



BURIAL IV. IN ISLAM

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Although replete with reminders of death and its significance, the Qur'ān is silent on the subject of funerals. The books of prophetic Hadith customarily contain chapters entitled *janā'ez* (e.g., Bokārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo, n.d., II, pp. 85-109), but the instructions found there are mostly general in nature (injunctions to bury the dead swiftly, to handle them gently and with respect, and to refrain from excessive lamentation). It is in the handbooks of *feqh* that the detailed procedures for washing, enshrouding, praying over, and burying the dead are expounded, with little variation among the different schools of Islamic law (in Shī'ite books, however, these regulations are to be found as a subdivision of *ṭahāra*, ritual purity).

When it is apparent that a person is in a state of impending death (*eḥteẓār*), he should be laid out so that the soles of his feet are turned to the *qebla*; it is desirable that the head should be slightly raised so that it too faces the *qebla*. The articles of faith should be repeated by those in attendance, and the dying person should be urged to accompany them if at all able to do so. It is also advisable to recite certain Koranic passages (*Sūrat yāsīn* (36), *Sūrat al-aḥzāb* (33), *Āyat al-Korsī* (2:255), and the last three verses of *Sūrat al-baqara* (2:284-86)) until the moment of death. If the expiring person experiences difficulty in giving up the ghost, he should be placed on the floor in the place where he customarily offered his prayers.



Once death has occurred, the eyes and mouth of the deceased should be closed and his limbs straightened. The body should then be covered with a piece of cloth. If death takes place at night, a candle or lamp should be left burning next to the corpse.

The body should be washed and prepared for burial as soon as it is cold. Washing, together with enshrouding, performing the funeral prayer, and burying the corpse, is a *farz kefāya* (or *wājeb kefā'ī*): a duty incumbent on the community as a whole but performed on its behalf by certain individuals. A male deceased should be washed by men and a female deceased by women; a spouse, however, may wash his or her dead partner. The obligatory minimum is one complete washing; three washings are *sonna*. The body may be washed an odd number of times in excess of three, but this is discouraged (*makrūh*). According to Shi'ite and Shafe'ite *feqh*, the water used should be cold; Hanafites view the use of warm water as preferable (*mandūb*). First the clothes of the deceased should be removed, but the private parts (*'awrat*) must remain covered at all times (Shafe'ites specify, however, that the whole body be covered with a thin and porous garment). The limbs and the trunk should be washed in a fixed sequence (*gosl-e tartībī*); it is not proper simply to pour water over the whole body. Sunnite *feqh* requires that the water used in the first two washings be mixed with soap or some other cleaning agent and that used in the third and final washing be mixed with some perfume, preferably camphor. Shi'ite *feqh* specifies that the first washing be done with water mixed with the perfume of the lotus; the second, with water mixed with camphor; and the third, with pure water.

Next the body should be anointed—preferably with freshly ground camphor—at the points that touch the ground in the course of prostration: the forehead, the palms of the hands, the tip of the nose, the kneecaps, and the tips of the big toes. This process is known as *hanūṭ*. Camphor should also be applied to the eyes, the ears, and the armpits.

Providing oneself with a shroud before death is disapproved; the heirs of the deceased should purchase it, using for the purpose the money he has left. The material used should be white and have been washed at least once. Shi'ite and Hanafite *feqh* forbids the use of silk, as well as saffron-dyed or gold-embroidered cloth, for both men and women; Shafe'ites regard it as permissible for women. No inscription of any kind should be made on the shroud. The shroud for men consists of three pieces: the *ezār* (Pers. *long*), which must cover the area from the navel to the knees but may extend



upwards to the chest and downwards to the feet; the *qamīṣ* (Pers. *pīrāhan*), also known as *qamīṣ al-ākera* (shirt of the hereafter), reaching from the shoulders to the upper half of the shins, and the *lefāfa* (Pers. *sartāsari*), which encloses the whole body. Two additional pieces of cloth are used in enshrouding women: a *kemār* to cover the face and a band wound around the breasts. It is permissible to secure the shroud with a strip of cloth tied around the waist.

The final point in preparing the body for burial is the insertion in each armpit of a freshly cut branch, preferably from a date palm, the two branches being known as *jarīdatayn*.

Martyrs are exempt from all the foregoing procedures, and are buried in the state in which they fell.

Once the preparations are complete, the prayer for the dead (*namāz-e mayyet*) is performed. It consists of five *takbīrs* and is made without either *rokūʿ* (bending) or *sojūd* (prostration). The one who leads the prayer should position himself close to the body, with its head to his right. Hanafite and Shiʿite *feqh* are agreed that *namāz-e mayyet* must not be performed in a mosque, with the exception of the Masjed al-Ḥarām in Mecca, but Shafeʿites regard it as preferable to do so.

The body must be carried to the cemetery in a *tābūt* (coffin) on the shoulders of the mourners; the use of a beast of burden or other conveyance is forbidden, unless there is a considerable distance to be traversed. It is meritorious to assist in the carrying of a *tābūt*, even if only for a few paces. At the cemetery, the body should be rested on the ground three times while approaching the grave. The grave should be dug deep enough to protect it from wild animals and to prevent any odor from reaching the surface. A pillow of earth is made on which the head of the deceased is laid, and the area above the head is strengthened with bricks, stones, or clay to protect it from the falling soil. It is permissible to strengthen the sides of the grave if there is danger of its collapsing, but the floor of the grave must be pure earth. The body is inserted in the tomb head first and laid on its right side with the face turned to the *qebla*. The one who places the body in the tomb should be bareheaded, barefooted, and in a state of ritual purity. Before leaving the tomb by its lower end, he should recite the Islamic creed into the ear of the deceased in order to prepare him for the interrogation by Monker and Nakīr. After the grave is filled with earth, the soil covering it is liberally sprinkled with water,



and the mourners plunge their fingers into the moist soil, reciting certain Koranic passages and prayers.

Shi'ite practice adds to the foregoing certain distinctive features of its own. The recitation of true beliefs (*'aqā'ed-e ḥaqqā*) made in the presence of the dying and in the grave before closing it includes an enumeration of the Twelve Imams. According to Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesī (*Ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, p. 386), the dying believer is in fact visited by the Prophet and the Twelve Imams who assist him in leaving this world. The dying are given *āb-e torbat*—water into which a small amount of soil from Karbalā has been mixed—to drink, and *torbat* is also mixed into the camphor used in *ḥanūṭ*. Shi'ite *feqh* recognizes a prayer of two *rak'as*, known as *namāz-e waḥṣat*, performed on the first night spent by the deceased in the tomb in order to lessen his terror. Shi'ism also regards as desirable the transport of the body for burial in the shrine cities of Qom, Mašhad, and the *'atabāt* in Iraq (also Ardabīl, in the Safavid period), although exhumation for this purpose is not recommended.

Throughout the history of Islamic Iran, various supplementary customs and practices can also be noted; some of them violate the prescriptions of *feqh*. The participation of women in funeral processions and burials, strongly discouraged by *feqh*, seems to have become standard practice early on. Extravagant forms of lamentation, forbidden by various Hadith, have been extremely common: these include loud wailing, laceration of the face, the breast, and the arms, the tearing of garments, the plucking out of the beard and the hair, the pouring of dust on the head, and the rubbing of mud on the face. A class of professional women mourners came into being not later than the Safavid period and continued to exist until quite recently (Massé, pp. 96, 99). Not even *'olamā'* were immune to the temptation of unrestrained mourning: when the great Shafe'ite scholar Emām-al-Ḥaramayn Abu'l-Ma'ālī 'Abd-al-Malek Jovaynī died in Nīšāpūr in 478/1085, his students and colleagues ripped their turbans, broke their pens and inkpots, and destroyed the *menbar* from which Jovaynī had preached (Rāwandī, pp. 340, 342).

The privileges the royal and the rich enjoyed in their lifetimes were frequently reflected in the manner of their burials. Their bodies would invariably be washed at home instead of being taken to the public house for the washing of the dead. The Safavid court had its own washer of the dead (*ḡassālbāšī*), who in addition to receiving a fee would be allowed to keep the rich garments the deceased had been wearing (Rāvandī, p. 365). When the Buyid minister Sayf-al-Dawla died in 356/967, his body was washed nine times in rosewater to



which sandalwood and camphor had been added, dried with rich brocade, and completely embalmed in camphor (Rāvandī, p. 319). Instead of being carried in a simple *tābūt*, the bodies of the rich were often conveyed to the cemetery in a palanquin (*takt-e ravān*) covered with silk curtains (Rāvandī, p. 317). During the Safavid and Qajar periods, the funeral corteges of the rich would often include a number of horses that carried the garments of the deceased (particularly his turban) as well as his weapons—in the case of a soldier—and other personal effects. This feature was probably derived from the mourning processions held during Moḥarram. The playing of mournful music on trumpets and drums was also common.

The bodies of the poor would be taken to the house for the washing of the dead (*ḡassāl-ḵāna* or *mordašū(r)-ḵāna*). *Feqh* prefers that the deceased be washed by a close relative of the same gender, and strictly speaking a fee may be charged only for certain supplementary services, not for the act of washing itself. The professional *ḡassāl* or *mordašū(r)* has nonetheless been a universal and unquestioned institution. He even plays a role in seeking forgiveness for the deceased: saying *al-ʿafw* (forgiveness), he blows into a bowl of water known as *kāsa-ye ʿafw*, which he pours over the head of the deceased at the conclusion of the washing (Hedāyat, p. 73).

Other popular traditions include the placing of a Qurʾān on the breast of the deceased immediately after expiration; leaving a glass of sherbet next to him in the hope that he will drink from the fountain of Kawṭar in paradise; carrying a leg of lamb and a quantity of *ḥalwā* in front of the cortege; and, on the first night of the deceased's absence from his home (*šām-e ḡarībān*), leaving a brick with a candle burning on it in the spot where he lay during his last hours. There are also numerous local funerary traditions. In Mašhad, for example, the *tābūt* is carried around the tomb of Imam Reżā in order to gain his intercession for the deceased (Šakūrzāda, pp. 180-81).

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