

BURY OR BURN?

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

I Corinthians 15:55

Introduction:

"The obituary columns of our newspapers make it abundantly clear that, in many quarters, cremation rather than burial is rapidly becoming the normal mode of disposing of the bodies of the dead. The Believer must come face to face with the issues involved in the practice. It is urged upon him by some that hygienic considerations in lands of ever-increasing population make cremation highly desirable, if not absolutely essential, and by others that there is nothing in biblical teaching and Christian theology that conflicts with it."¹

"In 1981, cremation accounted for about 80 percent of dispositions of the dead by the Japanese, 70 percent by the British and 10 percent by Americans. The ratio of cremation to burials in the U.S.A. is rising about 1 percent a year."²

By 1997, "21 percent of all deaths in the U.S.A. were followed by cremation nationwide." The crematoriums were busiest in the following states--"Hawaii led with 56 percent of the dead cremated, Alaska 53 percent, Nevada 50 percent, and Vermont 43 percent."³

I. THE RIGHTEOUS BURIAL

"It is the practice of the Jews that lies at the root of the Believer's custom. John's Evangel includes the phrase, 'as the manner of the Jews is to bury' (19:40), and the entire mass of Old and New Testament witness constitutes the strength of the argument for Believer's burial as against the modern plea for cremation. It was the spread of belief in the Evangel throughout Europe that ended the practice of cremation as it was found among Greeks, Romans, and 'barbarians'. The doctrines of redemption (including that of the body) and of resurrection, backed by age-old Jewish custom, caused all who confessed Messiah and embraced His teachings to desire interment at death, and this became universal in the Assemblies. In the early centuries of the Believers era, 'it was to outrage this well-known Believer sentiment that persecutors sometimes burned the bodies of the martyrs and

¹ Bible League Quarterly-Oct-Dec 1980

² Cremation Becomes More Acceptable--Houston Chronicle 2/6/81

³ The Baptist Challenge--July 1997

scattered their ashes in mockery of the resurrection".¹

II. INTRODUCTION TO BRITAIN

We may well ask when and why the idea of cremation of the dead reappeared, and we shall virtually confine our attention to Britain although progress was rapid on the Continent of Europe. It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that cremation found its advocates. A few Italian chemists and physicians appear to have ventilated the idea in their own country, and it was in Italy that progress was first made, a major landmark being the legalization of the practice in 1877. Garinbaldi,, the best-known Italian of his age, was himself cremated when he died in 1882. His will arranged for this. In England, Sir Henry Thompson, a professor of surgery of London University, was chiefly responsible for founding the first cremation society in the land in 1874, and he became its first president. Land was purchased for a crematorium, but the Home Office was hostile to the scheme and for a time it remained in abeyance. In 1884 a father was indicted for attempting to burn the body of his child instead of having it buried. The legal judgment that resulted laid it down that the father's act was not an offense against English law, unless it could be proved that a public nuisance had been committed. The decision greatly encouraged the Cremation Society to go ahead with its plans. Its propaganda found support in some quarters and in 1902 an Act of Parliament gave definite legalization to the practice of cremation, while at the same time guaranteeing exemption from participation for any minister who found it repugnant to his convictions. Since then progress has been steady.

"We may well note the fact that in Britain support for cremation began and increased at a time when a liberal theology had invaded the assemblies.

"It is not unworthy of note that Sir Henry Thompson, who championed the cause of cremation until his death in 1904, was himself an agnostic of a most pronounced kind."¹

"Cremation is a heathen custom, meaning a practice of people who do not have the Bible, or else have rejected its authority. And it is a frightening sign when professing Believers adopt heathen customs."⁴

"The first crematorium in the United States was established in Washington,

¹ Bible League Quarterly--Oct-Dec 1980

¹ Bible League Quarterly--Oct-Dec 1980

⁴ Cremation--What Does God Think?--David Cloud

PA in 1876."⁵

III. CREMATION DESCRIBED

"Our modern crematories are specially constructed buildings erected for the purpose of the incineration of human bodies, having individual compartments which are heated to a temperature that quickly reduces the body to ashes. The usual committal service is held in the crematory chapel, after which the friends leave. The casket is then placed in one of the compartments, the shape of an oversized coffin, then the cremation comes intense, the body appears to be very much alive as it jumps about, which is the result of the contraction and expansion of the muscles.

The body is reduced to ashes in a white heat of 2,000 degrees F. in a few hours. In the more recently build crematories, it is claimed, this is done in less than one hour. When cooled, the ashes are put into an urn. The remains of a body weighting about 140 pounds would be not more than three to four pounds of ashes."⁶

IV. THE BIBLICAL POSITION

"We again emphasize the fact, plain to all, that burial has been the age-old practice of the Jews and Believers. Old and New Testament alike know nothing else. The few Old Testament exceptions are not difficult to explain. In several cases men were burned with (super-natural) fire as a token of divine displeasure.

"In Numbers 11:1-3 the 'fire of Taberah' burnt and consumed the complainers among Israel. In Numbers 16:35, 250 men who offered incense in the Korah, Dathan and Abiram rebellion were destroyed by fire from Yahweh.

"In Joshua's day the death of Achan and his family, the trouble of Israel, was by stoning followed by the burning of the bodies with fire, after which, we read, 'So Yahweh turned from 'the fierceness of his anger' (7:25-26).

"Centuries later, when Jereboam, commenced golden-calf worship in Bethel and Dan, the 'man of Yahweh out of Judah' denounced his act and prophesied that men's bodies would be burned upon the idolatrous altar at Bethel; this would render it an abomination indeed to all pious persons, and even to the unrighteous worshippers.

⁵ Should Christians Cremate?--Bob Steward

⁶ Cremation Is It Christian?--James W. Fraser

'Amos records special divine indignation against Moab because its king had 'burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime' (2:1).

As recompense, Amos prophesied that Yahweh would send a fire upon Moab and its palaces. In other words, from a nation which did not know the Elohim of Israel, Yahweh required behavior befitting His moral law written in the consciences of men at large. And that law ran contrary to the burning of an enemy's corpse, rendering honorable interment impossible.

"The teaching of the Old Testament, clearly enough, is that the burning of a human body is only right when a sin peculiar for its hideousness is awarded a penalty designed to show the hatred with which it is regarded by Yahweh. The burning of the bodies of King Saul and his sons by the men of Jabesh-gilead, after they had taken them from the Philistines, seems to have been occasioned by the desire to prevent the further desecration of the bodies by the enemy if, perchance, they recovered them. Dr. Robert Jamieson remarks, in his comments on this passage (I Samuel 31:11-13): This was not a Hebrew custom. It was probably resorted to on this occasion to prevent all risk of the Bethshanites coming to disinter the royal remains for further insult'. Hence it is a 'neutral' passage on which no teaching can be based.

"Again, whereas we have in the Old Testament two cases of translation, those of Enoch and Elijah, we learn that it was not the will of Yahweh to translate Moses when his work was done.

"Moses himself was to die by the hand of Yahweh. Mount Nebo became his death chamber, and from its window he looked upon the land which he was not to enter. 'So Moses the servant of Yahweh died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Yahweh; and he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, ...but no man knoweth of his sepulcher' (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). Where Yahweh is Himself the undertaker--we speak reverently--there is no thought of cremation.

"And no man knows that sepulcher,
And no man saw it e'er,
For the angels of Yahweh upturned the sod
And laid the dead man there."¹

V. NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

"The New Testament, and Christian doctrine based upon it, certainly include indications, if not, precepts, that burial, not cremation, is the mind of Yahweh. We have already made reference to the replacement of cremation by burial in Christendom when the Evangel had spread abroad. The change calls for explanation, and it cannot be doubted that, in chief, the practice of the Jews, the facts of the Evangel of Messiah, the belief in the resurrection of the body, and the theological tenet that the Believer's body was the redeemed temple of the Kodesh Spirit of Yahweh, combined to bring it about. The practice of the Jews needs no further comment, the further points do.

"That Messiah was buried is an essential part of the Evangel. He was the corn of wheat which fell into the ground and died, that it might bring forth much fruit. Loving hands anointed Him for His burial (John 12:24; 12:2; Matthew 26:12). When Paul summarized the Evangel which he preached--he had first received it from heaven--he says that 'Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures' (I Corinthians 15:3-4).

That Messiah was to be buried was prophesied by Isaiah."¹

"And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth." Isaiah 53:9

"If, when we ourselves come to die, we wish to follow His steps (I Peter 2:21), it is supremely fitting that we should seek honorable burial. Those who, in Yahweh's providence have been called through faith to meet death in the fires of martyrdom have honored their Savior indeed. But the many who through faith have escaped sword, and fire and scaffold have honored the Savior equally in their 'sleep in Yahshua'. The delightful apostolic phrase suggests the provision of a bed in which the blessed of Yahweh thus sleep, and the bed is the grave, whether it be rocky cave or excavated earth. The word 'cemetery' itself means 'a place of sleeping'. It is the body alone which sleeps. The soul and spirit depart to be with Messiah, which is far better (Philippines 1:23). The inferior part, redeemed together with the soul by the precious blood of Messiah, remains on earth until the trump of resurrection 'awakes the chorus, from desert and field, of the blessed death'.

¹ Bible League Quarterly--Oct-Dec 1980

"Alone and safe in the kodesh keeping
 Of Him who holdeth the grave's cold-key,
 They have laid thee down for the blessed sleeping.
 The quiet rest which His dear ones see.

--Horatius Bonar."¹

CONCLUSION:

"But it is when we turn to our 'more sure word of prophecy' that we find the endorsement which comforts truly Righteous hearts. Believers sleep, not only in the grave, but in Yahshua. 'My flesh also shall rest in hope' (Psalm 16:9: Acts 2:26). Unlike the Master's body, the bodies of believers certainly see corruption. But if, in a spiritual sense, they are 'buried with Messiah by baptism into death' (Romans 6:4), they may know too that the very sepulcher which they receive at the hands of their kindred and friends sees them following according to the pattern shown to them in Scripture's mount (for mount it is). In the grave for awhile they find a silent fellowship with Yahshua, of whose body it was said by the angelic visitor to earth, 'Come, see the place where Yahshua lay'. The grave's dishonor is removed by the burial of Messiah, even as death's sting is removed by His death and its power is snatched from it by His resurrection. The lifeless body which lay for three days in the garden-tomb is described by the angel as 'Yahshua'. In occupying a similar resting place, do we not demonstrate our soul's rest in the Master-ship of Yahshua Messiah?

"To honor Yahshua thus is a part of blessedness. Death has lost its sting; the grave does not have the victory. Thanks be to Yahweh who giveth us the victory through our Master Yahshua Messiah'. Let us, like the 'beloved brethren' of the Epistle, follow in the steps of the 'blessed of Yahweh'. Let us imitate them in their steadfastness and unmovability, and repudiate firmly the teaching and belief that cremation is a 'more excellent way'.

"If we die, let devout men carry us to our burial. Let us honor Yahshua in death as in life. Certainly, in another sense, the body's honor is not yet, for 'it is sown in dishonor'; but when the body is raised in splendor, then we shall see and share the splendor of Yahshua and know the excellency of our Elohim."¹

To cremate is still pagan!
 To bury is still righteousness!

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