IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE, people express their grief in many ways. I once asked a funeral director what was the most unusual song he remembered being requested at a funeral. He replied, "At one man's funeral the widow and children asked for the soloist to sing 'Let the Lower Lights Be Burning.'" He continued, "I softly whispered to myself, 'I guess they all knew him better than we did.' As a pastor, I recall an only son, whose father was already buried, putting expensive jewelry on his mother's corpse and more in the casket. He then buried all of it with her body.

Ancient Egyptians shared the universal custom practiced by all cultures, even exceeding most in their mourning for the dead and conducting of elaborate funerals. As today, more financial resources enabled a family to have a more embellished ceremony in putting away their loved ones.

The activity immediately following a person's death was described graphically by two ancient writers. Herodotus, the first Greek historian, gives an insightful and discerning description of the initial stages in the mourning for an ancient Egyptian immediately subsequent to his passing.

He wrote, "When a man that has repute is dead and his household has lost him, then all the womankind from that house plaster their head and face with mud, and afterwards, having left the corpse in the house, they themselves wander through the city, beating their breasts; while so doing, they wear their clothes girt up and show their breasts, and with them are all their kindred women; on the other side, the men beat their breasts, and they too wear their clothes girt up. When they have done all this they then carry the corpse to the embalming."1

Diodorus, an outstanding scholar of the fourth century A.D., and mentor of Chrysostom, gave a similar account that agreed with many particulars of Herodotus. His account, however, included some additional details. According to him, "When any of them chance to die, their friends and relatives wander the town until the body is buried, heaping dust on their heads and mourning. Indeed, they partake not of the bath, nor of wine, nor of any food worth mentioning, nor do they wear any bright colored garments."2

The process of embalming, also called mumification, as practiced by the ancient Egyptians developed over several centuries. In the early days, called the Old Kingdom (2830-2130 B.C.), only members of the royalty, especially...
the king, possessed access to it for their families. By the time of the New Kingdom (1570-1070 B.C.), the practice extended to almost anyone who desired and could afford it. The process differed according to one's ability to pay. The most fully developed form contained three basic steps. First, the embalmers removed all the internal organs except the heart. The Egyptians considered the heart necessary to activity in the afterlife. Knowing the internal organs decomposed first, the embalmers mummified them separately. They placed the internal organs in canopic jars in the tomb at the time of the burial. Believing the heart was the seat of intelligence and emotion, the Egyptians left it in the body. Contending the brain had no significant value, they removed it through the nose and discarded it.

Second, the embalmers packed and covered the body with natron, a salty drying agent. They left the body to dry out for 40 to 50 days. By this time, the body's moisture had been absorbed, leaving only the hair, skin, and bones. They then stuffed the body cavity with resin, sawdust, or linen to restore the deceased's form and features.

Third, the embalmers wrapped the body in many layers of linen, inserting good luck or protective charms, known as amulets. Since Egyptians considered the scarab beetle the most important good luck piece, embalmers placed it above the heart. The priests recited prayers or incantations at each stage of the wrapping. This entire process or operation often required as many as 15 days. The final act consisted of putting the body in a shroud or winding sheet. The entire mummification process required about 70 days.

Those in charge of placing the mummy in a decorated coffin also placed prepared furniture, carved statues, games, food, and other items to be buried with the mummy. One final ritual remained, called "The Opening of the Mouth." Egyptians believed this ceremony gave the deceased ability to speak again, eat again, and have full use of his body in the "other world." Having completed the work of embalming and the accompanying rituals, the embalmers sealed the sarcophagus and pronounced it ready for burial.

What about the burial ceremony, last rites, and internment? Unless the person was affluent or of great importance, his funeral resembled one of today but in the context of Egyptian culture and properties. For the poor or anyone not wealthy nor of nobility, funeral services involved little, if any, ceremony. The preparations steeped the body for a short time in bitumen or natron or perhaps even rubbed the body with these substances. They placed his few personal ornaments on it and wrapped it in one piece of linen. To aid him in the nether world, his staff and sandals accompanied him, the former to support him and the latter to protect his feet. A few amulets to help him meet his foe in the grave completed the package.

Not so, the burial of a monarch, his family, or an

food, wine, and any kind of delicacy or dainty fare.

During this time, no one made use of baths or ungents nor did they recline on couches or enjoy the pleasures of sexual love. The people rather continued to sing dirges and spent the days in grief. Meanwhile those preparing the body assembled the paraphernalia necessary for the funeral and placed it in the coffin.

The Scriptures tell us Joseph instructed the physicians in his service to embalm the aged patriarch Jacob. This varied from ordinary Hebrew custom, but the faithful son planned to fulfill his father's request. He expected to carry the body back for burial in the Cave of Machpelah. This meant Jacob would realize his ambition to lie in Canaan with Abraham, Isaac, their wives, and with his first wife Leah. This showed a noble trait in Joseph, since Jacob buried Rachel, Joseph's mother, by the roadside near Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19).

Pharaoh granted Joseph's request concerning Jacob's burial. What a royal procession that must have made the journey! The Book of Genesis describes the details. Everyone who saw the group immediately realized Joseph's importance! The pompous funeral defied description. One Old Testament student says concerning the caravan, "In it, besides members of the family, high Egyptian officials took part, and it was even accompanied by a considerable military escort. The Canaanites were astonished at this funeral." The Scriptures give no clue as to which road the funeral train took. Normally traffic went up the western coast of Canaan, cut over to Beersheba, approaching Hebron from the west. Some evidence exists, however, that they took the detour across the Sinai Peninsula to the land east of the Jordan River, approaching Hebron from the east. At some nearby location before reaching the Cave of Machpelah, Joseph held a seven-day mourning period for his father.

The ceremonies impressed the Canaanites and enhanced the Jews in their eyes. How could it have done otherwise? They named the river bed to commemorate the mourning of the Egyptians that took place there. The expression "Abel Mizraim" means "mourning of Egyptians." Thus ended the life of Jacob and an epoch in Hebrew history.


The Antiquities of Egypt: Translation in Two Volumes, 1797, The Bible and Other Ancient History of Oubians, United Book. Section 71 (New Haven: Yale University) and London 212: J. Thacker


Fred Wood is pastor emeritus, Eudora Baptist Church, director, Preach-Teach Ministries, Memphis, Tennessee.

"When any of them chance to die, their friends and relatives wander the town until the body is buried, heaping dust on their heads and mourning. Indeed, they partake not of the bath, nor of wine, nor of any food worth mentioning, nor do they wear any bright colored garments."