

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

PREPARING THE DEAD BODY FOR BURIAL AND THE QURAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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Nearly all communities and nations have devised processes to bury or cremate their dead. This has been the case throughout human history. For Islam as it is practiced today, the matter is no different which also deploys a rigid ritualised process which is performed in the name of 'religion'. Depending on which school of thought one follows, the rituals can vary.

What is interesting to note is the fact that **preparing the body** in a **specified manner** for burial is not mentioned anywhere in the Quran nor is it prescribed. For example, the Quran states when '*ghusl*' (bathing) or '*wudu*' (ablution) is required (5:6).

There is complete silence on the matter regarding **burial preparation** and it is a matter left to society to prepare and bury the body in what it deems appropriate. There is no codified Quranic position with regards this. There is no right or wrong way to bury the dead, **other than with respect and a matter to be performed with dignity.**

To underscore the latter point of dignity, here is a telling verse with regards the corpse of the murdered son of Adam. ^(pbuh) Unfortunately many interpreters unnecessarily restrict the rendering of this verse to support a possible 'burial process'. However, a little examination of the verse clearly indicates that the verse has a much wider purport.

005:031

"Then God sent a raven, who scratched the ground, to show him how to hide the shame (**Arabic: Sawata**) of his brother. "Woe is me!" said he; "Was I not even able to be as this raven, and to hide the shame of my brother?" then he became full of regret"

The Arabic word 'Sawata' in this context has been used to denote 'shame' and although can depict a corpse in a metaphorical sense, it is a reference to the external portion of both sexes, their shame and their nakedness. The root (SIIN-WAW-ALIF) from which the word is derived carries the meaning of ill, anything that makes a person sad or sorrowful, a bad action, to do evil, to disgrace, to treat badly, evil doer, wretched, grievous or to annoy.

Let us see another verse in which the same Arabic word is utilised in a plural context in the 3rd person form to denote nakedness / shame.

007.022

"So by deceit he brought about their fall: when they tasted of the tree, their shame (**Arabic: SAWAT-uhumma**) became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the garden over their bodies. And their Lord called unto them: "Did I not forbid you that tree, and tell you that Satan was an avowed enemy unto you?"

020.121

In the result, they both ate of the tree, and so their nakedness (**Arabic: SAWAT-uhumma**) appeared to them: they began to sew together, for their covering, leaves from the Garden: thus did Adam disobey his Lord, and allow himself to be seduced.

So verse 5:31 with regards Adam's ^(pbuh) murdered son is no doubt a reference to the corpse which was laid bare in a manner of nakedness (both literal and metaphorical interpretations supportable) **but the focus of the verse is to conceal the shame of the dead body with some sort of dignity by burying it quickly.** At the time of Adam ^(pbuh) and his children, they would not have had access to complex wardrobes as we do today and attire would have most certainly been simple making use of natural foliage and animal skins. In a struggle of the kind that ensued between the two sons of Adam ^(pbuh) which caused the death of one of them, this coverage would most likely have laid bare the shame of the murdered son.

A corpse therefore deserves a degree of dignity with a timely burial which the action of the raven clearly depicted.

At the time of death, the angels that are tasked to remove the soul take the soul without fail (6:61) and the body almost immediately starts to disintegrate. A simple question to ask is why would a decaying body need to be prepared in a complex set of rituals when in a short period it is fully decomposed?

It is clear from a historic study of this subject that many civilisations have sought to 'protect' the body for a manner of reasons in some form or another.

- (i) Respect for the physical remains.
- (ii) To bring closure to the deceased family and loved ones.
- (iii) A belief in the afterlife (in various forms) where the preparation of the body is seen as a necessary step in the process to reach the afterlife.
- (iv) Practical reasons such as to stop the rotting odour of a deceased body reaching the surface.

At the point of death, tissues and cells rapidly die, different cells at different rates. Decomposition is well under way by the time the body is cremated or buried. Decomposition is rapid as the intestines are packed with millions of organisms which do not die with the deceased but continue to invade other parts of the body. This is further compounded by other organisms within the soil. Depending on the location, the soil integrity the corpse can become infested with maggots very rapidly.

Although burial in a coffin slows down the process and the body may remain identifiable for many months. However within a year all that is usually left is the skeletal framework of the body and the teeth.

Many complex ways were designed by many nations to counter and protect the body of the dead. There is no better example than the mummification process of the Egyptians. Again the drive behind

the mummification is the key, a possible necessity to secure the afterlife, which was a popular belief throughout ancient Egyptian civilization.

It is the association with the loved one that has passed why there is a want to treat the body with such respect. There is nothing wrong with this, but one needs to appreciate what is necessary and what is claimed as part of 'religion' supporting a particular 'belief' or 'doctrine'.

When the soul departs its record is closed. This can be attested in numerous verses from the Quran. What is done with the body, how it is buried, what others may do to it has no effect on the account of the soul. There are many who die and never receive a burial, many who remain frozen on mountains, drowned deep in the sea or have suffered a fate in which their body parts are beyond recognition. The departed soul has earned its measure during its life, what is left is a matter for the living to come to terms with and to remember their own inevitable death.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is no right or wrong way to bury the dead nor is this stipulated by scripture as part of 'Deen'. **The main focus is that of dignity and respect** as we saw in the case of Adam's^(pbuh) son.

Societal customs are appreciated as are practical necessities.

However, to claim a highly ritualised practice of preparing the dead body as a necessary part of religion is not supported by scripture which claims to be fully detailed and complete.

Finally, within general Muslim thought, the dead body of a 'martyr' **is not washed nor is it shrouded but buried in the same clothes in which they died**. Furthermore, many Muslim 'scholars' take the position that it is neither necessary nor appropriate to offer funeral prayers for martyrs.

This begs the question, who defines the 'martyr'? This is an especially pertinent question when throughout Islamic history, Muslims have fought Muslims and many have taken their own lives by killing innocent people in the name of martyrdom.

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