

Shayla: What is the biblical view of the proper treatment of the dead?

Meforshim:

Burial of the Tzaddikim

The ideal seems to be burial in place specially set aside, identified and remembered as an ancestral burial ground.¹ The careful marking and identification later made some graves or cemeteries dominant parts of the landscape, markers by which people travelled or gave directions.² The ability to be buried in one's ancestral lands was considered to be a blessing³ and had the blessed side affect of reinforcing the territorial claims of the deceased's descendents on the surrounding land.

Arrangements were often made to be buried next to the loved or respected one.⁴ Sometimes a respected but unrelated person would be buried in one's family burial plot.⁵

This makes the fact that the lovely but volatile Rachel was buried "on the way" (literally by the side of the road) while "weak eyed" Leah, who during her life constantly struggled in an unloving marital relationship was, in the end, buried with her husband Jacob in the ancestral plot.⁶

Embalming or otherwise preparing the body for burial was usual.⁷ There were people assigned to maintain the integrity of the body and to ensure the continued identification (and the contingent memory) of the site.⁸

There were specific forms to follow that served to demonstrate one's regret at the passing of the dead. These involved overt, explicit indications like tearing one's clothes, the wearing of sackcloth, a funeral procession, public weeping, songs of lament, and fasting.⁹

Here, although Asa was a wicked man, because he was a king, his burial was respectful and followed the social norm.

- **2 Chronicles 16:14 HCSB** He was buried in his own tomb that he had hewn out for himself in the city of David. They laid him out in a coffin that was full of spices and various mixtures of prepared ointments; then they made a great fire in his honor.

For nobility there was a "burning ceremony" to commemorate them. Some translations put it "spice burning" but in my mind that's presumptuous. In order to make that interpretation one must add the word "spice" when it is not actually in the text (in Jeremiah 34) and in the other two the spices in the coffin are not lexically related to the fire.¹⁰ These passages cannot necessarily be used to form a good argument for cremation because they don't actually say the body itself was burnt. Cremation was not historically common for the honored dead due to the Halakhic law related to the wicked being burnt.¹¹

However, it was not unheard of. In this particular case however I think that it was more to keep the Philistines from desecrating the bodies further.

- **1 Samuel 31:11-13 HCSB** When the residents of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, (12) all their brave men set out, journeyed all night, and

¹ Genesis 23:16-20; 35:19-20

² 1 Samuel 10:2; 2 Kings 23:17

³ Joshua 24:29-30; Judges 2:9

⁴ Genesis 49:29-33; Judges 8:32; 16:30-31; 2 Samuel 2:32; 1 Kings 13:29-31

⁵ 1 Kings 13:29-31; John 19:38-42

⁶ Genesis 35:19-20; 49:29-31

⁷ Genesis 50:2-3; Matthew 26:7, 12; Mark 14:3, 8; 16:1-3; Luke 23:55-24:1; John 19:38-42

⁸ Job 21:32

⁹ Genesis 50:1-14; 2 Samuel 3:31-36

¹⁰ Jeremiah 34:4-5; 2 Chronicles 16:14; 21:18-20

¹¹ Leviticus 20:14; 21:9; Joshua 7:15, 25

retrieved the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan. When they arrived at Jabesh, they burned the bodies there. (13) Afterwards, they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.

- **2 Samuel 21:12-14 HCSB** he went and got the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from the leaders of Jabesh-gilead. They had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan where the Philistines had hung them the day the Philistines killed Saul at Gilboa. (13) David had the bones brought from there. They also gathered up the bones of Saul's family who had been hung. (14) They *also* buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan at Zela in the land of Benjamin in the tomb of Saul's father Kish. They did everything the king commanded. After this, God answered prayer for the land.

Amos describes cremation¹² but it is within the context of eliminating thousands of corpses that are contaminating the land. Further, the context of God's wrath and judgment would preclude it from being used as an argument for cremation for the tzaddikim.

Food was provided for those who were mourning. A "cup of consolation" was offered as well.¹³ In contrast to *bikur ch'olim*, the provision of care for the mourning, some cultists had turned the act into a time of feasting.¹⁴ This is eerily and uncomfortably close to the modern American practice of the funerary meal. Adonaic culture makes room for *seudat hevrah* – (seh-oo-DAHT hev-RAH); a meal of condolence; the first meal mourners eat after the funeral. Usually the meal is prepared by neighbors and friends so that the mourners don't have to deal with daily chores like cooking. Some will also take meals to the mourners at their home for a few days. However, note that it keeps to the original purpose of provision for the mourner as opposed to simple crass partying.

Apparently, in their desire to honor the dead, some had begun to bury the noble or the rich in the Temple complex, right next to the Holy of Holies! This angered the Lord and brought about His judgment. He required their bodies to be moved.¹⁵

As we will shortly see, scavenging of corpses was considered a horrific end and care was taken to ensure that did not happen.¹⁶

Treatment of the Rashaim

Generally speaking even the bodies of common criminals were treated with a certain respect.¹⁷ Sometimes disrespect for the rasha was shown by simply doing the bare minimum in burying them.¹⁸ However, Yahweh Melek sometimes demanded the ritual desecration of those who were particularly evil.¹⁹ Sometimes the dead were actually disinterred so that desecration could take place.²⁰

It was considered a great curse to be left unburied and the Lord used the horror of that act serve as a warning to others who would follow in the schemes of the wicked.²¹ The same motif was used in the metaphor of the Assyrian "cedar" that was felled at Yawheh's command.²²

¹² Amos 6:8-10 cp Ezekiel 39:12

¹³ Jeremiah 16:7 cp Proverbs 31:6-7

¹⁴ Jeremiah 16:5-7; Amos 6:6-7

¹⁵ Ezekiel 43:7-9

¹⁶ 2 Samuel 21:10; Jeremiah 7:33

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 21:22-23

¹⁸ Joshua 7:25-26; 8:29; 10:26-28; 2 Samuel 18:17; Isaiah 14:19

¹⁹ Ezekiel 6:4-5, 13; 9:7-10; 35:6-9

²⁰ Jeremiah 8:1-2; 2 Kings 23:15-18

²¹ 2 Kings 10:25; Ezekiel 29:5; 32:4-6; Isaiah 14:18-20; 22:15-18; Jeremiah 22:18-19

²² Ezekiel 31:12-13

The related horror of having one's cadaver eaten by animals was also often threatened.²³ Sometimes the bodies of the enemy were left in huge piles. At other times it was merely their heads!²⁴

The Scriptures acknowledge and make provision for the possibility of disease being transferred to the innocent from the unburied dead.²⁵ Therefore sometimes, when the number of dead would threaten plague, mass burial was determined to be the appropriate treatment of the wicked dead.²⁶ In Ezekiel 39:11-16 we are told of a coming battle in which the slaughter will be so horrific that it will require seven months for dedicated, full time teams, to locate and bury all the body parts. The mass grave will be so huge that it will completely block access to the valley that serves the purpose!

²³ Deuteronomy 28:26; 1 Kings 14:10-11; 16:3-4; 21:19, 23-24; 22:37-38; 2 Kings 9:10, 33-37; Psalm 79:2-3; Isaiah 18:6; Jeremiah 7:33; 12:8-9; 15:3; 16:4; 34:18-20; Ezekiel 39:17-21 (the word play of "feast" or "sacrifice" and "slaughter" in verse 17 is also seen in Isaiah 34:6-8 and Zephaniah 1:4-8)

²⁴ Jeremiah 50:22-26; 2 Kings 10:6-8

²⁵ Leviticus 21:10-11; Numbers 5:2; 19:11-20

²⁶ Jeremiah 7:32;