

Death & Burials



Burial in the East is not nearly the expensive affair that it is in the West. The Easterners believe that since the soul has departed, the body that is left knows nothing anyway, so it is not thought necessary to spend money on it.

A typical Eastern burial is described in the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes. This is the chapter which begins:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

Most of the rest of the chapter is a continuation of this thought, describing old age and death:

While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble [a figure of speech meaning one's feet], and the strong men shall bow themselves [knees], and the grinders cease because they are few [teeth], and those that look out of the windows be darkened [eyes].

And the doors shall be shut in the streets [ears], when the sound of the grinding is low [not much grain to grind for meal] and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird [even a bird call frightens him], and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low [his voice is no longer strong.]

Also *when* they shall be afraid of *that which is* high [afraid of falling from high places], and fears *shall be* in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish [the almond tree in bloom looks like a white-headed old person], and the grasshopper shall be a burden [weakness of flesh; unable to do much] desire shall fail [no appetite], because man goeth to his long home [grave], and the mourners go about the streets.

The mourners going about the streets is indeed an apt description, since the whole town turns out whenever a funeral is being held. Easterners think they do a service to God in participating; even a prince will attend the funeral of a beggar of his town for this reason. Jesus said [Luke 9:59], "Follow me," and the young man replied, "Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father." (This is an old saying which means, my father is old and I do not know when he will die; let me see him buried before I come.) Jesus replied, "Let the dead bury the dead." This is a mistranslation and should read, "Let the town bury the dead," a very understandable saying when one realizes that the whole town does take part in funerals.

The body is dressed in the best clothes the person owned: if a woman, she wears her wedding clothes; if a bishop, he is buried in his robes, and so forth. The body is taken on a rude stretcher like bier (also called a wheel) to the cemetery. There are several main pall-bearers but the other men make it a point to assist sometime during the trip to the graveyard. This is the origin of the saying, "Put your shoulder to the wheel."

The eldest son is of great importance in the burial. If a man does not have a son, he adopts one for this purpose. This son carries a clay bowl gilded with gold on the outside and filled with burning coals. This bowl is broken by the son at the head of the grave to symbolize the soul departing the body.

The only woman who may accompany the body is the wife, if there is one, for she goes to the grave to loosen the silver cord she received as a bride and put it in the grave with the body. (Paul said, "If a woman be loosed from her husband..."). She must then immediately leave, because the men who have been bearing the bier must go to the fountain of the cemetery and wash themselves. The pitchers which are used are then broken. The women wash at home, and wash the whole house, collecting the clothes of the deceased and burning them.

With these few words of explanation, you can now read the next verse with understanding [Ecclesiastes 12:6]:

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

And the closing phrase to the thought [Ecclesiastes 12:7]:

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return to God who gave it.

It seems to me that Hindus know how to die more gracefully than some Christians. The Hindu believes that dying is just like changing a suit of clothes, and that when he dies, he will immediately be given another body. A Hindu seems to have a premonition as to when he is going to die, so he puts on his good clothes, lies down on the bed and calls the family to the bedside to give them a final blessing. The Holy Book is brought and a suitable passage is read. Then he raises his hand in blessing, and expires. It is the

honor and duty of the eldest son to close the eyes. In Genesis 46:4 we find God promising Jacob:

I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up *again*;
and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes.

The son who closes his father's eyes in death is the son which inherits the father's place in the family. Sometimes the father designates his heir before the hour of his death; however, this is done by putting a white robe on the son and laying the keys of the household upon his shoulder. Doubtless this was the significance of the robe which Joseph wore, and which infuriated the older brothers so much. A further reference to the keys on the shoulder may be found in Isaiah 22:22: "And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder ..." speaking, of course, of Christ who received the key from his father in heaven.

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