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Burning the Bones of the Dead

Shaul Bar

Summary

There are several incidents in the Hebrew Bible where the bones of the dead were burned. In addition we read in the Hebrew Bible and from extra Biblical sources that the bones of the dead were taken from the grave and were left unburied. Thus, the question that we pose here is: what is the significance of these actions when the person is dead already? We will show that burning the bones of the dead was a bad omen and it meant total obliteration of the dead. It came to profane the memory of the dead since no honor was paid to him and his spirit wondered aimlessly. It was an end to continuity and the final extinction of the deceased, who had not been “gathered to his ancestors.” In other words, he did not have a share in the resurrection of the dead.

Various forms of death appear in the Hebrew Bible as well as “death” after death. In other words, we find a description in the Hebrew Bible where that the bones of the dead were taken from the grave and were burned. For example, the bones of the king of Moab were burned (Amos 2:1) and in another instance King Josiah had the bones taken out of the graves and burned on the altar(2 Kgs 23:16). In another episode the bones of the kings of Judah, it’s officials, the priests, the prophets and the inhabitants of Jerusalem were taken from their graves and were left unburied on the face of the earth (Jer 8:1-2). What stands behind these actions and in what context do they appear? The people were already dead, why then burn their bones and desecrate their graves? We will try to answer why the Bible describes such a method of execution and what the meaning is for this form of Death. We have to remember that by burning the bones and taking them out of the grave it meant that the deceased were left unburied.

1. Burning the Bones of the Dead

Reading the Hebrew Bible shows that there are two cases in the Bible where the bones of the deceased people were burned.

In the book of Amos we read that cremation of the dead, including the corpse of a Gentile, is a sin for which there is no atonement: “Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Moab, for four, I will not stay the punishment: because he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime” (Amos 2:1). God will punish Moab for a misdeed that had nothing to do with Israel. Here the Vulgate has “*quod incenderit ossa regis Idumeae usque ad cinerem*”—to ashes. But as Paul pointed out, this translation is problematic since the Hebrew word cannot mean “to ashes” but only “to lime”.¹ Indeed the Aramaic Targum translated it to lime and provides further details of the sin: “Since he burnt the bones of the king of Edom and whitewashed [with] them his house like with plaster/lime.” This may be a reference to the war in which Jehoram, king of Israel, and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, in alliance with Edom, attacked Moab (2 Kgs 3:4–27).² However this particular incident is not mentioned. The implication was total destruction of the corpse. The bones were burnt so that the “ashes became as fine and white as powdered chalk.”³

There are some scholars who suggested the violation committed by Moab was human sacrifice. It was Albright who accepted Tur Sinai emendation of Amos 2:1 to “a human sacrifice to a demon.”⁴ But as Andersen and Freedman pointed out, the bones were not burned in sacrifice but removed and buried. “When bones are mentioned alone

¹ Shalom M. Paul, *Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 72.

² A. H. van Zyl, *The Moabites* (POS 3; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960) 20.

³ R. Gradwohl, *Die Farben im Alten Testament: Eine Terminologische Studie* (BZAW 83; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1963) 86-87.

⁴ W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) 240; Tur –Sinai, *halašon wehaseper* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1954) 1.40.

it is often a reference to a dead body, especially in context of burial.”⁵

To understand why bones might be burned, we must remember the ancient belief in their power. This is manifested in Elisha’s posthumous miracle: the dead man who revives when his body comes into contact with the prophet’s bones (2 Kgs 13:20–21). It is unlikely, though, that Amos believed this. More plausible is that he thought that even enemies deserve a proper burial.⁶ What is more, burning the bones of the dead prevents the mourners from paying their last respects and does not allow the deceased to find rest.

Another incident of burning the bones of the dead (this time recounted without blame) involves Josiah: “Josiah turned and saw the graves that were there on the hill; and he had the bones taken out of the graves and burned on the altar. Thus he defiled it, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord foretold by the man of God who foretold these happenings” (2 Kgs 23:16).⁷ The reference is to 1 Kings 13:2, where, when Jeroboam offered incense on the altar at Bethel, the man of God from Judah prophesied that a future king of the house of David, Josiah by name, would burn human bones on the illegitimate altar. Note that Josiah does not seem to be aware of the prophecy. Only the bones of the man of God from Judah and of his host in Bethel (the “prophet who came from Samaria”) are spared the ignominy of cremation (v. 18).⁸

⁵ Francis I. Andesen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos* (AB 24a; New York: Doubleday, 1989), 288.

⁶ Hans Walter Wolf, *Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997) 162.

⁷ See the explanations for this verse in: W. Boyd Barrick, “Burning Bones at Bethel: A Closer Look at 2Kings 23, 16a,” *SJOT* 14(2000) 3-16.

⁸ Gray points out that according to 1 Kings 13 the prophet “came out of Judah” and that the reference to Samaria is anachronistic, since the city did not yet exist at the time of Jeroboam. In fact, here Samaria refers not to the city but to the Northern Kingdom; the prophet is the old prophet of Bethel of 1 Kings 13. See John Gray, *I & II Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster

In this instance, the two main reasons for burning the bones seem to have been to profane the memory of the dead and to defile the altar (23:16). A human corpse is the ultimate source of impurity and can defile human beings as well as objects. Any part of dead body communicated ritual uncleanness. According to Josephus, in the time of the Roman legate Coponius “some Samaritans defiled the altar and threw about dead men’s bones in the porticoes.”⁹ Removing a corpse from the grave and burning the bones was an atrocious deed meant to profane the dead person’s memory.

According to Robinson burning human bones on the altar made it unusable in the future and showed contempt for the holiness of the sanctuary.¹⁰ He believes that the editors included the story in order to show that Jeroboam’s altar at Bethel was never accepted by God as a true altar. The restriction of sacrifice to Jerusalem was the teaching of Deuteronomy. Thus the editors used the story of the man of God to show that the sanctuary at Bethel was built by Jeroboam in defiance of the law of the covenant.¹¹ Sweeny similarly says that the destruction of the altar to the ground, to dust, resembles Moses destruction of the golden calf in Exodus 32:20. As for the burning of the bones from the tombs on the hill overlooking Bethel recalls 1Kings 13 the purpose was to desecrate the altar.¹²

According to the parallel passage in the book of Chronicle “He burned the bones of priests on their altars and purged Judah and Jerusalem.”(2Chr 34:5). In our passage the emphasis is on the bones of the priests and not common people. It was Dillard who pointed out that although not explicitly stated, the Chronicler implies that Josiah

Press, 1963) 672–673; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; New York : Doubleday, 1988) 290

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.2.2.

¹⁰ J. Robinson, *The Second Book of Kings* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1976) 224.

¹¹ *Ibid* 225.

¹² Marvin A. Sweeny, *I & II Kings* (Louisville : Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) 449

executed the priest of Baal following the precedent set by Jehu (2Kgs 10) and Jehoiada (23:17//2Kgs 11:18).¹³ He points to measure for measure the priest who burned sacrifice to Baal have their own bones burned on the same altar.¹⁴ Evidently Josiah took the bones out of the sepulchers and burned them upon the altar and defiled it.

2. Non Burial

Burning the bones of the dead and taking them out of the grave had a terrible implication it meant that the deceased remained unburied. To remain unburied was a curse. Non burial was worse than death, because the spirit of the dead could not find rest and would never reach the underworld. In the Ancient world the dead were offered food because of the belief that they can influence events in the world of the living. The dead will help the living if the latter provide for their needs, but will hurt them if they are neglected. The Bible is clearly antagonistic to inquiring of the dead or providing them with food and drink. The prohibition of magic and necromancy, in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, is motivated by the fact that these were among the abhorrent rituals of the Canaanites, whom the Israelites dispossessed. The Bible does not deny that it is possible to communicate with the dead; but it totally proscribes the practice. It mentions sacrifices to the dead (Ps 16:4; 106:28; Lev 19:26; 1 Sam 14:32–35; Ezek 33:25), but always rejects them. Providing the dead with food was not part of Israelite culture, and when it did penetrate was rebuffed by official circles.

In the Book of Jeremiah 8:1-2 we read about a judgment oracle which describes the desecration of the graves of the kings of Judah, its official the priests, the prophets and the inhabitation of Jerusalem.

¹³ Raymond B. Dillard, *2Chronicles* (Waco Texas: Word Books, 1987) 278.

¹⁴ *Ibid*; J.A. Thompson, *1,2 Chronicles* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 375

Accordingly their bones will be taken out of their graves and will be exposed to the sun, the moon and all host of heaven. The bones of the priests are a reference to the bones of the priests of Baal while, the bones of the prophets according to Targum Jonathan refers to the false prophets. Ironically the bones of the devotees of astral bodies will be displayed to the same bodies they worshiped. The result they shall not be gathered or buried they will remain as dung on the face of the earth. The description of the bone's of dead rotting upon the ground without burial and becoming fertilizers of the soil appears also in the book of Psalms in reference of desecrating the memory of the dead(Ps 8311). The fulfillment of this prophecy is mentioned in the Apocrypha (Baruch 2:21f); there we read: "the bones of our kings and of our fathers have been taken from their resting place; and there they lie exposed to the heat by day and the frost by night. They died a painful death by famine, sword and disease ,"(v.25).

The Talmud also alludes to our episode. Accordingly when the Moabites and the Ammonites heard the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem they encouraged Nebuchadnezzar to attack. When he replied that there is no place to his army to encamp outside of Jerusalem they replied: "Their graves are better than your palace".¹⁵ Thus Nebuchadnezzar marched to Jerusalem and stayed with his army at the graveyard and took out all the corpses.

In another passage in the book of Jeremiah the curse of non burial is also found: "The carcasses of this people shall be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth, with none to frighten them off" (Jer 7:33)—an echo of Deuteronomy 28:26. That there are none to frighten off the scavengers implies that there are no survivors or no one who pities them. Similar is "they shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth" (Jer 16:4).

¹⁵ Sanh.96b.

The curse of nonburial is also found in extra-biblical sources. For example, in the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon: “May Ninurta, leader of the gods, fell you with his fierce arrow, and fill the plain with your corpses, give your flesh to eagles and vultures to feed upon.”¹⁶ As for the bones in the same Vassal Treaties we read the following curse: “...let barely rations to be ground disappear for you, so they grind your bones, (the bones of) your sons and daughter instead of barely rations...”¹⁷ “Let dogs and pigs eat your flesh, and may your spirit have no one to take care of and pour libation to him.”¹⁸ “May the earth not receive your body for burial, may the bellies of the dogs and pigs be your burial place.”¹⁹ Clearly victorious kings treated their vanquished enemies savagely. The annals of Ashurbanipal report what he did to his foes: “I fed their corpses cut into small pieces, to dogs, pigs, zibu-birds, vultures, the birds of the sky and (also) to the fish of the ocean.”²⁰ In Ashurbanipal campaign against Susa the Elamite capital he describes his actions: “The tombs of their former and latter kings, (who had) not revered Ashur and Istar, my lords ,(who had) harassed my royal ancestors, I (Ashurbanipal) ravaged , tore down and laid open to the sun. Their bones I carried off to Assyria, thus imposing restlessness upon their spirits, and depriving them of food offerings and libations.”²¹ In the Epic of Gilgamesh, after Enkidu returns from the underworld, he is asked “Him whose corpse was cast out upon the steppe hast thou seen?” and replies: “I have seen: His spirit finds no rest in the netherworld.”²²

¹⁶ “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” trans. Erica Reiner, *ANET* 538, no. 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid*,no.47

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ *Ibid* 539, no. 56.

²⁰ “The Death of Sennacherib,” trans. A. Leo Oppenheim, *ANET*, 288. Iv. 65–82.

²¹ M. Streck, *Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergang II* (Leipzig :Vorderasiatische Bibliothek, 1916) VI.70.; William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah I* (Philadelphia :Fortress Press, 1986) 271-272.

²² “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” trans. E.A. Speiser, *ANET* 99. Xii. 152–154.

When the bones of dead were burnt and taken out of the grave it meant that the dead was cursed. The idea was that they will not find rest and their spirit will not reach the underworld. Therefore, not surprisingly we find curses against people who might desecrate the grave. In a Phoenician inscription of the Sidonian kings Tabnit and his son Eshmunazar, found on a sarcophagus from the end of the sixth century BCE, warns against those who might desecrate the grave: “May there be no resting place for you with the Rephaim.”²³

A comparison of the forms of judicial execution mentioned in the Bible with those in the Talmud indicates that the latter made an effort to preserve the body of an executed man.²⁴ The difference may stem from the fact that in Talmudic times the idea of resurrection was well developed. Even though the idea of the resurrection of the dead was not fully developed in the Biblical literature we still find some hints about it. The fact that the bones of the dead were burned and the subject was taken from his grave indicates to the existence posthumous concept. The notion that the righteous and the wicked share the same faith and are found in Sheol was too simplistic one. Indeed, we read that the underworld is a void; the dead cannot praise the Lord and do not know anything about the living. The notion of the underworld as the final station of life, from which there is no return and which is utterly divorced from reward and punishment, came to represents too naive and too cruel a notion. It left no room for answering the thorny question of why evildoers prosper and the righteous suffer. Hence the biblical texts began asking questions about the underworld and the survival of the soul. As Ecclesiastes wondered: “Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust. Who knows if a man’s life-breath does rise upward and if a beast’s breath does sink down into the earth?” (Eccles. 3:20–21). This same book, evidently written between 500 BCE and 100 CE, concludes: “And the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the life-breath returns to God Who bestowed it” (Eccles. 12:7). This clearly reflects a belief in the immortality of the soul.

²³ KAI 13, lines 7–8; for a similar curse see KAI 14, line 8.

²⁴ B Sanhedrin 45a, 52a; B Pesahim 75a; B Ketubot 37b.

The fact that the bones of the dead were burned and the subject was taken from his grave indicates to the existence posthumous concept. Non burial means an end to continuity and the final extinction of the deceased, who had not been “gathered to his ancestors.” In another words his spirit wandered aimlessly thus he will not have part in the resurrection of the dead. Indeed, pagans feared that the manner of death could influence whether or a not a man could be resurrected. As late as the tenth century the Jewish masses held similar views despite a contrary rabbinic view.²⁵ According to Saul Lieberman, medieval literature intimated that non burial was a bad omen for the deceased and a severe punishment, indicating that the man was a sinner.²⁶

4. Conclusion

In the Hebrew Bible execution by burning meant the total obliteration of the evil. The usage of the fire motif comes to stress that nothing is left from the sinner.²⁷ Burning the bones of the dead and taking them out of the grave was done in order to prevent the deceased from finding rest. Burning the bones of the dead was an

²⁵. Saul Lieberman, “Some Aspects of After Life in Early Rabbinic Literature,” in *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1965) 2. 528 no 112; M. Stein, “Mother Earth in Old Hebrew Literature,” *Tarbiz* 9 (1938) 272–274(Hebrew).

²⁶. He goes on to say, however, that the Sages also believed that the premature death of a normal sinner and non burial served as atonement and helped the man acquire his share of the world to come. According to Lieberman, the Christians adopted a similar tradition; in the late Middle Ages some requested that their bodies be thrown into the fields or a river, like the carcasses of animals; but such abuse is contrary to the spirit of Judaism. See B Sanhedrin 46b and 104a; Lieberman, “Afterlife in Early Rabbinic Literature,” 530.

²⁷ The fire motif appears many times in the prophetic literature in war oracles were fire is to destroy the enemy. The divine fire in battle often appears in the mythology of the ancient Near East. See: Isa.29:6; 30:27,30; 66:15-16; Ps.18:9,13; 50:2-3;104:4.

Shaul Bar, **Burning the Bones of the Dead**. IBS 30/1. 2012

atrocious deed meant to profane the dead person's memory. The act of burning came to prevent the dead from being gathered to his kin in the underworld. His spirit wandered aimlessly without finding a rest and therefore, will not have part in the resurrection of the dead.

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