

IN ACCORDANCE WITH JEWISH BURIAL CUSTOM,
THE BODY OF JESUS WAS NOT WASHED

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*They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, following the Jewish burial custom. (John 19:40). (J. B.)*¹

Introduction

It is the purpose of this paper to present evidence that will clarify the controversy that has arisen with regard to whether or not the body of Christ was washed prior to burial "following the Jewish burial custom".

The controversy has arisen among those individuals who have studied the Shroud of Turin, a cloth alleged by some authorities to be the true burial cloth of Jesus Christ. Some proponents of the Shroud state that Jesus was not washed according to the Jewish custom of washing the body prior to burial because the body of the crucified man seen on the Shroud shows numerous blood flows on the body. In opposition to this view, some authorities believe that the body of Christ was washed prior to his burial for it is general knowledge that Jews normally wash their dead prior to burial.

Ian Wilson's book, *The Shroud of Turin*, outlines this controversy succinctly. Quoting several references, he states that many scripture scholars insist that Jesus was washed.² These scholars base their assumption that Christ was washed prior to burial on John's statement, "following the Jewish burial custom ". They back this up with the fact that the Jewish burial custom states that normally the deceased is washed prior to burial.^{3 4}

Ian Wilson then explores the other side of the issue because the man in the Shroud of Turin has not been washed. He does this because in his words, "Only on the view that Jesus was not washed can the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin be upheld". He based his argument on the scriptural text which states the imminence of the Sabbath after the death of Christ. Because the Sabbath was so near at hand, there simply was not enough time to wash the body prior to burial.⁵

Other supporters of the authenticity of the Shroud have also taken this same line of thinking. For example, Wuenschel states: "When the

body was finally taken down from the cross, the Sabbath was imminent and there was no time for the customary burial rites. The disciples could carry out at most a hasty, provisional burial ... Neither can we assume that the body was washed, for the ritual ablution of the dead had to be done with warm water, perfumed with aromatic spices. Warm water could hardly have been provided in those last hurried moments outside the walls of the city—no more than the ointments which were certainly lacking".⁶

Definitions

In attempting to resolve the issue of whether or not Jesus was washed prior to burial, it is important that we begin by defining two important areas: first, a description of the body of Jesus which was being prepared for burial and, second, a complete definition of the Jewish burial custom as it relates to Christ who died a violent death.

First, the description of the body of Christ at death can be fairly well estimated from John's Gospel in the New Testament:

Pilate then had Jesus taken away and scourged; and after this, the soldiers twisted some thorns in a crown and put it on his head ... John 19: 1-2 (J.B.)

They then took charge of Jesus, and carrying his own cross he went out of the city to the place of the skull ... where they crucified him with two others ... John 19: 17-18 (J.B.)

When they came to Jesus, they found he was already dead, and so instead of breaking his legs one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water. John 19: 33-34 (J.B.)

Unless I see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe. John 20: 25. (J.B.)

Thus we have a body that had been scourged and had small puncture wounds of the head. There were nail wounds of the hands and very likely the feet, as well as an even larger wound of the side. One would have to assume that a fairly large amount of blood would have accumulated on the body during life with an uncertain but definite amount flowing from these wounds after death. Probably the greatest amount of blood flowed from the piercing of the side after death as described by John. In summary, we have the description of the body of a man who died a violent death by means of crucifixion and who had upon his body his own blood which flowed from his wounds prior to and after his death.

Second, a definition of the Jewish burial custom pertaining to those who died a violent death can be found in Maurice Lamm's book, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*:

- "7. The blood that flows at the time of death may not be washed away. When there is other blood on the body that flowed during lifetime, from wounds or as a result of an operation, the washing and taharah are performed in the usual manner.
- "8. Where the deceased died instantaneously through violence or accident, and his body and garments are completely spattered with blood, no washing or taharah is performed. The body is placed in the casket without the clothes being removed. Only a sheet is wrapped around it, over the clothes. The blood is part of the body and may not be separated from it in death.
10. Where blood flows continually after death, the source of the flow is covered and not washed. The clothes which contain the blood that flowed after death are placed in the casket at the feet".⁷

Lamm's work basically paraphrases the laws found in the *Code of Jewish Law* from the 16th Century; the following quotes are from the more recent abridged version of the Code:

- "9. One who fell and died instantly, if his body was bruised and blood flowed from the wound, and there is apprehension that the blood of the soul was absorbed in his clothes, he should not be cleansed, but they should inter him in his garments and boots, but above his garments they should wrap a sheet which is called Sobeb. It is customary to dig the earth at the spot where he fell, if blood be there or nearby, and all that earth upon which there is blood should be buried with him. He should be buried in those garments only which he wore when he fell, but if there were blood stains on other garments which he was not wearing, likewise if he were placed upon pillows and sheets whilst the blood was flowing these need not be buried, but they should be thoroughly washed until no trace of blood remains, and the water should be poured into his grave. If, however, the one who fell and died did not bleed, they should remove his garments and cleanse him, and dress him in shrouds, as in the case of other dead people ...
10. Even if blood flowed from his body but it had ceased, and they had undressed him, after which he revived and lived for a few days and then died, whereupon he should be cleansed and shrouds be prepared for him, although he be stained by his blood still he should be cleansed, for the blood which he had lost in his lifetime does not matter, as we are only concerned with the blood which one loses at death, perhaps this is the blood of the soul, or perhaps the blood of the soul became mixed therewith".⁸

This section is very specific and is an exception to the normal custom of simply washing the dead. In this case, if death is by violence and blood flows at the time of death, the victim does not undergo the ritual of washing. Therefore, with regard to the burial of Christ, it can be inferred in John 19:40 that the body of Christ was not washed prior to his burial but that it was simply placed in "linen cloths" and buried according to this specific Jewish custom.

At this point, from the Shulchan Aruch (*Code of Jewish Law*), we know that the custom existed in the 16th Century. The question now arises whether or not this custom can be traced to the time of Jesus. We could infer that this was the case because such customs do not change easily, but this would be far from satisfactory. We will, therefore, attempt to reconstruct from biblical and rabbinical writings what indeed was the custom of the Jews regarding the burial of an individual who died a violent death during the time of Christ.

*The Importance of Blood to the Jew
of the Old Testament*

Our attempt will be to first present a broad based understanding of the role of blood during the time of the Old Testament. We begin with Genesis:

"... I give you everything, with this exception: you must not eat flesh with life, that is to say blood, in it. I will demand an account of your life-blood. I will demand an account from every beast and from man. I will demand an account of every man's life from his fellow man. He who sheds man's blood, shall have his blood shed by man, for in the image of God man was made". Genesis 9:3-6 (J.B.)

Thus is the beginning of God's covenant with man asking man to make an account of his life's blood. Again, we see the importance of blood in Leviticus:

"If any man of the house of Israel or a stranger living among you eats blood of any kind, I will set my face against the man who has eaten the blood and will outlaw him from his people. The life of the flesh is in the blood. This blood I myself have given you to perform the rite of atonement for your lives at the altar; for it is blood that atones for a life. That is why I have said to the sons of Israel: None of you nor any stranger living among you shall eat blood". Leviticus 17:10-12. (J.B.)

The above quotes give us a basis for understanding the importance of blood in the Jewish community from early biblical history. We see this concern for blood continuing in Jewish thought as reflected in various rabbinical teachings.

Rabbinical Works Concerning Blood

As noted above in the earliest books of the Bible, blood and lifeblood have long been of great concern to the Jews and, as a consequence, they developed some very specific and rigid customs relating to this subject. We find these traditions finally written down in the early rabbinical works of the Jews in a book known as the Mishnah. "The Mishnah may be defined as a deposit of four centuries of Jewish religious and cultural activity in Palestine, beginning at some uncertain date (possibly during the earlier half of the second century B.C.) and ending with the close of the second century A.D."⁹

As for the definition of life-blood mentioned in the Old Testament, a note in the Mishnah defines this term by referring directly to Leviticus 7:11. From this passage, "... it is inferred that the blood which issues at the moment of death (which is what the Mishnah means by "life-blood") is the blood that makes atonement".¹⁰

At this point we must also define the term "unclean" as used in the Mishnah in order to understand its meaning with relation to blood. The word unclean is used with regard to many subjects. Uncleanness relates to the things that if touched by, carried by, or overshadow (lie above and cast a shadow upon) someone, the individual is rendered unclean which means that he cannot enter the Temple for a specific period of time and must, through the appropriate ritual of cleansing, become clean again so that he may enter the Temple and worship. With regard to a corpse and what is considered unclean, the Mishnah is very specific: "A man conveys uncleanness (as a corpse) only after his soul has gone forth ..."¹¹

Furthermore, there are many levels of uncleanness that carry different rules for becoming clean; but our interest lies with what is known as the first order of uncleanness with regard to a corpse. All that is contained in this order renders one unclean by all means of contact (touching, overshadowing, carrying) and, therefore, should be buried with the corpse. Many of the specifics that are contained in this first order of uncleanness are summarized in the following passage from the Mishnah:

"Because of these uncleannesses must the Nazirite cut off his hair: (uncleanness contracted from) a corpse, or an olive's bulk of corpse-dregs, or a ladle full of corpse-mould, or the backbone or the skull of any (severed) member of a corpse, or any (severed) member of a living man that still bears its proper flesh, or a half-kab of bones, or a half-log of blood, whether (the uncleanness is contracted) from contact with them or carrying them or by overshadowing; or (uncleanness contracted from) a barley-corn's bulk of bone whether by contact or carrying. Because of these a Nazirite must cut off his hair and be sprinkled on the third and seventh day; and it makes the preceding days of none effect and he may not begin to count afresh until

he is become clean and has brought his offerings".¹²

Our main concern is that of blood. The Mishnah deals quite specifically with the type and quantity of blood found on the body of a corpse as mentioned in the following quote: "A quarter-log of blood, a quarter-log of mingled blood from the one corpse ...".¹³ The definition of a log is the contents of 6 eggs, therefore, a quarter-log would be the contents of 1½ eggs, approximately a small cup of wine.¹⁴ This smaller amount of blood flowing from the body from the time of death also conveys a first order of uncleanness and should be buried with the corpse.

The definition of mingled blood is more complex and is as follows:

"... But R. Ishmael says: (Blood of which) a quarter-log (issued) while he was yet alive and a quarter after his death, and a quarter-log was taken from the two together. R. Eleazar b.R. Judah says: "These both alike are but as water. What counts as "mingled blood"? If beneath a man that was crucified, whose blood gushes out, there was found a quarter-log of blood, it is unclean; but if beneath a corpse, whose blood drips out, there was found a quarter-log of blood, this is clean. R. Judah says: It is not so, but the blood that gushes out is clean and that which drips out is unclean.

"Note 1. According to one view, in the intermittent dripping of blood the uncleanness of each drop in turn is nullified by its smallness in quantity; therefore, the whole quarter-log is clean. According to the other view, the slowness of its dripping is proof that it issued after death, and it is therefore unclean".¹⁵

Further reference to mingled blood is seen in the Talmud, which is a commentary on the Mishnah. It states:

"... What then is meant by "mingled blood"? If a quarter of a log of blood issued from a slain man both while he was still alive and when he was dead and the flow had not yet ceased and it is doubtful whether the greater part issued while he was alive and the lesser part when he was dead or whether the lesser part issued while he was alive and the greater part when he was dead, such is mingled blood ... R. Simeon ruled: If the blood of a man crucified upon the beam was flowing slowly to the ground, and a quarter of a log of blood was found under him, it is unclean. R. Judah declared it clean, since it might be held that the drop of death remained on the beam ...".¹⁶

The above quotes describe and quantitate mingled blood which also conveys the first order of uncleanness and should be buried with the corpse.

So, in summary, the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud and later the *Code of Jewish Law* enlighten our thinking with regard to Jewish customs by expanding our understanding of their concern with lifeblood. The Mishnah and Talmud specifically quantitate the minimum amount of blood which is necessary to become unclean (a quarter-log of blood) and the period at which it becomes unclean (at the time of death). This blood is described as an uncleanness of the first order and should be buried with the corpse.

In the case of Jesus who died a violent death, it can be stated that there was blood on his body that flowed during life and after death. Furthermore, as to the quantity of blood that flowed after death, an accumulation of at least a quarter-log of blood can be easily inferred by John's description of Christ's wounds, especially when considering the wound on the side. The blood on his body was, therefore, mingled blood which could not have been washed off the body because it had to be buried with the corpse in order to comply with Jewish custom.

We can now go on to study comments from individual rabbinical authors who have commented on this subject over the centuries from the time of Christ.

*Rabbinical Comments on the Burial of a Victim
of a Violent Death*

Turning to specific rabbinical authors who have commented on the burial of a victim of a violent death, two key individuals are presented: Rabbi Maharil of the 14th Century and Rabbi Radak (David Kimchi) of the 10th Century.

Maharar Shalom in his Collections of Maharil, translated from the original Hebrew, states the following:

"About one woman who fell from a roof and died due to her fall, 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 if a quarter-log of blood came out of her a priest should not rend himself unclean to her. I found in the answer of Maharil, that this rabbinic regulation deals with a slain man, that he is to be buried as he is found in his clothes for there is a possibility a quarter-log of blood came out of him".¹⁷

From the above we can see that the Maharil has interpreted the information we have just discussed in the Mishnah and Talmud in the same way as we have outlined, and specifically states the fact that if a quarter-log of blood flows from a slain man, he must be buried with it. This is again stated more specifically in the 16th Century *Code of Jewish Law* as previously quoted regarding the burial of a slain man. The custom, therefore, has not changed from the time of Christ, but is simply stated more clearly in later works.

Radak, a Rabbi of the 10th century, comments on the custom of not

washing those who die a violent death by referring to Isaiah:

"But you have been cast out as an abominable branch clothed with slain man's clothes, pierced by a sword, those going down to the stone pit as a carcass under trodden feet". (Isaiah 14:19) (Bible O.T. Hebrew)

His comments, translated from the original Hebrew, are as follows: On "as an abominable branch" Radak states: "When a man plants plants and some of them do not grow well, he will uproot them and throw them out. So with the clothes of a slain man which are soiled by blood a man shall throw it out. Because a slain man is clothed as such, man will not wash him or clothe him; this because he is a slain man and pierced by a sword".¹⁸

On "those going down to the stone pit", Radak states: "That the clothes of a slain person are thrown down the stone pit as the slain person who is a carcass trodden by feet among the slain. So you will be thrown out as those clothes".¹⁹

Summary and Conclusions

We encountered a remarkable controversy with regard to whether Jesus was washed or not washed prior to burial. This controversy involved the Shroud of Turin as well as a verse in the Gospel of John stating that Christ was buried according to the Jewish custom. The proponents of the Shroud of Turin argued that Christ was not washed because of the imminence of the Sabbath, whereas other individuals stated that the body was definitely washed because of the normal Jewish burial custom of washing the dead prior to burial.

In pursuing the literature further and reviewing the Bible and rabbinical works, we found it is indeed true that Jews are washed prior to their burial, but to this rule there is an exception. If a man dies a violent death and blood is shed, the blood is not washed from the body. He is simply buried in a white linen sheet with his clothes not removed for fear of losing blood that has flowed from the man at the time of death. This blood flowing at death is considered life-blood.

Therefore, from this study we have found that John is indeed precise in his description of Christ's burial. He is simply buried according to the Jewish custom. His body was not washed. The blood remained on the corpse which was wrapped in "linen cloths" and buried.

NOTES:

- 1 Alexander Jones, ed., *The Jerusalem Bible*.
- 2 Ian Wilson, *The Shroud of Turin*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978, p. 40 & p. 255, Chapter V, Note 2.
- 3 Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. New York: Jonathan David, Publishers, p. 6
- 4 Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933. Second Division, Moed. Tractate: Shabbath, 23⁵. p. 120.
- 5 Wilson, *Shroud*, pp. 40-41.
- 6 Edward A. Wuenschel, *Self-Portrait of Christ*. New York: Holy Shroud Guild, 1957, p. 47.
- 7 Lamm, *Jewish Way in Death*, p. 244.
- 8 Gansfried, Solomon. *Code of Jewish Law* (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch), trans. by Hyman E. Goldin. New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1927, vol. IV, Ch. CXCVII. Laws Relating to Purification (Tahara). Nos. 9 & 10 pp. 99-100.
- 9 Danby, *The Mishnah*, Introduction, p. XIII.
- 10 Danby, *The Mishnah*. Fifth Division, Kodashim. Tractate: Zebahim, 3¹ n. 4, p. 471.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Sixth Division, Tohoroth. Tractate: Oholoth, 1⁶, p. 651.
- 12 *Ibid.*, Third Division, Nashim. Tractate: Nazir, 7², p. 289-290.
- 13 *Ibid.*, Sixth Division, Tohoroth. Tractate: Oholoth, 2², p. 651.
- 14 *Ibid.*, Appendix II: Money, Weights, and Measures, p. 798.
- 15 *Ibid.*, Sixth Division, Tohoroth. Tractate: Oholoth, 3⁵, p. 653-654.
- 16 I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud*, London: Soncino Press, 1948, Seder Tohoroth. Tractate: Niddah, 7^{1a}, 7^{1b}, pp. 494-495.
- 17 Maharar Shalom, ed., *Collections of Maharil, Passage from Maharar Shalom from Austria*. Jerusalem: Maharil Book, 1969.
- 18 Bible O.T. Hebrew, Mikraot Gedolot. Jerusalem: Schocken, 1938, Isaiah 14:19, Rabbi Kimchi (Radak) Commentary, p. 29.
- 19 *Ibid.*, Isaiah 14:19.

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(All Hebrew translations completed by Rev. Daniel Klutstein.)

FURTHER STUDIES ON THIS SUBJECT:

Alfred O'Rahilly: *The Burial of Christ and Jewish Burial; The Irish Ecclesiastical Review*, pg. 125, "Among the Arabs ...those who fell in battle and martyrs were not washed but were buried in their blood." pg. 496: "If (a corpse) has been allowed to remain overnight for purposes of honor, to procure a coffin or grave-clothes for him, there is no transgression." *Sanhedrin* VI, 5 & the *Siphre* on Dt. 21:23. pg. 314: Entaphiazien means to "prepare for burial", not "to bury", which is *thaptou*.

La Santa Sindone nelle Ricerche Moderne, ed. by Pietro Scotti, S.D.B. pg 142: Alberto Vaccari cites De Gara, 1576, "one cuts the hair"; and pg. 207: Antonio Cojazzi, "the original Greek says 'prepare for burial', not 'buried' ". The Bobbio Codex has "*ad condiendum sepulturae*" at Jn. 10:40.

Edward A. Wuenschel: *The Shroud of Turin and the Burial of Christ*, in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. VII, 1945 & Vol VIII, 1946, pg 149: "to prepare the dead for burial-unquestionably the meaning in John's context."

Mons. Giulio Ricci: *L'Uomo della Sindone é Gesù*, Edizioni Studium, Rome 1969, pgs. 204 & 208: Ricci quotes *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1940: "The body [in complete ritual] was washed...the hair was cut before burial." Ricci remarks, "The hair should have been cut in the final phase of burial, phase which did not come to pass because of the Resurrection."

Joseph Blinzler: *Le Proces de Jesus*: Maison MAME, France, 1962, pg 439 & notes 25, 55.