

## **Cremation: Burial ceremony**

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1 Corinthians 13:3, *“And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”*

### **Introduction:**

Cremation, the disposal of a corpse by fire or intense heat, is an ancient practice. Archaeological finds point to its origin during the Stone Age in Eastern Europe or the Near East. As a mode of final disposition, it is widely practiced in many parts of the world. In the FUNERAL CUSTOMS of the Hindus of India, cremation is used almost exclusively. In the Western world it is generally accepted and is seen by some as a practical solution to the contemporary urban problem of overcrowded cemeteries. Its practice in the United States, however, remains statistically low. Cremation is forbidden in Orthodox Judaism and only recently has been approved by the Roman Catholic Church.

An early method of cremation involved placing the corpse on a wood pyre. In modern crematories the process is accomplished by the direct application of intense heat rather than flames to the body. The heat is created either by cracked petroleum or gas and usually reaches a temperature of about 1,360 deg C (2,500 deg F). The procedure takes place in a large oven-like structure called a retort. Generally about 2 hours are needed to reduce a corpse to bone fragments, after which the retort must be cooled. After the contents are removed from the retort, materials other than human remains are separated from the bone fragments. The bone fragments, which usually are reduced to 0.9 to 1.8 kg (2 to 4 lb) in weight, are then pulverized and placed in a cremation urn.

### **Spiritual Background:**

Partly because of the warm climate of Palestine and partly because the corpse was considered ritually impure, the Hebrews buried their dead as soon as possible and usually within twenty-four hours of death (Deut. 21:23). To allow a body to decay or be desecrated above the ground was highly dishonorable (1 Kings 14:10-14; 2 Kings 9:34-37), and any corpse found by the wayside was required to be buried (2 Sam. 21:10-14). Though the Bible nowhere systematically describes Hebrew mortuary practice, several features can be gleaned from individual passages. Joseph closed his father’s eyelids soon after Jacob’s death (Gen. 46:4). Jesus’ body was prepared for burial by anointing with aromatic oils and spices and wrapping in a linen cloth (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1; John 19:39). The arms and legs of Lazarus’ body were bound with cloth, and the face covered by a napkin (John 11:44). The body of Tabitha was washed in preparation for burial (Acts 9:37).

The dead were buried in caves, rock-cut tombs, or in the ground. It was desirable to be buried in the family tomb, so Sarah (Gen. 23:19), Abraham (Gen. 25:9), Isaac, Rebekah, Leah (Gen. 49:31) and Jacob (Gen. 50:13) were all buried in the cave of Machpelah, east of Hebron. Burial sites were marked by trees (Gen. 35:8), pillars (Gen. 35:19-20), and piles of stones (Josh. 7:26). The burials of the wealthy or politically powerful were sometimes accompanied by lavish accessories, including robes, jewelry, furniture, weapons, and pottery (1 Sam. 28:14; Isa. 14:11; Ezek. 32:27).

**In contrast to its wide usage among the Greeks and Romans, cremation is not described as normal practice in the Bible.** Bodies were cremated only in exceptional cases such as decay following mutilation (1 Sam. 31:12) or the threat of plague. Even in these instances, cremation was partial so that the bones remained. Embalming is mentioned only in the burial accounts of Jacob and Joseph (Gen. 50:2-3, 26) and there only because of the Egyptian setting and plans to move the bodies. Apparently, embalming was an Egyptian practice. When preparations for burial were completed, the body was usually placed on a bier and carried to the burial site in a procession of relatives, friends, and servants (Amos 6:10). The procession carried out the mourning ritual, which could include (1) baldness and cutting of beard, (2) rending garments and wearing sackcloth, (3) loud and agonized weeping, and (4) putting dust on the head and sitting in ashes (2 Sam. 1:11-12; 13:31; 14:2; Isa. 3:24, 22:12; Jer. 7:29; Ezek. 7:18; Joel 1:8). The Canaanite practices of laceration and mutilation are forbidden in the Torah (Lev. 19:27-28; 21:5; Deut. 14:1).

The period of mourning varied in response to circumstances. Mourning for Jacob lasted seventy days (Gen. 50:3), while for Aaron and Moses it lasted thirty days (Num. 20:29; Deut. 34:5-8). Women captured in war were allowed to mourn the deaths of their parents one month before having to marry their captors (Deut. 21:11-13). The deaths of the famous prompted poetic laments. David mourned for the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:17-27), and Jeremiah lamented the death of Josiah (2 Chron. 35:25). Professional mourners are referred to in Jeremiah 9:17-18 and Amos 5:16 as “such as are skilled in lamentation,” and in Matthew 9:23 as “minstrels.” In the latter account Jesus seemed to dismiss them as He healed the ruler’s daughter. It is interesting to note that Jesus’ own response to Lazarus’ death was comparatively simple; He wept quietly at the tomb (John 11:35-36).

Israel’s mourning rites reflect in part the belief that death is something evil. All contact with death—whether it happened by touching a corpse, the bones of a corpse, a grave, or a house which contained a dead body—made the Israelite unclean and in need of purification. In addition to personal sorrow, the mourning rites reflected at least to a degree the mourner’s humiliation because of his necessarily close contact with the body of the deceased.