



## The Eastern Mediterranean

**CULTURE**

### The Bedouin Way

*About ten percent of the people who live in Southwest Asia are Bedouins. Bedouin society is organized into large groups of loosely related family members that can range up to several hundred people in size. The term “bedouin” comes from the Arabic word badawi, meaning “desert dweller.” Today, however, many Bedouins have given up their life as desert nomads in exchange for houses and jobs in cities. The author of this reading describes this trend, but he clearly prefers the old Bedouin ways. Here, he discusses the traditional culture and customs of his people.*

My tribe is called Abuiack. The desert is divided up into tribal areas. In each area we have a limited water supply; the pasture and the right to cultivate the land belong exclusively to the tribe controlling that area. A bedouin tribe is a group claiming common possession over a certain territory. Each tribe knows the boundary of its land. I am the head of my tribe; I was elected by the adult men to oversee their tribal interests.

My women make my tent from goat’s hairs woven together. These hairs expand when they’re wet, making a watertight roof. In the summer they afford protection from the hot sun and desert sandstorms. The tent is divided by a woven curtain: one half is for the men and one half for the women. It’s the natural home of the nomad. A tent is light; we can fold it up and put it on the back of a camel and move on.

Some bedouins have changed from the nomadic life to a settled life, and they prefer to live in buildings. Our life is with the sheep and goats, cultivating the earth: their life is now turning toward industry.

We send our children to school every day to learn. Some of our children will go on to the university, giving up our traditional way of life. Camels used to be our only means of transport, but with the advent of trains and cars the camel has become less useful.

When we entertain, we cook a whole goat or a whole sheep. We make a fire and cook the animal in front of the guests. We, the men, eat the meat and we give the eyes and the brains to the women. We’re always making strong black coffee or sweet tea to offer any passerby at whatever time of day or night.

Our tent is our shelter. In Biblical times, Abraham received his guests in his tent. To this day, we have no greater pleasure than offering hospitality. It’s part of our desert culture, even if it means sharing our last piece of bread.

My wife must be a Moslem [Muslim] bedouin. My mother will see her first and report back to me—whether she is good looking; whether the economic situation of her family is good; whether she has gold [for the dowry, or marriage gift]—and then I decide if I want to marry her. I see her for the first time on my wedding day.

In my position I can't have a poor woman. . . . Some bedouins still buy their brides with camels. Seven is considered a fair price. I like to marry someone from my family [group], as it strengthens the family unit. If I'm displeased with my wife, I can send her back to her family, but I have to pay for the upkeep of the children.

I am quite happy with two wives; I would like three, but four would be too expensive.

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From "Our life is with the sheep and goats" (retitled "The Bedouin Way") from *We Live in Israel* by Gemma Levine. Copyright ©1981 by **Hodder and Stoughton Limited**. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

**Understanding What You Read** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What is the method by which Bedouins own land?

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2. In what ways is traditional Bedouin housing appropriate to their lifestyle?

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3. Name four ways in which Bedouin culture is changing, according to the author.

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4. What evidence is there in this reading that men and women are not equal in Bedouin society?

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**Activity**

Imagine that you are a son or daughter in a Bedouin family. Write a letter to a parent or other family member revealing whether, as an adult, you will continue to live in the traditional Bedouin lifestyle or move to a city. Explain your reasons for your decision.