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Original publication:

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An Ignominious Burial: The Treatment of the Body of Jesus of Nazareth
in: S. Cavicchioli / L. Provero (eds.), *Public Uses of Human Remains and Relics in History*,
11–28

New York, Routledge, 2019

URL: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429295904>

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An Ignominious Burial: The Treatment of the Body of Jesus of Nazareth

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Published in: S. Cavicchioli - L. Provero (edd.), *Public Uses of Human Remains and Relics in History*, New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 11-28.

Abstract

Accounts in the Gospels provide some information on the treatment that was reserved for the body of Jesus after death. These particulars and above all some omissions reveal a certain embarrassment in recounting both the inglorious end to Jesus' life and the dishonourable treatment accorded to his corpse, which had to comply with the provisions for those condemned to death. Rereading these texts in the light of Jewish law, without ignoring the apologetic intent of the evangelists, reveals a deliberate attempt to ennoble the accounts of the ignominious burial of the Nazarene.

The story of what happened to the mortal remains of Jesus of Nazareth—put to death on the cross in Jerusalem on an Easter Friday between the years 27 and 34 CE—is told in the Gospels. Of these, the oldest and most useful to any historical reconstruction, which is at least probable, are those attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Peter.

Their accounts are compatible as a whole, are partly interdependent, and are most likely drawn from sources now lost to us. Sometimes, however, their narratives are contradictory, each being influenced by the personal perspective of the compiler, who based his account on information available to him and which he believed was well-founded. Many of their differences could be due to the fact that there were a number of coexisting streams of information about Jesus, probably arising from several places. It is therefore possible, with due caution, to treat the Gospels as broadly reliable recollections, though we should not forget that they were written, in the form in which they have reached us, several years after the facts and using not always exact memories and stories as their foundation. Furthermore, they are not dry historical accounts, but rather testimonies of a faith lived in the light of belief in the resurrection of Jesus, in constant dialogue with the ancient Hebrew scriptures and with an explicit parenetic and apologetic intent. Thus the events that will be discussed from here on should not be automatically considered facts corresponding to reality because the truth of every detail of the Gospels cannot actually be proved and is the subject of debate among scholars. What I will reconstruct in the following pages is above all what Jesus' followers could and/or wanted to remember about him.

An Ignominious Burial

The funeral of a first-century Jew¹ began with a procession that accompanied the deceased to the sound of flutes and the keening of weeping women, and then there followed laments, ceremonies, blessings and eulogies, ending with the inhumation in the family tomb.² Jesus, however, had none of this. His burial recalls, at least in part, the punishment that Josephus demanded for blasphemers: “Let him that blasphemes God be stoned, then hung for a day, and buried ignominiously and in obscurity.”³ The *Mishnah* described this custom as follows:

They did not bury [the felon] in the burial grounds of his ancestors. But there were two graveyards made ready for the use of the court, one for those who were beheaded or strangled, and one for those who were stoned or burned. [. . .] And they did not go into mourning, but they observed a private grief, for grief is only in the heart.⁴

These were the two essential characteristics of what is known as “ignominious burial”: the prohibition of burying the criminal next to his “fathers”—in other words in a family tomb that housed the bodies of innocent people—and the ban on carrying out all the public ceremonies of mourning. Dishonourable burials were an ancient practice and can in fact be found in texts predating the time of Jesus.⁵

¹ On Jewish funeral customs, see Siegfried Klein, *Tod und Begräbnis in Palästina zur Zeit der Tannaiten* (Berlin: Itzkowske, 1908); Samuel Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Fock, 1911), 54–82; Shmuel Safrai and Menahem Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century*, vol. 2 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976), 773–87; Harold Liebowitz, “Jewish Burial Practices in the Roman Period,” *The Mankind Quarterly* 22 (1981): 107–17; Joseph Patrich, “קברים ונוהגי קבורה בארץ-”ל—לביאורם של מונחים קבורה ראשונה על-פי פטריכ, in Itamar Singer, ed., *מקורות הז”ל* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1994), 190–211; Nissan Rubin, *קץ החיים: טקסי קבורה ואבל* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997); David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Routledge, 2000); Byron McCane, *Roll Back the Stone. Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003).

² There are allusions to these customs in the Rabbinical texts: *Mishnah*, *Baba Batra* 6:7 (procession); *Ketubot* 2:10 (procession and funeral speech); *Ketubot* 4:4 (flutes and women); *Megillah* 4:3 (ceremonies and benedictions); *Mo’ed Qatan* 3:9 (singing women); *Talmud babilonese*, *Baba Qamma* 17a (very long procession). According to Josephus “the funeral ceremony is to be undertaken by the nearest relatives, and all who pass while a burial is proceeding must join the procession and share the mourning of the family” (*Contra Apionem* 2:205). Jesus himself crossed a funeral procession (Luke 7:12) in which the people “were all weeping, and beating themselves” (Luke 8:52), and according to Mark 5:38 were “weeping and wailing,” while according to Matthew 9:23 there were “the minstrels and the multitude making tumult.” Funeral lamentations dated back to the ancient world: see Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 60–61.

³ Iosephus Flavius, *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 4:202; translation of Henry Thackeray, *The Jewish Antiquities, Books I-IV* (London: Heinemann, 1930).

⁴ *Mishnah*, *Sanhedrin* 6:5–6; translation by Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: a New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). See Adolf Büchler, “L’enterrement des criminels d’après le Talmud et le Midrasch,” *Revue des études juives* 46 (1903): 74–88. See also Beth Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵ 1 Kings 13:22 says of an unfaithful prophet: “Your corpse will not be buried in your ancestral tomb”; Jeremiah 22:18–19, says this about Jehoiakim: “They will not mourn for him [. . .] He will be left unburied just like a dead donkey. His body will be dragged off and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem”; Isaiah 53:9, on the suffering servant:

The burial of Jesus described by the Gospels has certain characteristics that identify it as dishonourable.⁶ The joint condemnation by the Roman and Jewish authorities (this is what the Gospels say) excluded the possibility of a solemn funeral for those guilty of blasphemy, and so the ignominious suffering of the cross had to be matched by an equally ignominious burial. The Gospel of Peter confirms this when it mentions that the women were not able to perform the usual lamentations on the day of the burial, and adds that they meant to do so later:

Now at the dawn of the Lord's day Mary Magdalene, a female disciple of the Lord—who, afraid because of the Jews since they were inflamed with anger, had not done at the tomb of the Lord what women were accustomed to do for the dead beloved by them—having taken with her women friends, came to the tomb where he had been placed. And they were afraid lest the Jews should see them and were saying: "If indeed on that day on which he was crucified we could not weep and beat ourselves, yet now at his tomb we may do these things".⁷

But isn't all of this in contradiction with the Gospel passages where it is said that Jesus was buried in a new and dignified tomb, and not in the criminal cemetery mentioned in the Mishnah? Some have replied that their account is false, and sometimes go as far as to claim that Jesus was thrown into a mass grave. Yet there are good reasons for believing that things did not turn out like that.

The Handing Over of the Body

The Jews did not deprive anyone of a burial. Leaving a corpse unburied was considered an unworthy act; it could only happen in moments of great tension, such as war, when relatives feared that burying their dead might put their own lives at risk or when they were prevented from doing so.⁸ In the case of Roman executions governors reserved the right of deciding whether to return the body, and generally preferred to comply with Jewish custom. It is therefore likely that Jesus' body was handed over to be buried. Even Yehohanan, a man crucified in the first century whose bones have been found in Jerusalem, did not end up in a mass grave, but rather in a tomb, and the same is true of other executed people whose remains have come to light. The Mishnaic norm prescribing burial in a separate cemetery concerns criminals judged by the Sanhedrin, not those executed by the Roman civil authority.

"They intended to bury him with criminals, but he ended up in a rich man's tomb"; Flavius, *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 5:44: "He was straightway put to death and at nightfall was given the ignominious burial proper to the condemned"; *Tosefta, Sanhedrin* 9:8.

⁶ See, for example, Byron McCane, "Where No One Had Yet Been Laid: The Shame of Jesus' Burial," in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 431–52; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "The Descent from the Cross and the Burial of Jesus," *Revue biblique* 118 (2011): 554–57.

⁷ *Evangelium Petri*, 50–52; translation by Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1320.

⁸ See Iosephus Flavius, *Bellum Iudaicum* 4:317 (burial of the crucified); 4:331–32 and 381–83 (fear of burial).

Furthermore, Jewish law did not allow a body to remain exposed overnight, something that according to John even Jesus' opponents brought to the notice of Pilate.⁹ Jesus' closest followers and friends were not present either at the Deposition or at his burial. It might be assumed that they had escaped, fearful and confused at the death of their master. Yet somebody had to take care of the necessary, and the Gospels name Joseph of Arimathea, who obtained permission from the Roman governor to remove the body from the cross and arrange for it to be buried.¹⁰ According to Matthew and John, Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but Mark and Luke say that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, while Peter says that he was a friend of both Jesus and Pilate.

Assuming that the evangelists had credible information about him (something that cannot be taken for granted),¹¹ some think, as suggested in the Gospel of Peter, that Joseph did not act out of any sympathy for the deceased, but had instead been formally assigned to do so by the Sanhedrin,¹² which would not have allowed night to fall on an unburied victim of crucifixion.¹³ This would also explain the apparent anomaly regarding why Joseph was never mentioned in the Gospels as a follower of Jesus either before or after the burial, when we might otherwise have expected that he would have assumed a prominent position among the disciples. Joseph was not a witness either to Jesus' death or to his subsequent resurrection: it is as if his task lasted only a few hours, in other words, the time needed to take care of the burial in accordance with Jewish rules. This hypothesis may be indirectly corroborated by the passage in John where it is stated that it was the Jews themselves who asked Pilate to bring down the corpses of Jesus and the two criminals from their crosses, while the Acts of the Apostles, which quotes the words of Paul, states that it was they who also took measures to ensure the burial.¹⁴

Removing the body from the cross, transporting it and burying it, and sealing the tomb with a large stone were not tasks that could be carried by one person. Joseph may have used his own servants or else staff of the Jewish authorities.¹⁵ It is also possible that he tried to avoid the contamination deriving from any operation that involved contact with a corpse, something which rendered a person impure for seven days. In such an eventuality Joseph would have been unable to take part in the Passover festivities.

⁹ Deuteronomy 21:23: "His corpse must not remain all night on the tree"; see Flavius, *Bellum Iudaicum* 4:317; John 19:31: "The bodies should not stay on the crosses on the Sabbath."

¹⁰ Matthew 27:57–61; Mark 15:42–47; Luke 23:50–56; John 19:38–42; *Evangelium Petri* 23–24. A legal discussion of the question of the Deposition and burial of the condemned is in Barbara Fabbrini, "La deposizione di Gesù nel sepolcro e il problema del divieto di sepoltura per i condannati," *Studia et documenta historiae et iuris* 61 (1995): 97–178, although I do not share all of Fabbrini's conclusions.

¹¹ According to Jerome Murphy O'Connor "none of the evangelists had any reliable historical information about Joseph of Arimathea"; his inclusion in the story may simply be owed to the fact that he was the owner of the tomb ("The Descent from the Cross," 553).

¹² *Evangelium Petri* 23: "And the Jews rejoiced and gave his body to Joseph that he might bury it, since he was one who had seen the many good things he did."

¹³ Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, *La morte di Gesù* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2014), 133–59.

¹⁴ John 19:31: "The Jewish leaders asked Pilate to have the victims' legs broken and the bodies taken down"; Acts 13:27–29: "The people who live in Jerusalem and their rulers . . . asked Pilate to have him executed and . . . they took him down from the cross and placed him in a tomb."

¹⁵ According, for example, to Paul Gaechter, "Zum Begräbnis Jesu," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 75 (1953): 222; Josef Blinzler, *Der Prozeß Jesu* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1969), 394; Destro and Pesce, *La morte di Gesù*, 148–49.

The Cleaning of the Body

The practice of cleaning a corpse, known as *taharah*, is also mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁶ One would think that the ablution of a crucified and bloodied body was an obvious course of action, and the Gospel of Peter specifically states that Jesus was washed.¹⁷ The four older Gospels, however, do not mention any washing, perhaps because it went without saying.

Some, however, have maintained that it could not have taken place, making reference to the modern Jewish custom: those who die a violent death or through bleeding must not be washed, but must be buried together with the clothes impregnated with their blood. The oldest known formulation of this precept is the work of Yaakov ben Moshe Moelin, known as Maharil (d. 1427):

About one woman who fell from a roof and died due to her fall—may it not happen to us—the Maharash taught that if blood came out of her, she should not be purified, because if she was, the blood would be washed off. But she would be buried as she is clothed. And he also said that if a quarter-log¹⁸ of blood came out of her a priest should not rend himself unclean to her. [. . .] And it is customary to bury all those slain by transgressors and oppressors simply as they were found, with all their clothes, to raise anger and get revenge.¹⁹

Maharil had probably been taught this rule either by his master, Maharash, or by Shalom ben Yizhak, the rabbi of Neustadt in Austria (died c. 1413). In the nineteenth century the Hungarian rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried elucidated it by talking of lifeblood:

If a person collapses and dies instantly, if his body was injured, and blood flowed from the wound, and there is reason to fear that perhaps his lifeblood was absorbed in his clothes and his shoes, he should not be ritually cleansed, but he should be buried in his clothing and his shoes. Over his clothing, he should be wrapped in a cloth. The sheet is called *sovev* (“wrapping”). It is customary to scoop up the earth from the spot where he fell, if any blood is there. The earth nearby that spot should also be dug up, and he should be buried with all the earth that contains blood.²⁰

¹⁶ Acts 9:37.

¹⁷ *Evangelium Petri* 24.

¹⁸ A log is a measurement of between 345 and 597 cubic centimetres, so a quarter log would have been at least 85 cc (8.5 cl).

¹⁹ ספר שאלות ותשובות מהרי"ל - *Schalot utschuwot Maril* (Krakau: Fischer und Deutscher, 1881), 25v, translation by Daniel Klutstein, with slight revisions.

²⁰ Shlomo Ganzfried, *Kitzur Shulchan Aruk* 197:9; translation by Avrohom Davis, *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (New York: Metsudah Publications, 1996). The current law is described by Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David, 2000), 284. See also the explanation provided in Chaim Denburg, *Code of Hebrew Law* (Montreal: The Jurisprudence Press, 1954), 161, n. 39.

The current justification for this is that the last drops of blood, shed in the instant when a person passes from life to death, is lifeblood. If those drops had been absorbed by clothing or the ground, these too must be buried together with the body. But since with bleeding wounds lifeblood cannot be distinguished from blood lost before or after the moment of death, everything must be preserved.

If these provisions were applied in the case of Jesus, the situation would be clear: the corpse and shed blood would have to be buried together, without washing. Jesus did not have clothes, since he had died naked and his clothing had been shared among the soldiers.²¹

The difficulty raised by this interpretation has to do with the risk of blithely integrating the silence of the sources by making use of later texts. It is not historically correct to found the exegesis of first-century Hebrew writings by relying on other works written much later.²² The only thing to have been found in texts closer to the period in question is evidence of concern for the management of the blood of those who died of wounds. A passage from the Mishnah (second century) presents an interesting example of a hanged man (who could be compared to a crucified man, although it should be noted that Jewish law allowed the bodies of the condemned to be hanged only after death and not before). According to the passage, the blood that escaped from the man's wounds could be deemed impure owing to having been mixed, since some would have been shed when the man was still alive, and the rest after his death. This meant that anyone who had been exposed to it would have to be purified—exactly as in the case of touching a corpse—because he had been rendered impure.²³ From this passage we learn that at least until the second century there was some sensitivity regarding the purity of those who came into contact with lifeblood, although this is a different problem to that of what should be done with it, meaning that even this source does not allow us to deduce that there had been a rule regulating such a circumstance either in that century or the one before.

We should also bear in mind that the essential and original function of washing the body was simply hygienic. The ritualisation of the process transpired slowly, surfacing appreciably in the period of the Medieval Ashkenazic Hasidism in Europe. The Hasidim of Ashkenaz attributed great importance to the physical preparation of the body in view of the day of judgment for all souls (especially those of martyrs, marked with blood), which they considered imminent and not, as their predecessors did, an event that would arrive in a more distant eschatological time. The killing of many Jews during the twelfth and thirteenth century must have given rise to new discussions on the best way to bury murder victims. Indeed, the rare occasions when corpses were buried in their blood-soaked clothes concerned men murdered in Europe during the late Middle Ages: according to the beliefs of the Ashkenazi Jews, the blood would serve as proof of their martyrdom and was a substance that would unleash God's vengeance on the killers.²⁴ It seems highly significant that the rules written on the burial of blood with the corpse and on not

²¹ This is according to Alfred O'Rahilly, *The Burial of Christ* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1942), 3–4.

²² An excellent approach to this topic can be found in Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death*, 4–11.

²³ *Mishnah, Ohalot* 3:5; see also 2:2 (impurity due to mixed blood), the comment on the subject made by the *Babylonian Talmud, Niddah* 71a, and the treatment of Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities. Part 4: Ohalot* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 95–102.

²⁴ For this interpretation of the blood, see Israel J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 92–143.

washing do not go back beyond the Middle Ages,²⁵ and it is possible that the current rule mandating burials with the blood began with this motivation linked to blood-revenge.²⁶

Ultimately, there is not enough evidence to exclude the possibility that Jesus' body was washed.

Covering the Body

According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Peter, the corpse was immediately wrapped in a cloth after being brought down from the cross, even before it reached the tomb. It must therefore have already been covered when being transported, which is understandable because the Jews did not permit displays of nudity.

The five authors state that, after laying the body down Joseph covered it in cloth known as *sindón* (σινδών).²⁷ At the time, this word had two meanings. First, it referred to a type of fine fabric, especially linen but which could also be cotton. Second, and by extension, it identified any item made from that fabric: we find instances of it being used to refer to a variety of objects, such as cloths, tunics, sheets, flags, burial cloths, ribbons, cloaks and curtains. This double meaning has an immediate consequence as far as the text of the Gospels is concerned: if the writers used the word *sindón* in the first sense, in other words as the name of a type of material—surely linen since in the first century cotton did not exist in Palestine—the translation would be: “Joseph wrapped it in linen,”²⁸ in other words in one or more pieces of this specific material (from which strips, bandages, clothes and sheets could be made). If, on the other hand *sindón* referred to a single piece of cloth, the translation would be: “he wrapped it up in a (single piece of fabric made of) linen.”

There is no reason to choose arbitrarily between one solution or the other, as for example those who translate it as “in a sheet of linen” do. The term *sindón* does not in fact tell us anything about the shape of the fabric or fabrics to which the Gospels refer, but the associated verbs do at least inform us about the way that Jesus was wrapped. Luke and Matthew use the word *entulisso*, which means to “wrap” or “roll up,” while Mark, the oldest source, instead uses the more

²⁵ In fact there is a passage in the *Eichah Rabbah* (4,1) that may date back to the fifth century after Christ, in which it is stated that the quarter-logs of blood of the king Josiah “that flowed from him while there were three hundred arrows shot at him” were buried by Jeremiah “each in its place” (ed. S. Buber, *מדרש איכה רבה* [Wilna: Wittwe & Gebrüder Romm, 1899], 140–41). This also explains why in Lamentations it is stated that Josiah “was buried in the sepulchres of his fathers,” plural. But this account is isolated and has nothing to do with the cleaning of the body but only with the burial of the blood escaped from an injured man. The blood, in any event, was not buried with the body, but elsewhere. Each quarter-log deserved a burial, as an impure substance that might be touched unknowingly, and perhaps also because it was considered part of the life force. The action of Jeremiah can probably also be explained as an act of extreme veneration towards his sovereign. There is no evidence that there was a rule about this and if there was, that it was also followed by ordinary people.

²⁶ These considerations were suggested to me by Paul Mandel (Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem) who also consulted some of his colleagues on the subject. I would like to dedicate an in-depth study to this topic in the future.

²⁷ Matthew 27:59–60: “And having taken the body, Joseph wrapped it in pure *sindón* and laid it in his new sepulcher”; Mark 15:46: “And he, having brought *sindón*, and having taken him down, wound him with the *sindón*, and laid him in a sepulcher”; Luke 23:53: “And he, having taken down, wrapped it in *sindón*, and laid him in a tomb”; *Evangelium Petri* 24: “And he, having taken the Lord, washed and tied him with *sindón* and brought him into his own grave.”

²⁸ As happens, for example, in Luke 16:19: “A certain man was rich, and was clothed in purple and fine linen.”

restrictive *eneiléo*, or to “wrap tightly,” “envelop,” “wind” or “entangle.” Thus, for these evangelists, the body of Jesus was not simply covered or dressed, but, rather, bound up fairly tightly. There is no way of knowing whether it was wrapped in strips of linen, in one or more sheets, in a tunic or other form of clothing, or whether it was wrapped in bandages, ropes, cord or something else. We cannot know if Joseph’s *sindón* was used in the form in which it had been purchased, or if it was cut to make pieces or strips with which to wrap the corpse. The only thing that is certain is that this linen had to fulfil the function of wrapping and tightly binding the body.

It may be that the Gospel writers chose to utilise the term *sindón* because they wanted to underline the value of the type of material used, their concern being not so much to describe the way the corpse was dressed, which could have easily been imagined by their contemporaries, as to remove any suspicion that Jesus had been buried naked or was covered in cheap material. Matthew even specified that the *sindón* was *kathará* (καθαρά), that is “pure” or “clean.” This might signify that the material was new and unsoiled, in other words unused (Mark states that Joseph purchased it for the occasion); or else that it was made of pure linen, that is, not mixed with other textiles (which, among other things, would have meant that it broke Jewish laws which in certain cases—but not in burials—forbade the mixing of different fibres); or even that it was “white,” that is, that it had been subjected to bleaching processes. White was a colour typically attributed to priests, philosophers, angels and gods, even pagan ones:²⁹ the evangelist, then, might be implying that the cloth had a sacred quality.³⁰

The Gospel of John, conversely, does not speak of Jesus’ *sindón*, but rather of *othónia* (ὀθόνια) which served to bind (δέω) the body of Jesus.³¹ *Othónia* is a diminutive plural of *othónē* (ὀθόνη), which means, generically, “linen cloth,” “garment,” “veil” or “band.” In our case, the diminutive might have been utilised to indicate a very fine and delicate textile (like linen), or one made out of the material *othónē*, in small quantities, or else a textile different in quality to *othónē*, that is small, or long and narrow, perhaps made of something bigger (like bandages obtained by cutting down a larger piece of cloth). Among Greek writers *othónion* is used to denote a “cloth,” “little curtain,” “placemat,” “hand towel,” “handkerchief” or a “bandage” for wrapping, and more rarely as “cloth” or “linen” generally, regardless of size. Papyrological evidence reveals a constant use of *othónion* in the generic sense of “cloth” and also of “clothing.” Clearly John was thinking of more than one item, but he did not say what these were like. Thus the phrase “they bound it in *othónia*” should prudently be translated as “they bound it in linen cloths.” The translation “they bound it in strips of linen” that is sometimes used is not incorrect, but interpretative and influenced by the fact that John himself used the same verb *deó* (to “bind”) when he said that in the tomb Lazarus’s hands and feet were bound in “swathing-bands,” “bandages,” “strips” or “girths” known as *keiríai* (κειρίαι).³²

Moreover, John added to the linens a *soudáron* (σουδάριον), that is, a cloth that was placed on the head of the deceased. He then recounted that on Sunday morning the apostle Peter went to the tomb that had been found empty and, looking inside, saw that there remained only

²⁹ See the sources collected by Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 700–1.

³⁰ See Pier Angelo Gramaglia, “La Sindone di Torino: alcuni problemi storici,” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 24 (1988): 550–59, which contains many examples.

³¹ John 19:40: “They took, therefore, the body of Jesus, and bound it by *othónia* with the spices.”

³² John 11:44: “And the dead man came out, being bound feet and hands with *keiríai*, his face wrapped in a *soudáron*.”

“the linen cloths lying there, and the *soudarion* that was upon his head, not lying with the linen cloths,” but wrapped up in a different place (or in a particular way).³³

Unfortunately, we have no clear idea about how the Jews normally wrapped the dead in Jesus’ time. Some findings made in the Cave of Letters show that most sepulchral materials were made from recycled cloths, particularly of tunics made into rags or sacks.³⁴ Even the fabrics in ‘En Gedi had probably been reclaimed. In two coffins a piece of knotted cloth was found in the position of the right shoulder: could this be the “knot in the undergarment at the shoulder” to which the Mishnah refers?³⁵ The presence in a tomb of two types of material, one coarse and the other fine, confirms that a variety of fabrics were used on the same person. A momentous discovery was made in the region of Akeldamà: although, because of the fragmentary state of the original form, the number and size of the materials cannot be determined, the surviving fabrics were made up of overlapping layers.³⁶

Ointments and Aromas

In general the corpses of Jews were cleansed and covered in perfumed oil. It is normally believed that the washing of a body was an operation that preceded its anointing, and indeed if the aim of the anointing was to perfume the body, it makes sense that this came after the washing.³⁷ However, a passage of the Mishnah has this order in reverse, affirming that a corpse can be “anointed and washed” even on the Sabbath.³⁸

Following an extensive investigation of the Jewish sources, Adolf Büchler has compared this funeral practice with that of rubbing one’s hands with oil after meals to remove the dirt sticking to the fingers before washing them, as well as to the custom of covering the body with oil in the bath to remove dirt and impurities before scraping it off the skin or rinsing with water. The purpose of washing the corpse would therefore be to remove the oil previously used to give the skin a pleasant smell.³⁹

The fact that anointing the deceased was a widespread practice in this period was confirmed by Jesus himself in the episode of the sinful woman of Bethany who one day approached him with a jar filled with perfumed oil and began to anoint his body. Jesus

³³ John 20:7.

³⁴ See Yigael Yadin, *The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem: Israel exploration society, 1963), 171 and 205; Orit Shamir, “Shrouds and Other Textiles from Ein Gedi,” in *Ein Gedi*, ed. Yizhar Hirschfeld (Haifa: Hecht Museum, 2006), 58.

³⁵ See Gideon Hadas, תישעה קברים מימי הבית השני בעין-גדי, *Atiqot* 24 (1994): 56; Shamir, “Shrouds and Other Textiles,” 71–74 and 57–59; *Mishnah, Miqvaot* 10:4.

³⁶ See James Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 6–15; Orit Shamir, “Textiles from the 1st Century CE in Jerusalem,” in *Ancient Textiles: Production, Crafts and Society*, ed. Carole Gillis and Marie-Louise Nosch (London: Oxbow Books, 2008), 77–80; Shimon Gibson, *Final Days of Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 143–47; Orit Shamir, “A Burial Textile from the First Century CE in Jerusalem Compared to Roman Textiles in the Land of Israel and the Turin Shroud,” *SHS Web of Conferences* 15, no. 10 (2015): 3.

³⁷ As can be seen in 2 Samuel 12:20; Ezekiel 16:9.

³⁸ *Mishnah, Shabbat* 23:5: סכין ומדיחין אותו.

³⁹ Adolf Büchler, פירוש המשנה שבת פרק כ”ג, ה, עושין כל צורכי המת סכין ומדיחין אותו, in *ספר היובל לפרופיסור* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1937), 36–49.

interpreted this as a symbolic precursory sepulchral anointing.⁴⁰ The question has been asked, without agreement ever having been reached, whether this story allows us to deduce that Jesus was not anointed after his death.

Let us therefore return to the Gospel accounts of the burial.⁴¹ Matthew, Mark and Luke say that after Jesus' body had been removed from the cross Joseph of Arimathea wrapped it in linen, placed it in the tomb, and nothing more. Matthew does not speak of any perfume, while Mark states that "when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought aromatic spices so that they might go and anoint him," while according to Luke, on the Friday evening the women "returned and prepared aromatic spices and perfumes, and on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment." All three agree on the fact that the women returned to the tomb on the Sunday morning, but only Mark and Luke specify that they took perfumes with them.

John provides a very different account, introducing a new protagonist, namely the Pharisee Nicodemus. At the Deposition he came "carrying a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about a hundred pounds." He and Joseph of Arimathea "took Jesus's body and bound it by *othónia* with the aromatic spices, as is the custom of the Jews to prepare for burial." John makes no mention of the women's morning visit, making reference only to the arrival of Mary Magdalene but saying nothing of aromas. The accounts are therefore contradictory: Matthew does not talk about perfumes, Mark and Luke say that these were brought to the tomb by the women on Sunday, Mark asserts that they were purchased late on Saturday, while Luke says that they had already been prepared on Friday night. John excludes the women from anything involving aromas and he alone reveals that on Friday evening Nicodemus had brought a mixture of myrrh and aloe and that Jesus was buried with it.

Myrrh is an odoriferous gum resin that can be extracted from the trunk and branches of various plants of the genus *Commiphora*.⁴² It was a precious resin that the Magi gave to the baby Jesus along with gold and frankincense. On the other hand, there are two types of aloe: a juice that is extracted from the leaves of the homonymous plants of the liliaceae family, and the fragrant wood known as agarwood or aloeswood. The juice, which has anti-inflammatory and healing properties, is very odorous, while the wood is taken from trees affected by a particular fungal infection which causes them to spontaneously secrete the resinous compound that makes the wood fragrant. The plant that provided the most highly sought-after fragrant wood was the *Aquilaria*, and the most widely used variety was the *Aquilaria agallocha*.⁴³ In order to release the smell, the wood would be burned, and it appears that John was in fact thinking about the wood rather than the juice. In any case, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the myrrh and aloe referenced by John were probably solid and would therefore be different from the aromas mentioned by Mark, which were liquid. One should therefore avoid conflating the two things. In an attempt to reconcile the difference between them, some have speculated that the solid aromas were pressed into a liquid oil.

As for the mixture of aloe and myrrh provided by Nicodemus, the quantity mentioned is large, both from the point of view of purchase and of transportation: 100 Roman pounds equates to around 32 kilograms. Some commentators have therefore suggested that John may have used a

⁴⁰ Matthew 26:6–12; Mark 14:3–8; Luke 7:36–47; John 12:1–7.

⁴¹ Matthew 27:57–28:1; Mark 15:42–16:2; Luke 23:50–24:1; John 19:38–20:1.

⁴² See Jean Langenheim, *Plant Resins* (Portland: Timber Press, 2003), 368–70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 448–50.

different unit of measure or that he was simply exaggerating with the intent of symbolising a messianic abundance or a regal burial. This brings to mind the funeral procession of Herod the Great, when the corpse was transported on a litter while 500 slaves and freemen carried aromas.⁴⁴

And the thought of Herod's funeral recalls a traditional custom referred to in the scriptures: that of transporting and offering aromas for the deceased, which would have been laid down on his bedding and burned in his honour.⁴⁵ The Mishnah also mentions some specific "spices of the dead," which the Palestinian Talmud explains were placed on or in front of the coffin and which the Babylonian Talmud says were used "to remove the bad smell."⁴⁶ The Tosefta also refers to the ancient use of carrying incense ahead of the coffins of those who died from intestinal problems, a custom that was then extended to everyone "because of the honour owing to the dead." This gesture evidently became widespread over time so that eventually the Babylonian Talmud no longer considered it a sign of honour, but merely a "deference to the living that suffer from intestinal disorders."⁴⁷ Thus, in addition to the anointment occurring during the preparation of the corpse, the Rabbinical texts also spoke of the custom of burning aromas with the deceased or of transporting them during a funeral procession, as well as of using liquid perfumes either on the body or in front of the coffin.⁴⁸

Should we therefore consider the possibility that Nicodemus brought his fragrances in order for them to be burned or sprinkled on the bench of the tomb or around the body, perhaps having them transported during the brief funeral procession and even sprinkled on that occasion? In that case we should take into account the tendency to ennoble Jesus' burial that emerges in the Gospel of John. Or were these fragrances perhaps intended to be part of the funeral goods? There is in fact evidence of a contemporary Jewish practice of leaving objects in the tombs, including jars, bowls, unguents,⁴⁹ whose function is unclear. Were these votive offerings? Materials used during the burial? Aromas to perfume the stale air in the sepulchre?

After telling us about Nicodemus, John affirms that Jesus' body was bound in linens "with the aromatic spices." Were these the mixture of aloe and myrrh just mentioned? They might have been, but we cannot completely exclude the possibility that the evangelist intended to distinguish between Nicodemus's mixture, brought for one of the aforementioned reasons, and other aromas (solid or liquid) used to perfume the sepulchral cloths: an informed reader would of course have been able to identify them without need for further explanation. It may be that the aromas were placed between the body and the fabric, or between the different layers of cloth, or else that the fabrics had been perfumed beforehand by them.

In the end, we have no precise idea about what John was attributing to Nicodemus with his mixture of aloe and myrrh, and neither do we know whether the aromas used when wrapping the body of Jesus inside the linens were the same or not, or whether they had been put in contact with the fabrics during the inhumation or before.

⁴⁴ Flavius, *Bellum Iudaicum* 1:671–73; *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 17:197–200.

⁴⁵ See 2 Chronicles 16:14; 21:19; Jeremiah 34:5; Flavius, *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 15:61; *Babylonian Talmud*, *Abodah Zarah* 11a.

⁴⁶ *Mishnah*, *Berakhot* 8:6; *Palestinian Talmud*, *Berakhot* 8:6 (61a); *Babylonian Talmud*, *Berakhot* 53a. On the Rabbinical sources, see Deborah Green, "Sweet Spices in the Tomb," in *Commemorating the Dead*, ed. Deborah Green and Laurie Brink (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 145–73.

⁴⁷ *Tosefta*, *Niddah* 9:16; *Babylonian Talmud*, *Mo'ed Qatan* 27b.

⁴⁸ *Tosefta*, *Sheqalim* 1:12; *Palestinian Talmud*, *Yoma* 8:1 (39a).

⁴⁹ See Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 378–86.

Were the aromatic spices brought by the women that Mark and Luke talk about poured on the body at the moment of burial? If this were so, we must conclude that they had no means or time to perform the operation at the right moment on the Friday evening, that is, before the burial, and thus had to leave Jesus, having in mind to return later to complete the task.

But the Gospels do not tell us this, nor do they speak about a provisional or incomplete burial. It may be that the anointing took place without the evangelists feeling a need to recall it explicitly, since it was a customary act. Or else maybe the perfumes that the women prepared to take to the tomb on Sunday morning were not meant to be the anointment of the deceased called for by the ritual preparation for burial. The women's visit on the third day may simply have been an act of piety performed by spreading aromatic oil on the already buried body of Jesus. In fact, "it would not be unnatural for the women to wish to make their own offering of devotion, even if they knew that someone else had already done what was required."⁵⁰ The verb *aléipho* ("anoint") could very well indicate the act of pouring oil on something, perhaps even on a body already wrapped in its burial cloths, without it needing to be poured directly onto the skin:⁵¹ a little like what the angels did for three days, according to the Testament of Abraham (first century), to the already wrapped body of the patriarch, and like the archangels did with the body of Adam that had already been dressed in three linens, according to the Apocalypse of Moses (first to third century).⁵²

Mark writes about spices (ἀρώματα), Luke about spices and perfumes (ἀρώματα καὶ μύρα) and immediately afterwards only about spices.⁵³ But when we distinguish between ἀρώματα and μύρα it is possible that we are differentiating between solid spices and oily liquid perfumes. This reading, however, seems to be invalidated by Mark, who uses the verb "to anoint" when referring to the ἀρώματα: but not invalidated if the oil had been mixed with spices to create a substance suitable for being poured or sprinkled on the corpse.

The visit made on the third day can also be understood in the light of the Rabbinical texts, which mention the custom of visiting the tomb in the days after the death, especially during the first three, following which the most intense phase of a family's mourning comes to an end. The Babylonian Talmud formulated a series of precise instructions for these first three days, establishing rules that had two prime purposes, namely those of regulating the behaviour of grieving parties in the post-burial period and declaring the irreversibility of the death.⁵⁴ For the first three days the absence of signs of putrefaction could in fact lead the grieving to think that the departed was not dead but only appeared so. According to the Palestinian Talmud,

for the first three days after death the soul floats above the body, thinking that it will return to the body. When the soul sees the body, that the appearance of the face has changed, it leaves the body and goes on its way.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Charles Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 464.

⁵¹ So thought François-Marie Braun, "Le Linceul de Turin et l'Évangile de Saint Jean," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 66 (1939): 1038–39; Josef Blinzler, "Die Grablegung Jesu in historischer Sicht," in *Resurrexit*, ed. Édouard Dhanis (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1974), 81.

⁵² *Testamentum Abrahæ* (long version) 20:10–11; *Apocalypsis Mosis* 40.

⁵³ Mark 16:1; Lk 23:56 and 24:1.

⁵⁴ See Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death*, 123–26.

⁵⁵ *Palestinian Talmud*, *Yebamot* 16:3 (83a), a saying attributed to the third quarter of the third century. Parallel passage in *Mo'ed Qatan* 3:5 (14a). In the *Paralipomena Ieremiae* (BHG 777) 9:10–13 it is said that Jeremiah came back to life three days after his death.

Thus the third day marked the moment when the family of the deceased could be certain of the demise of their loved one. The visit of the women to Jesus' tomb on the third day, that is the Sunday, can therefore be interpreted as an act of obedience towards a Jewish tradition, which has perhaps also been confirmed by the later *Semaḥot* treatise.⁵⁶

The Coffin, the Litter and the Problem of Time

Was Jesus taken from the cross to the tomb on a litter? Did he have a wooden coffin? We do have contemporary testimonies of these objects, and the Gospel of Luke mentions the coffin of another deceased but not of Jesus.⁵⁷ The Rabbinical texts lead us to believe that coffins were necessary for burial but archaeological findings relating to first-century Jerusalem are ambiguous: some coffins have been found, although they do not appear to have been used consistently.⁵⁸ The specific conditions in which Jesus was buried suggest that his body was moved when wrapped simply in burial cloth, and in any event there must have been some men acting as carriers.

It has sometimes been argued that Jesus' burial took place in a hurry due to the late hour and the supervening of the Sabbath, a festive day on which many activities were forbidden. In the remaining hours before nightfall those involved had to go to Pilate, await his response, arrange for the burial cloths, remove the body from the cross, cover and transport it, open the tomb and bury it. Luke informs us that at the end of all of this "the Sabbath was beginning."

It is certainly true that the fast-approaching Sabbath created some urgency and perhaps the need to find a nearby tomb to avoid a long funeral journey,⁵⁹ but it would not necessarily have created the same problem for the other practices involved in the burial, which were another matter. These two passages from the Mishnah are informative in this regard:

Whoever allows his deceased to stay unburied overnight transgresses a negative commandment. But if one kept a corpse overnight for its own honor, to bring a bier for it and shrouds, he does not transgress on its account.

[On Shabbat they can] prepare all that is needed for a corpse. They anoint and rinse it, on condition that they not move any limb of the corpse. They remove the mattress from under it. And they put it on sand so that it will keep. They tie the chin, not so that it will go up, but so that it will not droop.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Thus Braun, "Le Linceul de Turin," 1037. *Semaḥot* (8:1) also prescribed that "one may go out to the cemetery for thirty days to inspect the dead for a sign of life." There are proposals to amend "thirty" to "three" (for example Safrai and Stern, *The Jewish People*, 784–85) since after 30 days such an inspection would make very little sense.

⁵⁷ Luke 7:14.

⁵⁸ *Mishnah*, *Berakhot* 3:1; *Mo'ed Qatan* 1:6; *Babylonian Talmud*, *Mo'ed Qatan* 27a–b. Images of some Judaic coffins from the first century can be seen in Hadas, תישעה קברים מימי הבית השני, 6:54. See Amos Kloner and Boaz Zissu, *The Necropolis of Jerusalem* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 103–4.

⁵⁹ This is also said in John 19:42: "And so, because it was the Jewish day of preparation and the tomb was nearby, they placed Jesus's body there."

⁶⁰ *Mishnah*, *Sanhedrin* 6:5 and *Shabbat* 23:5.

If this practice was already in force at the time of Jesus—that is, at a time when such rules were the subject of debate, even if they had not been written down in a definitive form—then we have no reason to consider why at least this part of the funeral operations had to have been hasty and incomplete. It is true that the prohibition on moving the limbs prevented the manipulations of a body typical of burial, but since in Jesus' case there had not been a funeral with the transportation of the body and subsequent inhumation, once his body had been laid in the tomb the completion of the burial could have taken place in the evening. Nor would all this have taken an inordinate amount of time: according to the Acts of the Apostles, when Ananias died he was buried in the space of three hours.⁶¹ If Jesus died around three in the afternoon, sunset would come just four hours later: there was not much time, but neither was there too little.

The preparations—which were usually carried out at home but on this occasion had to be done near the tomb, or at least not far from the cross—meant that the body had to be anointed, perhaps washed, and wrapped in linen before burial. The more recent rabbinic custom also calls for the face to be shaved and the hair to be cut.⁶²

The New Tomb

The new tomb in which Jesus was placed is an indirect confirmation of the ignominious nature of his burial: a tomb in which nobody had ever been buried (thus an empty one)⁶³ was the only acceptable compromise to make. In this way burial in a cemetery for criminals was avoided and, in addition, a breach of the rule against burying a condemned man in a family tomb along with innocents was averted. According to Josef Blinzler rather than a compromise, this was an out-and-out necessity:

If there had been enough time Jesus would have been buried in the official cemetery for criminals. Since after the removal of the body from the cross and its preparation for burial, the day had begun to decline—and with the sunset the Sabbath would begin, during which no work could be done—transporting it to an official cemetery some distance away was no longer possible, and thus a nearby rock tomb was chosen instead. This was not against any legal scruple, since the tomb had not yet been used so there was no need to fear bringing any dishonour to the pious deceased.⁶⁴

The choice of a new tomb would also serve, later on, to counter the claim that the story of the discovery of the empty tomb was due to an error by the women and the apostles in identifying the corpse, which could only have happened in an already populated tomb. Thus despite the dishonourable torture of the cross, Jesus was able to receive a burial, and there are no grounds in

⁶¹ Acts 5:6–10.

⁶² *Babylonian Talmud, Mo'ed Qatan* 8b.

⁶³ Some Biblical manuscripts in fact substitute *καὶνόν* (new) with *κενόν* (empty). The pronunciation is the same.

⁶⁴ Blinzler, "Die Grablegung Jesu," 101–2.

any of the texts to believe that he did not.⁶⁵ But this was a dishonourable burial, without a procession, flutes, prayers, lamentations and public demonstrations of mourning.

In conclusion, the evangelists demonstrated good knowledge of Jewish customs and their stories are broadly consistent. One notes, however, an increasing tendency to stress the fact that the body of Jesus was not thrown among the criminals, but received a burial, if not quite sumptuous then at least dignified. A process of progressive ennoblement of details concerning the burial is clearly evident: Mark and Luke's burial cloth becomes, in Matthew, "pure"; for Matthew the tomb belonged personally to Joseph, while for John and the Gospel of Peter it was located in a garden, like that of the kings of Israel.⁶⁶ John adds the presence of Nicodemus and the aromas, and the Gospel of Peter speaks of the washing of the body and of the women who intended to carry out the ritual lamentations. John, it is clear, describes a burial that is more than dignified, and in him is realised what Raymond Brown has defined as a "triumphal orientation . . . as the culmination of the enthroning crucifixion."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ In response to those who believe that a person condemned to death was necessarily destined to remain unburied or to be placed in a mass grave, see Craig Evans, "Jewish Burial Traditions and the Resurrection of Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3 (2005): 233–48; Craig Evans, "The Family Buried Together Stays Together," in *The World of Jesus and the Early Church*, ed. Craig Evans (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2011), 87–96; John Granger Cook, "Crucifixion and Burial," *New Testament Studies* 57 (2011): 193–213, in particular against the opinions expressed by John Dominic Crossan, who in fact repeated what had been written a century earlier by Alfred Loisy, *Les Évangiles synoptiques* (Ceffonds: chez l'auteur, 1907), 223. Crossan believes that Jesus ended up in a mass grave at the mercy of wild animals and that the whole history of his burial is merely the result of the pious wishful thinking of his disciples.

⁶⁶ See 2 King 21:18–26.

⁶⁷ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1278.