

## Essay on the Biblical Basis for Cremation

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### Types of Burial

Historically, there have been at least five ways in which human beings have been buried. The most common burial was “earth burial,” where the individual body was buried in the ground or in some cave or tomb. Another common practice was water burial, when the body was placed on a raft and set out to sea, or cast into a river, or in the case of the Merchant Marines or Navy, the body was slipped off the ship into the water. The third form of burial is called “burial by fire,” in which the body is burned and the ashes scattered. A fourth type of burial is related to earth burial, and it is called mummification. The Egyptians particularly buried the bodies of nobility and rulers in pyramids, embalming the bodies and covering them with cloth in order to ensure the least amount of decay. These processes virtually kept the bodies in a lifelike form for centuries. Yet a fifth form of burial practiced in some parts of Africa and New Guinea is for the body to be raised on a platform in the jungle of the ground, probably to keep marauding animals from bothering it. The body is covered with a tar-like substance to prohibit decomposition.

In the Bible, the primary form of burial is earth burial. The one instance of cremation occurs in *I Samuel 31:13* where Saul and Jonathan were cremated by the Philistines and later their remains were returned to Jerusalem for burial. (*See II Samuel 21:14*)

### Places for Burial

Most burials occurred in caves outside of the city or, in some cases, a manmade cave was tunneled out of the side of a hill. This type of cave was known as a tomb. Archeological excavation has revealed that ancient cultures used these natural caves or tombs over and over again, and that after natural decomposition occurred, fresh bodies would be piled in the cave and the bones shoved aside.

The first burial mentioned in the Bible is the burial of Sarah in the cave of Machpelah. (*Genesis 23:19*) Caves were frequently used to bury people. (*See Deuteronomy 34:6* for the burial of Joshua) Gardens were also favorite spots for burial. (*See II Kings 21:18-26*) Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus to be buried in a garden adjacent his house. (*See John 19:41*) Apparently, gardens are very prominent burial spots in the Bible.

The burial near a home or sometimes even in a home is not unusual. (*See I Samuel 25:1, I Kings 2:34, II Chronicles 33:20*) The one instance of the use of a coffin mentioned in the Old Testament is *Genesis 50:26* when a coffin was made for Joseph. Most of the time, the body was simply placed in the ground or in the cave without the benefit of a coffin. Generally, shrouds and linens were the normal accompaniment for burial.

The Egyptian culture adopted the process of embalming, but in Biblical times the body was not embalmed. Anointing with various perfumes and spices was practiced, but normally the body was buried within one day after the death of the individual.

The early Egyptian cultures 4,000 B.C. established the practice of embalming, and also used sarcophagi, very large ornate carved wooden coffins inlaid with gold, and brass, and sometimes jewels, depicting the life of the individual laid to rest. This, however, was not the practice of the

Biblical people, although the Egyptian pharaohs who enslaved the Israelite people did practice this type of burial.

In contemporary practices today in Asia virtually all bodies are cremated. The type of burial usually tends to follow the practice of faith in a culture. Sometimes a revolution in faith will change the custom for burial. In Japan, up until the 8<sup>th</sup> century, almost all burials were by earth. But after Japan became a Buddhist state, virtually all burials were by cremation, and in Asia virtually all bodies are cremated today. Cremation first occurred in the years 4,000 to 1,000 B.C. and was practiced by the Greeks on the Greek peninsula. The bodies of soldiers killed in battle were cremated, and their ashes were shipped back to Athens for burial by the Greeks.

### **The Concept of Dust**

There is a strong prejudice in the Bible that the human body was conceived from dust. In Genesis 2:7 we read that God formed man out of dust. Psalm 22:29, Psalm 103:14 and Psalm 104:29, all reiterate this concept. Ecclesiastes 12:7 and Daniel 12:2 indicate that we were conceived from dust and that we return to dust. Genesis 3:19 also has the quote from God after the fall of Adam and Eve, "To dust you shall return."

From this Biblical perspective it does seem that the entire understanding of the human composition is that we were derived from the dust of the earth, and that we are destined to become dust once more.

### **The Concept of the Bodily Resurrection**

In the New Testament there is a strong Biblical evidence for the truth of a general bodily resurrection at the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is understood that at the second coming of Jesus Christ, those who are asleep in Him will be raised from the dead and shall be reconstituted with a new body. (*I Corinthians 15:52, Revelation 20:4-5, II Thessalonians 2:1, I Thessalonians 4:12, II Corinthians 4:14*) In these passages we read that the dead shall sleep and then be raised again with a new perfect body. They shall go through a judgment and shall be with the Lord and will be in an eternal state of bodily resurrection. These bodies are reconstituted from the dust.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the Biblical understanding of burial is earth burial. The only instance of cremation was in the case of Jonathan and Saul, which occurred because of the violence done to them by a pagan army. However, there is no Biblical quotation which prohibits the practice of cremation. There is a very strong belief that the human body will return to the dust of the earth. Based on this concept, and the understanding that through the miracle of the bodily resurrection all for those who have been dead for eons will be reconstituted, I see no reason why the practice of cremation would be unbiblical or unchristian practice by those faithful people who seek to follow Christ in their life.