¹⁰ Lancaster (1997:48) notes that Rwala typically marry when the male is approximately 20-25 years of age, and the female is 15-20.
- ¹¹ The father and brother apparently possess this and other rights over the woman because “. . . she is considered to be the property of her father. He begot her, and her brother inherits her from him” (Musil 1928: 236).

¹² This part of the process enables the families to ensure that the proposed marriage promotes rather than decreases the family's honor (Lancaster 1997: 86). Increasing honor through marriage may have factored into Abimelech's desire to marry the elderly Sarah in Gen 20. Forming a bond with the powerful chieftain Abraham through marriage may have provided Abimelech with greater prestige and security.

¹³ By contrast, see Raswan (1947: 132-3) who describes a wedding with relatives and friends who act as witnesses, as well as the arrival of the bride in a decorated camel litter (cf. Cant 3:6-7) to the accompaniment of "songs and shouts and waving of scarves."

¹⁴ Lancaster mentions that he had records of forty-two of the seventy reported marriages of Emir Nuri, who died in 1936. He further states that many multiple marriages were sequential, not concurrent, and that the practice of polygamy is now declining because few can afford to support many offspring (1997: 132-7).

¹⁵ The author of this paper and his wife learned of this expectation when they lived in Bethlehem in 1984-85. They were in their second year of marriage, and the local Arabs could not understand why they did not already have a child or why the wife was not at least pregnant. The pressure to have children, especially sons, was further illustrated by the modern Arab custom of the parents' names changing with the birth of the first son. When the first son is born, the father then is called "Abu (father of) – (then the son's name)." The mother is likewise called "Umm – (the son's name)." Only on a later visit with their firstborn son could the couple's friends in Bethlehem call them "Abu-Yesua (Joshua)" and "Umm-Yesua."

¹⁶ Similarly, an Israelite nomad told the author in 2001 that the primary foods for his clan were bread and camels' milk.

¹⁷ In this story Isaac reaped a hundred times more than he sowed, a production of amazing proportions apparently used to demonstrate God's blessing on him. The production is particularly striking considering the marginal regions in which Isaac typically lived.

¹⁸ Musil notes that Rwalan women catch fresh urine from their camels to wash their hair. "The camel's urine destroys the lice embryos, refreshes the scalp, prevents itching, and gives the hair a peculiar gloss" (1928: 118). Raswan describes a Rwalan couple who coaxed their camels into supplying urine, which "smells sweetly of herbs and aromatic plants . . . With this they bathed the[ir] squealing, downy [newborn] infant all over, baptizing him . . . into the sacred fellowship of the wilderness" (1947: 73-4).

¹⁹ Musil notes that a good riding camel can run more than two hundred kilometers in twelve hours, and must have a rest period of at least three months after an exhausting march (1928: 356-7).

²⁰ Raswan estimated the numbers of the Rwala at the time as 35,000 people in 7,000 tents with 350,000 camels that covered a front fifteen to twenty miles wide when they camped. Conditions for the Rwala grew so bad that as many as two thousand camels died or had to be killed daily (1947: 86-90).