

# Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.  
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

## Israelite Burial Customs

*"The claim that Jesus is raised by God is a claim of divine vindication for the deeds and words of Jesus. His life has been that of the Word made flesh in Israel, and God preserves its fleshly record intact."*

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Given that the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus are so central to our faith, I thought it would be most helpful to post this extended comment from Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh.

Archaeological evidence and later scribal Pharisaic documents disclose to us the meaning of Israelite burial customs at the time of Jesus.

Israelites regarded death as a lengthy process, not a moment in time.

In elite circles in Judea, between the last breath and sundown, the body would be laid out on a shelf in a tomb carved into limestone bedrock outside Jerusalem.

Mourning rites would commence, continuing throughout the year as the body underwent decomposition. The rotting of the flesh was regarded as painful, but also expiatory for the dead person. One's evil deeds were thought to be embedded in the flesh and to dissolve along with it.

After a year, the mourning ritual concluded.

In the first century, people thought that the bones retained the personality, and that God would use them to support new flesh for the resurrection.

After this year of purification and putrefaction, the bones of the deceased were often collected and placed in an ossuary or "bone box," which was in fact a second burial casket. This process was called the *ossilegium*, "the collection of bones."

The ossuary was designed like a box for scrolls, just long enough for the thigh bones to be laid in like scroll spindles awaiting a new hide and new inscription by the divine hand.

In an alternate image, the bones could be regarded as loom posts made ready for God to weave a new body.

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In keeping with these views of the character of resurrection, inkwells and spindle whorls have been found in excavated tombs.

This day of second burial (of the bones) marked the end of the family's mourning and its turn toward the hope of reunion and resurrection.

Obviously, then, the disappearance or loss of a body after death would be experienced as a greater calamity than the death itself because the family would be unable to prepare the bones for resurrection. ...

These cultural beliefs and practices provide the context for understanding the claims of the first generations of Jesus' followers about the resurrected Jesus.

In John's account, Jesus dies condemned by the Judean populace, leaders, and crowds alike (although at the hands of the Romans).

Then a ranking Judean, Joseph of Arimathea, takes his body into custody.

It is laid in a separate tomb, to begin to serve the sentence of decay in order to atone for its sins.

It is precisely this penal / atonement process that is interrupted if the tomb is suddenly discovered empty.

To say that Jesus was raised is to say that God overturned the judgment of Israel's chief priests and the Judean populace, the judgment that Jesus needed to rot to prepare for resurrection.

Instead, God supposedly took Jesus directly from last breath to resurrection because there had been no guilt in his flesh.

God intervened before the rotting started, hence God overturned the death sentence.

The claim that Jesus is raised by God is a claim of divine vindication for the deeds and words of Jesus. His life has been that of the Word made flesh in Israel, and God preserves its fleshly record intact.

Taken in its cultural context, the claim of resurrection for Jesus asserts that his death was wrong and has been overturned by a higher judge.

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This cultural interpretation of the death of Jesus contrasts sharply with the theological one: that Jesus' death was right and necessary and required by God "to take away the sin of the world." ...

For John, Jesus calamitously died due to the intransigence of the Judeans, but God rescued and vindicated him because Jesus was in fact the mediator of life itself. (See John 20:31)

The other (theological) tradition ... is not in John.

And contrary to Malina and Rohrbaugh, I would argue it is also not in Matthew, Mark or Luke either.

This cultural background also helps us to understand why the New Testament stresses the bodily resurrection of Jesus – his flesh did not need to rot away in order for his bones to be ready for resurrection. The fact that God raised Jesus without this rotting process confirms and vindicates that Jesus' flesh – his words and deeds – were true, without fault or failing, and can be trusted without hesitation on our part.

We cannot dismiss the bodily aspect of Jesus' resurrection because to do so would be to dismiss the resurrection of his words and deeds which are embedded in his flesh.

And before we get into speculating about Jesus' flesh and bones, let's remember that the resurrected body is connected to the earthly body somewhat like our minds are connected to our brains. Our mind arises from that piece of flesh we call the brain, but it is also more than the brain and has a life that cannot be reduced to the brain.

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Historical background information in this post is drawn from Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, see link below, pages 276-277.

\* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.