

You Shall Not Defile the Land: The History of Jewish Burial Practice and Conception of the Corpse

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The Hebrew Bible contains references to burial, but it never explains them. The Patriarchs are buried in a family tomb, Rachel is buried by the side of the road where she died, and the Book of Ezekiel refers to burying the bones of one's enemies, but there is no prescription on why these burials occur or how to conduct one. The human corpse is a source of impurity, able to somehow render unsealed containers placed near it impure, but there's no explicit reason given as to why. However, a robust funerary culture clearly existed among Judahites living while the Hebrew Bible was being written, with archaeological evidence of tombs, bones, inscriptions, and monuments from throughout Judah, now in Israel. How does this evidence align with the Biblical references? Were the authors of the Bible responding to existing practice, or trying to change it? How did people use the Bible to inform their treatment of the dead?

I used this archaeological work and the analyses of many secondary sources to try to answer those questions. In the First Temple period, from around the eighth to sixth centuries BCE, there were many types of tomb in frequent use. Some people were buried in large jars, others in bathtub-shaped coffins, and others in large rock shafts. These burial types took direct inspiration from neighboring cultures, such as the Egyptians and Assyrians. The most distinctively Judahite type was the rock-cut bench tomb, a structure resembling the Judahite family home cut into a mountainside outside of town. Bodies were placed on benches hewn out of the walls, and once flesh had decomposed their bones were moved in what is called a secondary burial to a collection of family bones stored within the same tomb. Lineage was very important here. A "good death" was one where the corpse could gradually join that collection of family bones, moving through a rite of passage that turned it from an identifiable individual to a familial ancestor. In many ways, the Biblical attitude towards death reflects this. A "bad death" is one where the corpse dies in battle or goes unburied, conditions which mean the individual is not buried in the family tomb. The importance of lineage and ancestors is shown in the Patriarchs' special burial place in the Cave of Machpelah, which is an auspicious place as a result. Even the notion of corpse impurity shows an understanding of the liminal phase of the rite of passage, where the time between freshly dead and fleshless ancestor poses a danger to the social order. On the other hand, the need to take care of the dead through ritual and secondary burial ran the risk of turning into ancestor worship or necromancy, which prophets like Isaiah made conscious efforts to push back against. The cult of the dead in ancient Judah was ingrained enough that the Bible could make references which its readers would have understood.

Outside of that original context, Jews had to re-interpret Biblical references to burial and their knowledge of previous practice to inform new practice. In the Second Temple period of the second and first centuries BCE and first century CE, burial became more individualistic, with tombs designed for smaller family groups instead of a whole lineage. The bench tomb was replaced with the loculi tomb, where bodies were placed in nooks within the rock first and later moved to an ossuary containing family bones. Inspiration for inscriptions, funerary art, and monuments was taken from Hellenistic and Roman culture, which led to increased use of metaphors for the dead crossing to another world instead of becoming an ancestor. Without specific Biblical descriptions of what a tomb looked like or what an afterlife was like, neighboring cultures became important points of comparison. What remained consistent was an assumption that death was the beginning of a process of dying, not the end. This core assumption drove the need for familial burial, a "good death" for the dead's sake, and secondary burials to mark the end of the transition of dying.

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