

IS IT BETTER TO BURY OR TO BURN? A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CREMATION AND CHRISTIANITY IN WESTERN CULTURE PART 1

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INTRODUCTION¹

If I might adapt the Apostle Paul's phraseology (1 Cor 7:9),² I would ask, "Is it better to bury or to burn?" Does it make any difference? Is cremation a Christian option? Are there any ethical, theological, or philosophical issues involved in the choice to cremate the body of someone who has died? Are these even relevant questions?

I would propose to you that these are, indeed, important questions and ones that the church must face. In past generations this question was largely ignored in our churches and in our seminaries. I suspect that was because such a practice was rare—perhaps nearly nonexistent in conservative churches. Cremation was foreign, not only to conservative Christianity, but also to Western culture. It was typically viewed as a pagan Eastern practice.

¹ This essay was presented as part of the annual William R. Rice Lectures at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary on March 15, 2006. This edition contains some minor post-lecture corrections and revisions.

² I am certainly not suggesting that 1 Corinthians 7:9 has anything to do with cremation or that this is a hermeneutical use of the text. Though I would like to think this note is unnecessary, I have discovered that not everyone appreciates or understands what I intend only as a "clever" title!

When I was a seminary student in the 1970s, cremation was not mentioned in my ethics class or textbooks.³ In more than a half century I have never heard the subject discussed in a church setting. In a dozen years of pastoral ministry in the 1970s and 80s I do not remember anyone connected with the church which I pastored ever being cremated. For that matter, in the rural area of Michigan where I spent most of my pastoral ministry, I do not remember even hearing of a cremation. They may have occurred, but it was certainly not a common practice.

Perhaps my experience is atypical (or my memory faulty), but I suspect that discussion of cremation by conservative churches is less common than one might hope. My own attention was first focused on this topic only a year ago in connection with a new church that I was helping one of my students plant. In that inner-city, heavily Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox context, one of the ladies attending North Valley Baptist Church died quite unexpectedly—but left a request that she be cremated. Such a request was not only unusual for our church; it was also atypical in our community. In the wake of that event I have had to grapple with the acceptability of such a practice for a Christian. The following essay is the record of my pursuit of this very question. I began my quest for an answer with no fixed opinion one way or the other.

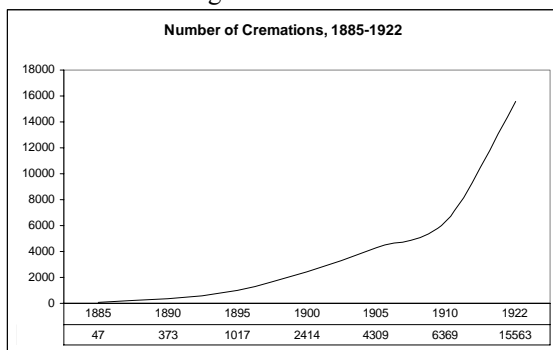
What do we know of the practice of cremation in our country? Let me sketch briefly the history of the practice. As I do, I think the facts and statistics will demonstrate why this is becoming a much more urgent matter for the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The first American cremation was that of Colonel Henry Laurens, the president of the Continental Congress.⁴ Laurens was paranoid of being buried alive, so he specified in his will that his family would inherit his estate only if they cremated his body. Although I am not sure how Laurens perceived the possibility of being cremated alive as any particular improvement over being buried alive,

³ I have ten books on my shelf that deal with Christian ethics (a number of which were seminary textbooks for an ethics class) which might be expected to at least mention the subject of cremation. Not one lists it in the index or the table of contents.

⁴ Many (not all) North American Indians had practiced cremation for centuries, but the first Caucasian to be cremated in the Colonies or in the infant United States was Colonel Laurens.

his family did cremate his (presumably dead!) corpse on an open pyre in 1792. This event, however, was an anomaly. Cremation was otherwise unheard of in America for nearly a century. The next recorded cremation did not occur until 1876 when Baron Joseph Henry Louis Charles De Palm gained the notoriety of being the first person incinerated in a commercial crematory furnace. De Palm's cremation prompted a fiery debate regarding the acceptability of such a novel practice. Over the next three years there were only four more recorded cremations in America. It was not until the 1880s and 90s that any significant momentum can be seen for the practice of cremation. The debate was waged on several fronts, both pro and con, but by the beginning of the twentieth century the practice had gained some limited degree of acceptance in American society. From 1884 to 1899 there was a 38% compound annual growth rate. With only 16 cremations in 1884, the number grew to 1,996 in 1899. By the end of the century there were 24 crematories in 15 states and 10,000 cremations had been performed—a startling number in such a short time and the largest number of cremations in any Western country, though this was still less than 1% of the deaths in America during this time.



The twentieth century saw increased interest in cremation, though the rate of increase was slower. The 1% boundary was crossed in the early 1920s, 2% in the 1930s, and 3% in the 1940s. By contrast, Great Britain's rate, though initially much slower, rapidly overtook the U.S. rate, exceeding it in the 1950s. By 1967 Britain was cremating more than half of those who died, though the U.S. cremation rate was still only about 4%. The cremation rates in the West have continued to increase, and most recently at a much faster pace than in the first half of the twentieth century. Since

1963 when the cremation rate was about 4% in the United States, it increased to 25% in 1999 and to 29% by 2004.⁵ There are now nearly fourteen hundred crematories in the U.S. which incinerate more than a half million corpses annually. American figures are still relatively low in comparison with those of some other Western countries. As of 1999 Australia's cremation rate was over 50%; in Scandinavia, over 60%; and in Britain, 70%. These figures contrast with Catholic countries such as Spain and Italy where it is still less than 10% or in Greece⁶ where the practice has been illegal until approximately a year ago.⁷ The figures also contrast with the East where cremation is the norm. The rate in Japan, for example, is 98%. It is quite likely that the American rate will increase significantly in the next few decades. A survey in 1995 indicated that

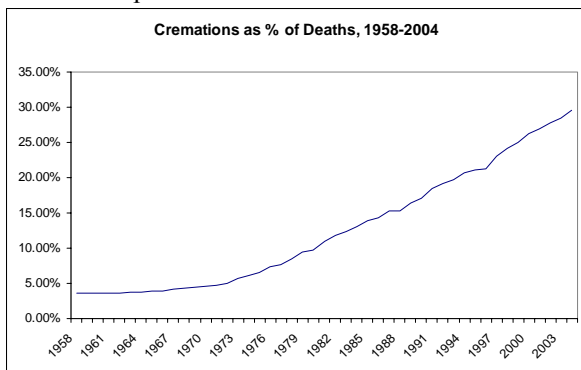
⁵ The 2004 data comes from "Cremation Gaining Acceptance Among Roman Catholics," *USA Today*, 4 April 2005, 9D. There is considerable geographical variation in the cremation rate. Those states with the largest numbers of retirees who have relocated from out of state have the highest rate of cremation: Nevada, 61%; Arizona, 57%; and Florida, 49%. The lowest rates come from the Bible belt, including Tennessee, 3%; and Alabama, 4%. It is also noteworthy that in the year 2000 military funerals ran about 50% cremation, partly because Arlington National Cemetery has less stringent qualifications for burial there if it is a cremation ("A Grave Matter," *U.S. News & World Report*, 20 March 2000).

⁶ Anthee Carassave, "A Grave Issue," *Time*, web exclusive, 21 November 2005, <www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1037623,00.html> accessed 21 November 2005. By contrast, the American Catholic rate has recently increased faster than that of the general population and is now at 30% ("Cremation Gaining Acceptance Among Roman Catholics," *USA Today*, 4 April 2004, 9D). The particular problem in Greece is caused by the refusal of the Greek Orthodox Church to allow cremation. In Athens 80% of the cemeteries are full—and burial plots are only *rented* for three years (after which the remains are moved to mass graves so the original plot can be reused).

⁷ On March 1, 2006, the Greek legislature voted to allow cremation by non-Greeks and those not part of the Greek Orthodox Church. Although the church remains strongly opposed to the practice, the law does make provision for church members to be cremated if certain conditions are met ("New Greek Law Permits Cremation," Reuters, *International Herald Tribune, Europe*, 3 March 2006, <<http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/03/02/news/greece.php>> [accessed 4 March 2006]).

43% of those surveyed would “likely” choose cremation for themselves.⁸

So that is where we stand at the beginning of a new century. A funeral practice that was practically unknown 100 years ago has become mainstream and appears to be growing quite rapidly. What are we to make of this new cultural approach to death in the West? Is it a positive gain to be celebrated? Many would argue that it is. Is it a sinful, heathen practice to be forbidden for Christians? Is it an amoral practice in the proverbial “gray area” which should be left to individual preference?



TERMINOLOGY

We will first address the technical terminology involved, and then we will move on to the biblical data and other considerations.

Bury/Burial; Grave/Tomb. The nonmetaphorical use of the word *bury* is technically defined as, “to deposit (a corpse) in the ground, in a tomb; to inter.”⁹ The more technical term for earth burial is *inhumation*: “the action or practice of burying in the

⁸ The historical and statistical data in this paragraph (apart from items footnoted separately) have been summarized from Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001), 9–10, 15, 23–35, 42–45, 105–09, 127–28, 189–90. See particularly the graphs on pp. 108 and 164. The figures have been verified from the tables given at <www.cremationassociation.org>.

⁹ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), s.v. *bury*. (Hereafter cited as *OED*.)

ground.”¹⁰ In this sense, a grave is a hole dug in the ground to bury a corpse.¹¹ The word *tomb* has a somewhat wider reference; although it includes a dug grave, it may also refer to a natural or hewn cave or similar man-made structure—which may be above ground.¹² *Tomb* and *grave* are sometimes not clearly distinguished in Bible translations, partly because it is not always possible to determine the nature of the burial in the context. As used in this paper, *burial* refers to placing a dead body in a dug grave, in a tomb, or under a cairn or barrow; *inhumation* is only used in the more narrow sense of burial in a dug grave.¹³ There is a tendency in discussions of cremation, especially by advocates of that practice, to use *bury* in the sense, “to dispose of a corpse”—and assume that cremation is one way to bury.¹⁴ This is a sloppy use of language—though it is often helpful to cremation advocates by making the process appear to be just a variation of more common (in our day and culture) burial practices.

Cremation. The disposal of a corpse by means of fire is referred to generally as cremation. Ancient practice as well as that in many places in the world yet today accomplished this on an open pyre in which the flesh is burned. In the ancient world it is likely that such cremations were often only partial. That is, the flesh was

¹⁰ *OED*, s.v. *inhumation*.

¹¹ This is the normal meaning of *grave*. Note the definition of *OED*: “a place of burial; an excavation in the earth for the reception of a corpse” (s.v. *grave*). Related terms, often implying shallow burial or burial “on” the ground under a manmade structure (which may be only a pile of dirt or rocks) or in a man-made tomb, include *cairn*, *tumulus*, *barrow*, (*sepulchral mound*, and *sepulcher*; see also *cenotaph* (a monument sans body).

¹² *OED* offers two definitions which together reflect the summary above: “1. A place of burial; an excavation in earth or rock for the reception of a dead body, a grave . . . 2. A monument erected to enclose or cover the body and preserve the memory of the dead” (s.v. *tomb*).

¹³ These distinctions are English ones. The Hebrew and Greek terms cover a larger semantic domain: קבר and θάπτω refer to both burial and inhumation; קבר as well as τάφος and μνημα/μνηεῖον all refer indiscriminately to grave or tomb.

¹⁴ The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 2000), s.v. *bury*, explicitly defines burial as “by means other than cremation.”

consumed, but the bones remained largely intact. In such a case the bones would still be disposed of by burial. The wealth of the individual also had its effects. Wealthy families could afford more elaborate pyres as well as pitch and oil to enable a hotter fire and thus a more complete cremation. Poorer families would have had only a smaller wood fire, and the poorest were limited to communal pyres. This is reflected in the ancient insult of referring to someone's ancestor as "half burned"—i.e., too poor to afford a sufficiently hot fire for a more complete cremation.¹⁵

In contemporary Western culture this burning has seemed crude and distasteful to "modern (and postmodern) sensibilities." As a result technology has been employed to accomplish the same end in a more "refined" process. Cremation in this context is therefore often defined or explained apart from any reference to burning. Thus we are told that cremation is the reduction of a dead corpse to ash and bone fragments through rapid oxidation caused by intense heat.¹⁶ This is accomplished in special crematory furnaces heated to at least 1400° F.¹⁷ Some cremationist literature claims that the body never contacts the flame; it is the intense heat in the furnace that reduces the body to ash.¹⁸ The process now takes only a few

¹⁵ Paul E. Irion, *Cremation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 7–8.

¹⁶ See, e.g., "Cremation Explained" (Cremation Association of North America, n.d.), 3: "The enclosed body is placed in the cremation chamber where through heat and evaporation the body is reduced to its basic elements."

¹⁷ This varies depending on the age and type equipment used. Some states have legislated higher temperatures, though the industry contests the necessity of this, pointing to *increased* air pollution statistics as a result of a higher burn temperature (<www.cremationassociation.org/html/environment.html> and <www.cremationassociation.org/html/test_results.html> (both accessed 19 February 2006).

¹⁸ Although it *may* be true that in some types of crematory furnaces the corpse is never touched by the flame which generates the heat in the retort, this does not appear to be generally the case. (I cannot document any specifics of such a furnace design; I will assume that the cremationist literature claiming such may be valid in some instances. For one such claim, though the statement is a bit evasive; see Frances Newton's "Light, Like the Sun," *The Forum* (1937; reprint, New York: Dodd, Mead, 1937), available on the web at <www.funerals.org/faq/light.htm>.) In what appears to be a fairly standard system, however, this is explicitly not the case. In my private tour of a local crematory, the sexton explicitly pointed out the position of the

hours (depending on the size of the body) and produces 5–7 pounds of bone fragments (sometimes referred to by the neologism, cremains). These fragments are run through a mechanical grinder, shredder, or tumbler to reduce the bone fragments to a small size. Although popularly referred to as “ashes,” these remains are not like the soft flakes characteristic of wood ash; they are more like sand with some larger bone fragments the size of rice, though this depends on the equipment used (newer systems produce a very fine powder).

BIBLICAL REFERENCES TO CREMATION

What does the Bible say about the practice of cremation? Despite claims to the contrary,¹⁹ there are very few references to cremation in the Bible, either directly or indirectly. There are only three instances of cremation recorded, though there is some additional data that is relevant to the question.

Instances of Cremation

The first biblical instance of a cremation is found in 1 Samuel 31 which records the cremation of Saul and his sons.

⁸The Philistines ... found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹They cut off his head and ... ¹⁰fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

¹¹When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard of what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹²all their valiant men journeyed through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the

flame in the retort and commented on the importance of positioning the corpse so that the flame was centered on the torso to insure the most complete and rapid burning. Also in the required paperwork for another crematory in my area the terms and conditions clearly specify that the body will be “totally and irreversibly destroyed by prolonged exposure to intense heat and direct flame” (“Maple Hill Crematory Authorization for Cremation and Disposition,” Archbald, PA).

¹⁹ Prothero claims that “there are numerous references to cremation in the Hebrew Bible” (*Purified by Fire*, 6). He cites, however, only one reference in the text (a figurative allusion to God’s judgment, Isa 30:33), though adding four more in an endnote (Gen 38:24; Lev 20:14; 21:9; 1 Sam 31:11–13; 2 Chron 16:14, the last of which is likely invalid).

wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them.¹³ Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh (1 Sam 31:8–13).²⁰

Following a disastrous battle with the Philistines, Saul's corpse is decapitated by his enemies and hung on the city wall of Beth Shan along with those of his sons. To redress this affront, the valiant men of Jabesh Gilead²¹ undertook a covert nighttime commando raid of Beth Shan to retrieve the bodies.²² After returning to Jabesh (about 10 miles distant) with the four corpses, they cremated the bodies there and then buried the bones. These bodies were likely already badly decomposed and had been previously

²⁰ English citations of the biblical text in this essay usually follow the wording of the NIV, though a few changes have been made where helpful for clarity. When longer passages are cited, the text is sometimes abridged for economies of space and time and to focus attention on the statements most directly related to the issue at hand. In such cases ellipses are always employed to indicate the elided material. Readers are encouraged to consult their own texts for the full account.

²¹ This may reflect their loyalty to Saul for his deliverance of that city 30 years earlier as his first "royal act" as king of Israel (1 Sam 11:1–11). It may also be relevant that many in Benjamin were descended from mothers from Jabesh Gilead (see Judg 21); indeed, Saul likely had a (great?) grandmother from Jabesh Gilead, accounting for his motivation to deliver that city. See Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 180–82. A contrary position is argued by Diana Edelman, "Jabesh-Gilead," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:594–95. She argues that the practice of cremation evident at Jabesh Gilead proves that the inhabitants were non-Semites, not Israelites. This conclusion, however, unjustly extrapolates one isolated event into an ongoing, normative practice in the city. Given the historical background of Judges 21, it is practically certain that this was, indeed, an Israelite town. In the distress over the Benjamite disaster, the people ask, "Which one of the tribes of Israel failed to assemble before the Lord at Mizpah?" They discovered that no one from Jabesh Gilead had come to the camp for the assembly" (Judg 21:8). To circumvent this clear identity, one would have to postulate different inhabitants for Jabesh Gilead by the time of 1 Samuel 31—yet there is no evidence for this. Edelman avoids the problem by denying the historicity and accuracy of these texts.

²² The retrieval of the corpses was a covert operation according to 2 Samuel 21:12.

mutilated, so the treatment is understandable. It was probably considered more honorable to cremate the royal retinue than attempt to haul the mutilated, stinking bodies elsewhere for the usual Jewish burial ceremonies.²³ They were later commended by David for the kindness they showed Saul by doing this, suggesting that the king's honor may have been involved (2 Sam 2:5).²⁴ The necessities of war are often different from those of "ordinary life."

The second reference to a cremation in the Bible is found in connection with God's judgment of Moab for an otherwise unknown historical event that is recorded in Amos 2.

This is what YHWH says:

For three sins of Moab,
 even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.
 Because he burned, as if to lime,
 the bones of Edom's king,
²I will send fire upon Moab
 that will consume the fortresses of Kerioth.
 Moab will go down in great tumult
 amid war cries and the blast of the trumpet.
³I will destroy her ruler
 and kill all her officials with him,"
 says YHWH. (Amos 2:1-3)

The Moabites burned the bones of an Edomite king "as if to lime."²⁵ We can only speculate whether this was the result of a military victory (similar to the Philistines' treatment of Saul) or more likely, a tomb desecration of a recently-buried Edomite ruler.

²³ Eugene Merrill suggests that the purpose of the cremation was to hide the mutilation by the Philistines ("1 Samuel," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. J. Walvoord and R. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor, 1985], 2:455). This appears more likely than the attempt to make this a special honor accorded Israel's "first royalty" as William E. Phipps proposes ("The Consuming Fire for Corpses," *Christian Century*, 4 Mar 1981, 221).

²⁴ The bones are later exhumed and reburied in the family tomb at Zela in Benjamin (2 Sam 21:11-14).

²⁵ Gary Smith suggests that the comparison of the remains with lime was to emphasize the totality of the destruction (*Amos: A Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989], 62). That is, there were no bones or bone fragments left to bury.

It is particularly significant, however, that God's judgment is not pronounced on any military action, tomb raiding, political maneuvering, or other forms of oppression. The text is quite clear that God's judgment "in kind" (i.e., by fire, v. 2) is because of their cremation of the king of Edom. God's words are, "I will not turn back [my wrath from Moab] because *he burned ... the bones ...*" (Amos 2:1).²⁶ Moab's action was considered not only sinful, but of such a magnitude as to prompt God's drastic judgment. This is as close as the Bible gets to condemning the act of cremation.²⁷

The only other reference to an actual cremation comes in Amos 6.

Adonai YHWH has sworn by himself—YHWH Elohim declares:

"I abhor the pride of Jacob
and detest his fortresses;
I will deliver up the city
and everything in it."

⁹If ten men are left in one house, they too will die. ¹⁰And if a relative who is to burn the bodies comes to carry them out of the house and asks anyone still hiding there, "Is anyone with you?" and he says, "No," then he will say, "Hush! We must not mention the name YHWH." (Amos 6:8–10)

As a result of Israel's sin (Amos 6:1–8), God prophesies judgment by military invasion and conquest of the city of Zion (6:8, "I will deliver up the city"). The devastation will be catastrophic, portrayed by the number of corpses left behind—ten of them in a single house. In the aftermath of this attack when the ruined city is left behind by the attacking forces, the few survivors hiding in the city will attempt to clean up the casualties. A relative is said to carry the bodies out of the house to burn them (6:10).²⁸ In the car-

²⁶ The causal statement is expressed with *לִי* + infinitive construct. Note the parallels in Amos 1 which give the reason for the judgment of other of Israel's neighbors (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 13), as well as Israel's own judgment (2:4).

²⁷ One must be careful not to transfer inappropriately what was perhaps a deliberate war atrocity to normal funeral practice. The point of the text *is* significant in this regard (see below), but it is not legitimate to cite this as a proof text which forbids cremation in all situations.

²⁸ Other translations/interpretations of v. 10 are possible. NASB substitutes a functional equivalent ("undertaker," in place of "the one burning him" or "his burner"), and ESV opts for "anooints" rather than the more

nage of war, normal burial is not always possible, especially when the number of casualties is high.²⁹

These three examples—and especially the fact that there are *only* three—suggest that cremation was not the normal practice of God’s people. It was accepted (apparently, so far as the text indicates, without condemnation from God) in exceptional situations, viz., in war (1 Sam 31; Amos 6).³⁰ However when it was employed (apparently) as an inhumane act of desecration it was, at least on one occasion, explicitly condemned, and that *because* a body was burned. It is not any other action or attitude that prompted the cre-

traditional “burns” (as in KJV, NIV, RSV, NRSV, HCSB). The use of “anoints” to translate שָׂרַף reflects the proposal of G. R. Driver in “A Hebrew Burial Custom,” *ZAW* 66 (1954): 314–15. The text can also be understood as referring to someone who burns incense or a memorial fire for the deceased (see BDB, 977 and HCSB mg). For a discussion of the text and its meaning in this context, see John J. Davis, *What About Cremation? A Christian Perspective* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1989), 66–69.

²⁹ This is still true today. See the account of American troops being forced to cremate the bodies of Taliban terrorists in Afghanistan in *Time*, “Stench Prompted U.S. Troops to Burn Corpses,” 21 October 2005, corrected version 3 November 2005, <www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1125699,00.html> (accessed 21 November 2005). There is one biblical passage that shows a contrast here. In the prophecy of Ezekiel 39 (Gog and Magog) the massive casualties will be *buried*, not burned. The weapons will be burned, but the text describes a period of seven months during which the land is searched for human bones which are then marked and later buried. This contrasts with the picture of Amos 9 in that the bodies are not in a limited area (the city), but scattered across a large geographical area and have already been picked clean by birds and animals.

³⁰ It is quite interesting that in the parallel account of Saul’s burial in 1 Chronicles 10:12 the cremation is omitted (as it also is in Josephus, *Ant.* 6.14.8); the Chronicler—who may have been inclined to omit potentially offensive or negative details—tells us only that Saul was buried: “[they] took the bodies of Saul and his sons and brought them to Jabesh. Then they buried their bones under the great tree of Jabesh.” It is noteworthy, however, that the very next statement in the text is that “Saul died because he was unfaithful to the Lord ... so the Lord put him to death ... (1 Chron 10:13). Both of these features illustrate the very focused, selective nature of the Chronicler’s narrative (on which see Wm. LaSor, D. Hubbard, and F. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 630–37 and R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], 1158–62).

mation which was condemned; the perpetrators were condemned to judgment *because they burned* the body.

These three passages are either historical narrative or prophetic genre—and all under the governance of the old covenant. As such they are not, in and of themselves, normative. They merely record what happened in two specific situations or what would happen in a future judgment situation. It is not legitimate to build a theological conclusion on such texts. They do, however, form the first part of a larger picture of the biblical view of cremation. We must pursue other aspects of the question before attempting to formulate a conclusion.

God's Use of Fire for Judgment

There are a number of instances recorded in the OT in which God employed fire to bring death in judgment, either directly or indirectly.³¹ In these situations there is at least “partial cremation” of the bodies of those killed in judgment.

The death of Nadab and Abihu as judgment for offering unauthorized fire before the Lord comes by fire:

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before YHWH, contrary to his command.² So fire came out from the presence of YHWH and consumed them, and they died before YHWH. (Lev 10:1–2)

In this instance fire is the means of capital punishment. Just as fire from the Lord devoured the burnt offering in Leviticus 9:24, so these men are said to be devoured by fire. There *are* remains since they are carried out of the camp (10:5), but if the contrast with the burnt offering a few verses earlier is deliberate, there was at least a partial cremation involved.³² There is no statement in the text regarding the final disposal of the remains outside the camp.

³¹ Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24) might be added to this list, though the nature of the “burning sulfur” (NIV) is not clear. The judgment context would certainly be parallel.

³² This explanation is not beyond question. Though the parallel with the burnt offering in 9:24 would suggest a more complete burning, that there are remains which are carried out in their relatives' tunics might suggest that at least the bones were left. (The tunics are more likely those of

The account of Korah's rebellion is explicit that God used fire to consume 250 people who rebelled against Moses' God-given authority:

¹Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites ... became insolent ²and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. ³They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and YHWH is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above YHWH's assembly?" ... ¹⁶Moses said to Korah, "You and all your followers are to appear before YHWH tomorrow—you and they and Aaron. ¹⁷Each man is to take his censer and put incense in it—250 censers in all—and present it before YHWH. You and Aaron are to present your censers also." ¹⁸So each man took his censer, put fire and incense in it, and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. ¹⁹When Korah had gathered all his followers in opposition to them at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the glory of YHWH appeared to the entire assembly ... ³⁵And fire came out from YHWH and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense. ³⁶YHWH said to Moses, ³⁷"Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy—³⁸the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before YHWH and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites." (Num 16:1–38 *passim*)³³

Fire is both capital agent and undertaker—and this time there is reference to the "smoldering remains" (v. 37), which might suggest that this fiery judgment was more than a lightning strike. The final disposal of the remains is not specified. This judgment became the archetype of God's judgment—the bronze censers used by these men were made into hammered plates and used to overlay

the men who carried them out rather than the tunics of Nadab and Abihu as implied by the NIV's "still in their tunics," though the text can be read either way. There is no equivalent of "still" in the text.) Alternately, the fire might be viewed as something similar to lightning, in which case the corpses, even though burned/charred, would still be largely intact. The text is not sufficiently explicit to warrant dogmatism in this regard.

³³ This is in addition to the immediately preceding destruction of Dathan and Abiram and their families. Their judgment was distinct since they had insolently refused to even appear at the tabernacle (v. 12).

the altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle, serving as a perpetual reminder of the dire consequences of sin.³⁴

The final such account is found in Joshua 7 which records the initial defeat of the Israelites in their attempt to capture the city of Ai.

¹But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan ... took some of them. So YHWH's anger burned against Israel. ... ¹⁰YHWH said to Joshua, "... ¹¹Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. ..." ¹³this is what YHWH, the God of Israel, says: "That which is devoted is among you, O Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove it. ... ¹⁵He who is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of YHWH and has done a disgraceful thing in Israel!"...

²⁰Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against YHWH, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them." ... ²⁴Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. ... Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. ²⁶Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then YHWH turned from his fierce anger. (Josh 7:1–26 *passim*)

As a result of Achan's sin, both he and his family were first stoned to death and then burned (v. 25). The remains were not buried in the earth, but covered with a large pile of rocks. The burning was in direct obedience to God's command that the guilty party be "destroyed by fire" (v. 15).

Once again, these are narrative records and as such, are not inherently normative. It is instructive, however, as to the associations that God's OT people would have made with fiery events of this

³⁴ There may have been a similar judgment on those Israelites who complained about the hardships in the wilderness: "fire from YHWH burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp" (Num 11:1–3). It is not clear whether *people* were consumed by fire in this instance or if this consisted of "tent fires" (in which people may or may not have died).

nature. Such a history of judgment fire “hardly provided a positive incentive for the burial practice of cremation”³⁵ in ancient Israel.

Legal Stipulations for Cremation

The old covenant stipulated cremation in two specific cases. In each such case it is judgment for sin—not sin in general, but particular sin for which God specified exceptional judgment. In the midst of a capital penal code section of the Law (which included human sacrifice, witchcraft, cursing parents, adultery, homosexuality, incest, and bestiality), Leviticus 20:14 mandates not just capital punishment, but death and subsequent³⁶ cremation for a man who “marries both a woman and her mother.” While we may not understand why this particular sin receives a unique judgment, it is clear that cremation of the corpse is intended to represent an exceptionally severe judgment.³⁷ A similar provision follows in Leviticus 21:9 in which the daughter of a priest who becomes a prostitute is to be “burned in the fire.” This is, again, intended as a more severe standard than prostitution in general since she has disgraced her

³⁵ Davis, *What About Cremation?*, 62.

³⁶ That “burned in the fire” refers to cremation subsequent to capital punishment (probably by stoning as earlier in the chapter) is an assumption not explicitly stated in the text (so C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, 25 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], 2:427 and, in connection with Lev 21:9, Allen Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 385–86). The OT, though recording “fire from YHWH” as the instrument of capital judgment on a number of occasions (see above), never portrays the equivalent of “burning at the stake” as a human-administered form of capital punishment (unless Genesis 38:24 suggests this, but even if so, it is not a God-ordained action in this case). The events of Joshua 7 in which Achan is first stoned then burned probably portrays the normal procedure in such instances. For a contrary view (burned alive), see W. Bennett, “Death and Disposal of the Dead (Jewish),” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911], 4:498.

³⁷ The commentators say little (or nothing!) about this provision. R. Laird Harris, e.g., notes that this is a “peculiar provision” for a “type of incest [which] was regarded as especially reprehensible” (“Leviticus,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 2: 613).

father *who is a priest*. This presumably is also cremation following capital punishment.³⁸

These passages are unusual in that they are prescriptive provisions; most of the biblical data discussed earlier in the article (as well as much of what follows) is only descriptive. In each case, however, the punishment is exceptional and deliberately graphic. These instances parallel those already examined in that they do not portray normative Israelite funerary practice but appear in exceptional and judgment contexts.

Fire Symbolism in the Bible

Although not referring in most cases to cremation as such, there is abundant use of metaphorical fire symbolism in the Bible. The extent of such language and the dearth³⁹ of a positive symbolism of such language presents a situation in which cremation would have largely negative connotations in the cultures of the Bible.⁴⁰ This is true in both testaments. In the OT, to select only a few representative instances from the prophets (where this symbol appears frequently), we read of God's becoming a blazing fire which will consume the King of Assyria (Isa 10:16–17) and of God's tongue as a consuming fire on the nations (30:27–28). This figure even

³⁸ Surprisingly (to us?), prostitution in general is never explicitly given capital status in the Law, though apparently cultural norms assumed this to be the case even pre-law (e.g., Gen 38:24). Perhaps it was subsumed under the category of adultery in the Law.

³⁹ This is not a totally negative image, but the preponderance is clearly one of judgment. A positive image can be seen in Zechariah 2:5 where YHWH is a "wall of fire" around his people—though this certainly has negative connotations for those who would seek to harm God's people. In the NT the tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2:3) form a positive image. References to fire as a natural physical phenomenon are probably not relevant to this question (unless it is physical fire used in judgment).

⁴⁰ Such cultural associations only help us understand the responses of people within those cultures. The comments above do not intend to establish an atemporal interpretation of such symbolism in the sense that this is what fire must always symbolize. It usually *does* have negative associations in the biblical text, and those associations can never be ignored, but our contemporaries will not necessarily have the same response. On this, see the discussion below regarding cultural issues in the modern world.

becomes “crematorial” as God describes the judgment awaiting the King of Assyria as a funeral pyre prepared in the Valley of Topheth, to be lit by his own breath (30:33). In Jeremiah God’s judgment is likened to an unquenchable fire among his people (4:4; cf. Lam 2:3–4). The whole earth will be devoured by the fire of God’s jealousy (Zeph 1:18; 3:8). A field of burning stubble is the picture of the day of the Lord in Malachi 4:1.

The NT also frequently uses fire symbolism in a negative way. Jesus refers to fire in judgment terms in several of his parables or figures (e.g., Matt 3:10, 11, 12; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8; 22:7; 25:41, to use only Matthew as a sample). Paul describes the believer’s judgment in terms of fire (1 Cor 3:13, 15). Judgment on unbelievers is described throughout the NT, but especially in Revelation, in fiery terms reminiscent of the OT prophets (2 Thess 1:7; Heb 10:27; 12:18, 29; 2 Pet 3:7; Jude 7; Rev 8:5, 7, 8; 9:18; 11:5; 14:10; 16:8; 18:8; 19:20, etc.). James’s use of fire is also negative, particularly as he portrays the sinful use of the tongue (3:5–6).

In themselves, these passages say nothing directly regarding cremation. They do, however, help us sense how God’s people would have viewed such a practice against their conceptual world view. Every culture has its ingrained figural associations, but these conceptions vary from culture to culture. For example, *oil* has very different associations and figurative connotations in our culture when compared with oil imagery in Bible times. Though perhaps not as negative to twenty-first century Americans, fire would have had a much more negative association for the Israelites. That fire would form any part of their funeral practice seems quite unlikely.⁴¹

Other Bible Examples of Bodies Burned

There are several other instances in which bodies are burned in the Bible, though these are not really cremations as such. They are included for completeness (and because some are occasionally

⁴¹ This leaves open, of course, the significance of such imagery today when the same associations are likely not present. The discussion above serves only to help us conceptualize an ancient world view and explain why cremation is apparently so foreign to the world of the Bible. Contemporary associations and significance in this regard is considered later in the essay.

cited in the discussion), though they should not be used as a direct argument for or against cremation.

There are accounts of murder (or attempted murder) by fire. Samson's wife and father-in-law were murdered by their fellow Philistines who burned their house over them following one of Samson's rampages (Judg 15:6). What, if anything, was done with the burned bodies is not said—though as a Philistine action it would hardly be relevant to a discussion of cremation in a biblical context. Likewise in Daniel 3 the Babylonian king attempted to execute the three Jews who refused to bow in worship—but in this case the “crematoria” furnace (probably a brick kiln) was ineffective due to divine intervention—they “quenched the fury of the flames” (Heb 11:34).

The other notable instance of bodies being burned is that of human sacrifice as practiced by Israel's pagan neighbors and, sadly at times, by Israel herself. Accounts of such can be found in 2 Kings 17:17 and Jeremiah 7:30–31. This was clearly forbidden by the Law (Deut 12:31; Lev 18:21) and forms no parallel with the issues involved in cremation. It is possible, however, that associations and similarities between such atrocities and the practice of cremation may account for the Jewish shunning of that practice.⁴²

BIBLICAL FUNERAL PRACTICES

In contrast to exceptional instances involving cremation, we next consider the customary practices of God's people in Bible times. There is an abundance of biblical material related to funeral practices. Only a sampling of the most relevant data can be included here.

⁴² Davis suggests this connection (*What About Cremation?*, 63). Though Reformed Judaism adopted and encouraged cremation in the 19th century, following the Holocaust even this liberal branch of Judaism has been reluctant to use cremation. A representative article from this perspective is Daniel Schiff, “Cremation: Considering Contemporary Concerns,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* 34 (1987): 37–48. Similar views from the conservative wing of Judaism may be found in David L. Abramson, “Concerning Cremation: One Rabbi's Perspective,” *Conservative Judaism* 51 (1998): 32–45.

Terminology and Examples

There is no dispute that the Bible presents burial as the standard way to handle a corpse. In the OT the terms קָבַר (“to bury”) and קֶבֶר (“grave”)—which together occur 200 times—always assume burial, whether that is in a cave (Gen 23:19), under a tree (Gen 35:8), beside the road (Gen 48:7), in the desert (1 Kgs 2:34), in a garden (2 Kgs 21:18), or on a hill (2 Chron 32:33).⁴³ This may be either earth burial in a dug grave or interment in a tomb. In the NT θάπτω (“to bury”) is used 10 times, always of burial, e.g., in a tomb (Acts 2:29). Likewise ταφή (“burial”) and τάφος (“grave”), used 7 times total, describe burial, e.g., in a field (Matt 27:7).⁴⁴

The earth grave was typically the form of burial for the poor. There is less archaeological evidence for the existence of these burials simply because they are not as substantial as tombs. Individual graves and small cemeteries would easily disappear if the rock piles marking the graves were destroyed, scattered, or reused.⁴⁵ There are, however, several large cemeteries in Bible lands

⁴³ Most such references merely specify the locale (e.g., “he was buried in the city of Jerusalem”) with no indication of the physical nature of the inhumation.

⁴⁴ See also συγκομίζω (“to harvest,” used metaphorically of burial; see BDAG, 952), ἐνταφιάζω (“to prepare for burial, bury”), ἐνταφιασμός (“preparation for burial, burial”), and συνθάπτω (“to bury with,” only metaphorical in NT), as well as idiomatic expressions such as προστίθῃμι πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας αὐτοῦ (“to place with his fathers”). For details of the usage of these forms, see J. Louw and E. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: UBS, 1989), Domain 52, “Funerals and Burial,” 1:530–31.

⁴⁵ Headstones were not often used to mark dug graves in the ancient world. The normal practice seems to have been to build a large pile of rocks over the site to prevent animals from digging up the grave. Reuse of such rock piles in later times was not unknown. There is reference in the OT to erecting a pillar at the site of a grave (e.g., Gen 35:20), some of which may have been inscribed or marked in some way to identify the nature of the grave (2 Kgs 23:17, a “tombstone” [NIV], or “monument” [HCSB] identified the grave of a particular prophet).

that consist of large numbers of graves dug in the earth and covered with piles of rocks.⁴⁶

Depending on the social status and chronological period, the tomb is better known in Bible lands since it is an obvious, often a prominent, structure. These might consist of natural caves, but the best known (especially in the vicinity of Jerusalem and Jericho) are hand-hewn into soft rock. There are several styles and customs evident, but typically a tomb would be used for multiple interments, most commonly of family members. In some periods bodies were (permanently) buried individually in coffins placed in hewn niches or laid on rock shelves (without a coffin). In other times the initial burial was individual, but after a corpse had decomposed so as to leave only bones, the bones were transferred to an ossuary (a stone or pottery bone box or pottery jar) so as to make room for additional burials of family members.⁴⁷

Even criminals who were executed were granted burial. The Law contains specific provisions for this in the case of hanging (Deut 21:22–23).⁴⁸ To refuse or deny burial for someone was always a sign of contempt—and often (though not always) the result of God’s judgment (Deut 28:26; 2 Sam 21:6, 9; 1 Kgs 14:10–13; 2 Kgs 9:10; Ps 79:1–4; Jer 8:2; 14:16; 16:4, 6; 25:33; Rev 11:9). Part of God’s judgment on Jehoiakim was that he would “have the burial of a donkey—dragged away and thrown outside the gates of

⁴⁶ A cemetery with over 800 such graves is found near Qumran—the piles of rock marking each grave are still largely intact. About 50 of these graves have been excavated; most are narrow vertical shafts about 4–6 feet deep, typically containing one body with no coffin (some have two bodies, and a few have traces of wooden coffins.) There is a similar cemetery containing 3,500 graves east of the Dead Sea. For details of both cemeteries, including photos and maps, see Yizhar Hirschfeld, *Qumran in Context: Reassessing the Archaeological Evidence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 152–62.

⁴⁷ For details, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, “Burials,” *ABD* 1:785–89 and Rachel Hachlili, “Burials, Ancient Jewish,” *ABD* 1:789–94. Allusion to this “reburial” or “secondary burial” may be the significance of the OT phrase “gathered to his fathers” (e.g., Gen 25:8).

⁴⁸ Even enemy combatants of high rank (the five Amorite kings), though they were executed by hanging, were buried in a cave in Joshua 10:16–27.

Jerusalem” (Jer 22:19).⁴⁹ The massive number of corpses resulting from God’s judgment in the Babylonian invasion are compared with refuse lying on the ground (Jer 25:33).

Jesus’ Burial

In one sense, Jesus’ burial is simply one more example of common Jewish custom. As a narrative event it has no inherent normative force. But as with other aspects of Jesus’ life, as Christians we often take his life as exemplary, if not technically imperative. Our wedding ceremonies often refer to Jesus’ blessing marriage by his presence at the wedding in Cana (John 2). He attended the Sabbath services, visited with “sinners,” showed compassion to those who hurt, etc. In the same way and to the same extent (and only to that extent), we are wise to consider his example in death, for in this case it is not only what would be normal for someone of his day and culture, but it was also ordained by God that he be buried (Isa 53:9). The NT makes an emphatic point that his body did not suffer decay when he was buried (Acts 2:31; see also v. 27, citing Ps 16:10); cremation was not an option. None of these factors in their own right would, perhaps, be determinative, but since they complement all the other factors considered thus far, it should not be ignored that Jesus was, indeed, buried—not cremated—and that by God’s choice.

God as “Undertaker”

There is one instance in which we might say that God served directly as the “undertaker” for a funeral.⁵⁰ When Moses died, God

⁴⁹ This is one of the few instances (perhaps the only?) of קבר not having inhumation as its referent—yet here the context makes it very clear that this is an exceptional “burial.”

⁵⁰ As a side note for the curious, the trade of “undertaker” (i.e., mortician, or funeral director) is a relatively recent development in burial practices (late-19th century in America) and is due largely to the modern American/Western desire to avoid death as much as possible. Prior to the time of the undertaker, families and friends cared for the corpse, including preparing it for burial and the interment. On this, see James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1980) and especially Karen P. Flood, “Contemplating Corpses: The Dead Body in American Culture, 1870–1920” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 2001).

took care of his body—the only instance in all of Scripture in which God did so directly (i.e., not through a human intermediary). Deuteronomy 34 records the details:

¹Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There YHWH showed him the whole land. . . . ⁴Then YHWH said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.” ⁵And Moses the servant of YHWH died there in Moab, as YHWH had said. ⁶He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. (Deut 34:1–5)

The antecedent of the 3MS verb, וַיִּקְבֹּר (“he buried”), can only be YHWH.⁵¹ In the situation, God could have handled the body in any number of ways. He could have taken it to heaven, he could have caused it to disintegrate into nothing, he could have left it exposed for birds of prey, etc., but God chose burial, not cremation or any other potential form of disposal. If this was God’s preferred method in the only such recorded instance, it ought to be treated as a significant precedent.

Summary of Biblical Data

When the biblical data presented above is considered, there is clarity and consistency. Although there are a variety of funerary practices attested in the ancient world, the biblical record consistently depicts burial. Cremation is virtually unknown in biblical practice, though it was a common (but not universal) practice in the ancient world. Both the Greeks (from Homeric times) and the Romans practiced cremation as the preferred means of disposing of a corpse.⁵² By contrast with the Greco-Roman practice, the Egyptians

Flood’s chapter 2 pursues the development of the funeral profession in detail: “Controlling Corpses, Civilizing a Trade: The Emergence of the Funeral Directing Profession,” 67–106.

⁵¹ This is not a passive construction as the NIV mg note suggests (“he was buried”).

⁵² Greek culture originally practiced burial during and before the Mycenaean period, cremation being introduced in Homeric times (see below). The earlier Roman practice was also burial; cremation, learned

rejected cremation, but in addition to burial, mummified the corpse before interment in graves or tombs.⁵³ For Egyptian royalty this took the form of the extravagant pyramids; for the wealthy, a sealed tomb; but the common folk of Egypt received only earth burial. All, however, were apparently mummified to some extent.⁵⁴ Outside the biblical world cremation is the norm in Buddhism and Hinduism. The ancient Chinese and Japanese civilizations rejected

from the Greeks, became the “fashionable” practice of wealthier Romans (E. Hartland, “Death and Disposal of the Dead (Introductory),” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911], 4:423). See also Donna Kurtz and John Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1971); J. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1971); and Caroline Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995). The Greek practice can be seen in Book 23 of *The Iliad* which records Achilles’ cremation of his friend Patroclus who had been slain by Hector in the battle with the Trojans on the plains of Troy:

“Those who were about the dead [i.e., Patroclus] heaped up wood and built a pyre a hundred feet this way and that; then they laid the dead all sorrowfully upon the top of it. They flayed and dressed many fat sheep and oxen before the pyre, and Achilles took fat from all of them and wrapped the body therein from head to foot, heaping the flayed carcasses all round it. Against the bier he leaned two-handled jars of honey and unguents; four proud horses did he then cast upon the pyre, groaning the while he did so. The dead hero had had nine house dogs; two of them did Achilles slay and threw upon the pyre; he also put twelve brave sons of noble Trojans to the sword and laid them with the rest, for he was full of bitterness and fury. Then he committed all to the resistless and devouring might of the fire” (*The Iliad of Homer*, trans. S. Butler [Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, 1942], 356).

⁵³ There are other forms of “mummification” or “desiccation” of the corpse, particularly in “primitive” cultures, the most common being drying the body with smoke or solar heat. For details, see E. Hartland, “Death and Disposal of the Dead,” 4:418.

⁵⁴ There were three “levels” of mummification; the method chosen depended largely on the financial means of the family. For extensive details, including citations from contemporary sources (both Egyptian and Greek), see H. Hall, “Death and Disposal of the Dead (Egyptian),” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 4:461–62.

cremation, though it was later (8th C. A.D. in Japan) adopted with the spread of Buddhism.⁵⁵ Islam rejects cremation.⁵⁶

The few instances of cremation in the OT are not presented as in any way typical. They are, instead, unusual and exceptional. Every such historical account, legal prescription, or prophetic proclamation is associated with or occasioned by war or judgment for sin. The biblical text suggests that cremation was viewed as abhorrent or at least offensive. The connotations of fire imagery in Scripture are consistent with this reaction.

These observations are strictly descriptive. There is no normative statement forbidding, allowing, or commanding cremation, (the only exception being the two legal dictates in tightly defined situations as retribution for particularly heinous sin.) On the other hand, it must be observed that neither is there any prescriptive statement establishing burial as the only acceptable practice for God's people. In and of themselves, descriptive statements in the biblical text are not normative. Even though we have a consistent, positive pattern of burial, and even though we have some indication of God's preference for burial in two particular situations (Moses and Jesus), we cannot hermeneutically extrapolate a divine imperative for all situations. For this we need to involve additional considerations, both theological and cultural.⁵⁷ Those issues will be addressed in part two of this article.

⁵⁵ For a historical survey of cremation, see Davis, *What About Cremation?* 19–33 and Hartland, “Death and Disposal of the Dead,” 4:411–44. Nock considers both cremation and burial practices in the Roman world, but also includes a wide-ranging survey of other contemporary cultures across the ancient world (“Cremation and Burial”). See also the related articles on death in Chinese, Buddhist, Hindu, Japanese, Greek, and Roman contexts in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* (4:446–507 *passim*). The cultural, philosophical, and theological significance of cremation by various groups will be considered below.

⁵⁶ See <www.islamtoday.net>; specific reference to cremation on this site can be found at this shortened URL: <<http://tinyurl.com/hhszg>>.

⁵⁷ On the question of normativity in historical narrative, see Rodney J. Decker, “Polity and the Elder Issue,” *Grace Theological Journal* 9 (1988): 263–66; also available online at <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/polity.pdf>>.