

THE BURIAL OF JESUS

by Walton Weaver

The Hebrew custom of providing a burial place for the dead is first introduced in Scripture with Abraham's purchase of a cave in the land of Canaan for the burial of Sarah (Gen. 23:1 ff.). Although Joseph was first embalmed and put in a "coffin" in Egypt (Gen. 50:26), because of his own request before his death his bones later were returned to Canaan for burial (Gen. 49:29; Exod. 13:19). According to history many Jews of the dispersion of the Roman period also preferred to be buried in Canaan, their homeland. Some were buried in the ground (Gen. 35:8, 19). It was generally viewed as a dishonor to leave a body unburied (Deut. 21:23; 2 Sam. 21:12-14; 2 Kings 9:10), and whenever possible the preference would be to place one in a family burial place. Note, for example, the request of Joseph (Gen. 49:29), and that of Barzillai, the servant of Joab (2 Sam. 19:37). See also 2 Chronicles 21:20.

The Tomb Where Jesus Was Buried

Tombs in New Testament Times. In New Testament times tombs had come to be a common place for burial. Even today in the city of Jerusalem one can visit the Tomb of Absalom (so-called) which dates from around the first century. This tomb is a building which served as a monument and it exhibits both Greek and Nabatean influence. Other tombs from the same period might be either a single connected cluster of underground tombs with niches for the various individuals and would serve the purpose of an entire family, or perhaps even an extended family or families. Some tombs however were simply an individual rock-cut tomb for one person. "The bodies generally were not enclosed in coffins ; after decomposition the remaining bones were then removed to a bone chamber in the floor or at the side of the burial ledge and the space reused" (Kenneth E. Bailey, "Burial Customs," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 95-96).

Some have thought that Jesus' reference to "whited sepulchres," or "whitewashed tombs" (NRSV), implies buildings like those mentioned in the above paragraph, but there does not appear to be any good reason why these terms could not include the other type of tombs (those hewn out of rock) as well. The stones used to close the tombs were probably whitewashed in the same way that the buildings were that were built for tombs.

A New And Expensive Tomb. The place where Jesus was buried was a new tomb which had been hewn out of rock by Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:60), a town some 25 miles from Jerusalem. This was “his own new tomb,” meaning that he had just purchased the place and had the rock hewn out. It may very well be that these plans had been made in advance by Jesus. Why would Joseph have just recently purchased this burial place and have it all ready for use if it had not been planned in advance to serve as the burial place of Jesus?

Tombs hewn out of rock were expensive and were therefore purchased only by wealthy families. Joseph is described as “a rich man of Arimathea,” and a disciple of Jesus (Matt. 27:57). He was therefore able to purchase such an expensive place, and being not only a disciple, but also a member of the Sanhediran (“a prominent member of the Council,” Mark 15:43 [NIV]), he was given a favorable hearing by Pilate when he approached him to make request for the body of Jesus. We are told, “then Pilate commanded [the centurion in charge of the crucifixion, Mark 15:44-45—ww] the body to be delivered” (Matt. 27:58).

But more was probably involved in Pilate’s decision than the fact that Joseph was a prominent member of the Council. Pilate’s granting the body of Jesus to Joseph was actually against normal Roman practice. Erich H. Kiehl points out that “according to law the body of someone executed on a charge of high treason could not be given to relatives or friends for burial; the idea was to prevent the burial site from becoming a shrine and focal point for any followers” (*The Passion of Our Lord*, p. 149). Kiehl’s own view is that the greatest motivating factor on Pilate’s part in giving the body of Jesus over to Joseph was his own conviction of Jesus’ innocence, which he had acknowledged more than once. Only this, he thinks, will explain Pilate’s willingness to ignore Roman law on this matter as he did.

The Tomb Was Closed and Sealed. After the body of Jesus had been prepared for burial (see the next section) it was placed in the tomb that had been prepared to receive it and a large stone was rolled to the door of the tomb (Matt. 27:60). The next day, the day of the Sabbath, the chief priests and Pharisees came to Pilate and asked that the tomb be “made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead . . .” (Matt. 27:62-63). Pilate granted their request: “You have a watch,” he said to them, “go your way, make it as sure as you can.” “So they went,” we are told, “and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch” (Matt. 27:66). It is uncertain whether Pilate gave them permission to use a temple guard, or whether he told them they could station Roman soldiers at the

tomb.

This sealing of the tomb and the posting of a guard to make sure no one stole the body would prove to be strong evidences that the missing body of Jesus on the third day means he had been resurrected from the dead. Isn't it amazing that what the disciples had not remembered—that Jesus had promised he would be raised from the dead on the third day—"the chief priests and Pharisees understood and remembered, and were determined that no apparent fulfillment of such predictions should be accomplished by the disciples" (Alfred Plummer, *Matthew*, p. 408).

The Location Of The Tomb. The exact location of the tomb where Jesus was placed cannot be identified with certainty. We know that it was in a garden because Scripture states that as a matter of fact (John 19:41). There is also a reference to a gardener in John 20:15. It was close to the place of crucifixion, and probably in the area of the traditional cite of Aceldama ("the field of blood," Acts 1:19), near the junction of the Hinnom and Kidron valleys.

Preparation Of Jesus' Body For Burial

Joseph of Arimathaea, along with Nicodemus, the one who at first had come to Jesus by night, and also a member of the Sanhedrian (Jn. 3:1 ff.), prepared the body of Jesus for burial. The body would have first been washed (see Acts 9:37). They then wrapped it in a linen cloth ("fine linen," or "the linen", Mark 15:46) and took it to the tomb where "the two men wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen" (Jn. 19:40, NIV). They probably tore the linen they had first used to wrap the body into these "strips" (NIV) or "cloths" (KJV) and with these they individually wrapped each limb of his body, and in this way "bound" it, "no doubt, between layers of myrrh and aloes, the head being wrapped in a napkin [see Jn. 20:7—ww]. And so they laid him to rest in the niche of the rock-hewn new tomb" (Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, II: 618).

Lazarus, when he was raised from the dead by Jesus, you will remember, "came forth, bound head and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth" (Jn. 11:44). The large mixture of myrrhs and aloes that were used to prepare Jesus' body for burial (and no doubt the same would have been done for Lazarus and others) had been brought by Nicodemus (Jn. 19:39). These would serve to counteract the odor of death. Neither embalming (an Egyptian custom) nor cremation (called idolatry in certain Jewish writings) were permitted. The amount of the myrrh and aloes brought would be about seventy-five pounds in

our weight. Kiehl gives the following description of these two substances:

Myrrh comes from a species of thorny-branched shrubs or trees that grow in Arabia, Ethiopia, and Somaliland on rocky ground. The stems and branches exude drops of oily resin. When they are cut, the resin flows freely, eventually solidifying. Aloe is a perfumed oil that comes from the tall and somewhat broad leaves of a species known as Aloe vera. Probably cultivated in Jesus' time, Aloe vera is found today in Arab countries and in Palestine.

Because it was only a short time before the beginning of the Sabbath day which would begin at 6:00 p. m. that evening, the day of preparation was almost over when Joseph came to Pilate to make request for the body of Jesus (Mark 15:42). No doubt the disciples were in a hurry to make sure everything had been taken care of before the day of the Sabbath began.

The Women From Galilee

Mark says that there were some women from Galilee, among whom were “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jose” (Mark 15:47), who followed Joseph and Nicodemus and observed the preparation of Jesus' body for burial (Luke 23:55). Evidently this means that they did not help with the burial, but they did watch and pay careful attention as the work was being done and saw exactly how the body was laid in the tomb. They had planned at a later time to visit the tomb, and as proof of their love for Jesus they hoped to further apply “spices and ointments” (“ointment” is from the word also rendered “myrrh” used by Joseph and Nicodemus) to his body. Evidently the custom was that this was usually done over a period of several days. But they had to hurry to make careful preparation before the beginning of the Sabbath day. So they must have secured the needed materials, the spices and the ointment, immediately upon returning to their place of lodging (Luke 23:56). The earliest opportunity they would have would be on the first day of the week. Luke says that they “rested the sabbath day according to the commandment.”

When the women returned to the tomb early on Sunday morning they found the huge stone rolled away . . . and you know the rest of the story!! The empty tomb, the grave clothes undisturbed, the angels, etc.

Conclusion

What does the burial of Jesus mean to us? What is its significance? It means that Jesus was dead when they placed him in the tomb, contrary to some theories that would explain away the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Its significance is seen in the fact that Paul names it as one of the three cardinal facts of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-3). We also see its significance in our own conversion and the new life that we now have as Christians. Paul tells us that not only were we baptized into Christ's death, but that in our baptism we were also *buried with him* in baptism (Rom. 6:3-4). As a matter of fact, the way he words it, we died to sin when we were buried with him in baptism!