

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

Fred H. Wight

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN -

Death in Oriental Lands

THE ATTITUDE OF THE PEOPLE of the East toward death, and their behavior at such times, is so strikingly different from the attitude and behavior in the West that the Bible student will do well to study such customs.

THE DEATH WAIL

As soon as a death has taken place in the Orient, a wail is raised that announces to all the neighborhood what has happened. This is a sign for the relatives to begin demonstrating their sorrow.¹

This death wail is referred to in connection with the first-born of Egypt, "**And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead**" (Exodus 12:30).

Such a death-wail heard in an Eastern desert has been thus described as, "a sharp, shrill, ear-piercing shriek." This shriek is followed by prolonged wails. When this is heard, everybody knows a death has occurred.²

LAMENTATION

From the time the death wail is heard, until the burial takes place, relatives and friends continue their lamentation. The prophet Micah compares it to the cry of wild beasts or birds: "Therefore I will wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked: I will make a wailing like the dragons, and mourning as the owls" (Micah 1:8). Such lamentation was in the house of Jairus when JESUS entered it: "**And he cometh to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and seeth the tumult, and them that wept and wailed greatly**" (Mark 5:38).

In connection with the lamentations, there are apt to be certain exclamations of sorrow used. David mourned over the death of Absalom: "**O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!**" (II Samuel 18:33). Certain words are repeated over and over again. The exclamations concerning the disobedient prophet who died, were: "**Alas, my brother!**" And in mourning the death of a king, the words were used, "**Ah lord!**" and "**Ah his glory!**" (Jeremiah 22:18).

The Hebrew prophets mention professional mourners, who were called in at the time of sorrow

to express mourning for the dead. **"Call for the mourning women, that they may come; . . . and let them make haste, and take up a wailing for us"** (Jeremiah 9:17, 18). Another reference is to **"such as are skillful of lamentation"** (Amos 5:16). The presence of such a group of mourners hired for the occasion seems out of place to the Occidental mind; but certainly such professional wailers are no more lacking in helpfulness to the Easterner than are nonreligious professional singers at a Western funeral service.³

EXPRESSIONS OF SORROW AND COMFORT

Since Orientals are so very demonstrative and emotional, it is difficult for those not acquainted with their customs to appreciate their method of expressing their sorrow, and their attempts to be comforted.⁴ In times of grief and sorrow, sackcloth is worn, and they often rend their garments in order to let people know how deep is their grief (II Samuel 3:31). The beating of the breast is another method of expressing sorrow (Luke 23:48). Tears flow freely at such times and are considered to be a definite means of bringing comfort to sorrowing hearts (John 11:33).

PREPARATION OF THE BODY FOR BURIAL

In Syria the custom has prevailed of wrapping the dead. Usually the face is covered with a napkin, and then the hands and feet are bound round with linen cloth. The body is then put upon a bier, with a pole at each corner, and thus carried on the shoulders of men to the tomb for burial.⁵ The description of Lazarus, when JESUS called him forth from the tomb, indicates that the same custom was practiced in those days:

"And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go" (John 11:44). Also we know that the body of JESUS was thus wrapped by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus: **"Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury"** (John 19:40). Embalming spices were used when they could be afforded.

EASTERN FUNERALS

Burial follows death quickly. The burial of the dead in the East takes place soon after death, usually the same day. The people of these regions have a primitive idea that the spirit of the one who dies, hovers near the body for three days after death. Mourners think of this spirit as being able to hear the wailing calls of grief. Martha, no doubt, thought it would be hopeless to think of reviving her brother's body, because he had been dead four days (John 11:39).⁶

Burial in caves, tombs, or graves. Today there are thousands of rock-cut tombs scattered over the land of Palestine, to bring to mind past decades. Such tombs were made by the wealthy. Not being able to afford these, the poorer folks buried their dead in graves. Some of these tombs had many chambers in them. They were closed by a rolling-stone which ran down an inclined plane in front of the mouth of the sepulcher. In the vicinity of ancient Gadara (Luke 8:27), there are many rock-hewn tombs today, bringing to mind the experience of JESUS when he met the demoniac who lived in the tombs.⁷

Often the dead were buried in graves dug in the earth, as in the case of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, who was buried under an oak at Bethel (Genesis 35:8). Natural caves were sometimes utilized, as in the case of the cave of Machpelah, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob were placed (Genesis 49:31; 50:13). When they could afford to do so, families had a sepulcher. Gideon was buried in the sepulcher of Joash his father (Judges 8:32). Only prophets and kings were buried within the limits of a city, as Samuel, who was buried in his house at Ramah (I Samuel 25:1), and David, who was buried in the city of David (I Kings 2:10). A graveyard for poorer people was located outside Jerusalem (II Kings 23:6). Many of the villages had graveyards outside their limits, as for example Nain, where JESUS raised the widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). There is a graveyard located there today.⁸

Custom following burial. In Bible times it was quite customary for the sorrowing ones to fast up to the time burial. Then following the funeral, they would be offered bread and wine as a comforting refreshment. Such was called a mourning feast, which had as its real purpose the comforting of the mourners. The prophet Jeremiah refers to this custom: "**Neither shall men tear themselves for them in mourning, to comfort them for the dead; neither shall men give them the cup of consolation to drink for their father or for their mother**" (Jeremiah 16:7). This mourning feast brought to an end the period of deepest sorrow and strict fasting.⁹

BIBLICAL EXPRESSIONS OF ORIENTAL MOURNING

The Psalmists, Prophets, and Apostles often make use of expressions referring to Oriental mourning. Some of these cannot be appreciated by the Occidental, unless the highly emotional character of the Easterner is understood, and also his fondness for figurative language. The Psalmist says:

"Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law" (Psalm 119:136). The prophet exclaims, **"Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!"** (Jeremiah 9:1). And, it was to Orientals that Paul said, **"Weep with them that weep"** (Romans 12:15).

It will pay the Bible student dividends if he will read the Word from the Oriental point of view.

1. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 126.
2. H. Clay Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life*, pp. 144, 145.
3. Ibid., p. 154.
4. Ibid., p. 155.
5. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, p. 121.
6. Trumbull, op. cit., pp. 177, 178.
7. G. Robinson Lees, *Village Life in Palestine*, p. 130.
8. "Grave-Hebrew," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, Charles R. Barnes, ed., pp. 435, 436.
9. C. Von Orelli, *The Prophecies of Jeremiah*, p. 134. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889.)

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