

STATUS OF WOMEN:

- In first-century Israel, women were considered second-class citizens, akin to slaves. In a legal context women had very few rights or responsibilities. Middle Eastern men usually represent their families in official and legal matters such as Registering for the Census.
- For many centuries Middle Eastern culture has traditionally closely associated the honour of the family with the sexual behaviour of its women. Violation of this code was extremely serious and, at times, resulted in women being killed by their own families.
- There was a high degree of chivalry in Middle Eastern culture. In situations of danger women could do things that would have been impossible for men. For example, the women were able to assemble under the cross and visit the tomb without fear of being arrested (Lk 24:1-12).
- There was no law that allowed a woman to initiate a divorce. A divorce was not necessarily a public legal act, but usually rested on the husband's decision to conclude the marriage.
- The rule about a brother marrying a childless widow is known as the 'Levirate Law', specified in Deut 25. It was designed to protect a woman who, as a childless widow, had no social status and no-one to provide for her needs.
- A barren woman had no status within the community, so falling pregnant at an advanced age was seen as a great blessing from God (John the Baptist - Lk 1:5-24).

RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE FAMILY:

- Even once married, a woman was never fully accepted into the groom's family until she bears a son. Until that time it has perceived that her loyalties might be divided between her family of origin and her husband's family. The birth of a son led to acceptance and provided a degree of 'social security' for the mother (Jesus presenting his mother to the 'disciple whom he loved' at the crucifixion - Jn 19:25-27).
- A woman was totally dependent upon the care of a man. Initially it would have been her father, then her husband and then her son if she was widowed. If both her husband and sons died (Lk 7:11-17), a woman could be left without any means of support and would be dependent on charity from the village. She would have given up her claim to her own family and could lose her connection to her husband's family.

RELATIONSHIP WITH MEN IN THE COMMUNITY:

- Generally a male would not make eye contact with woman in a public place. It would be expected that a male, as a matter of courtesy and decency (to show that it was safe), would withdraw from an area by about six metres to allow a woman to attend to her business (Jesus and the Samaritan Woman - Jn 4:1-42).
- Speaking to a woman who is unknown to a man would contravene the acceptable social mores of the time. Within the Jewish religious codes rabbis were 'strictly warned' not to talk to women in any public place - not even to their own wives.
- Women were not considered to be reliable witnesses in a court of law (The women were not initially believed about the Resurrection - Lk 24:11).

CONNECTIONS TO JESUS:

- Both women and men travelled with Jesus during his public ministry (Mt 12:46-50). Luke (8:1-3) records the unusual fact that women were in fact financing some of the journey.
- There is evidence that women were able to listen to and, in some respects, interact with Jesus as a rabbi. For example, Mary, the sister of Martha, sat at the feet of Jesus in the mode of a disciple to a rabbi (Lk 10:39).

UNDERLYING SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL BELIEFS:

- A belief in the resurrection (advocated by the Pharisees, but not held by all Jewish sects) dictated many of the burial rituals. Regardless of circumstances every person was entitled to a proper burial. From the moment of death the body would not be left unattended.
- Caring for human remains was considered one of the highest forms of a good deed, as it was carried out without the common expectation (of other good works) that the favour would be returned. Burial was the only service a person could render to another without any anticipation of reciprocation (cf Joseph of Arimathea preparing and burying the corpse of Jesus – Jn 19).
- Whilst ritual impurity would occur through burying a person, this was considered a minor sacrifice relative to the importance of providing a dignified burial. The human body was very directly the work of God.
- The most sacred duty of a Jew was to honour their parents by giving them a proper burial. This expectation was connected to the Fourth Commandment: 'honour your father and mother'.
- The mourning period, especially for parents, could last up to one year, with special commemorative prayers in the family home, after one day, one week 'shivah', to the 30-day period 'shloshim', and on the anniversary of the death (Lord, first let me go and bury my father – Lk 9:59).
- Jewish belief was that the soul hovered near the body for three days after death. The reference to Jesus arriving on the fourth day with respect to the story of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-43) indicated that Lazarus was well and truly dead.

BURIAL CUSTOMS:

- Jewish burial customs required that a body be buried as soon as possible after death, if possible before nightfall (even for executed criminals – Mt 27:57). However a burial could not be performed on the Sabbath. When Jesus was buried in haste prior to the Sabbath the women had to return later to complete the burial rites.
- Generally a large crowd would accompany the body to the burial place. A procession would be formed, stopping on several occasions to recite psalms. The women usually walked ahead of the open bier on which the body was carried, ritually crying and wailing and clapping their hands rhythmically (Jesus raises the Widow's Son – Lk 7:12-15). Close relatives ritually tore their clothes and the men recited the ritual prayer for the dead, the 'Kaddish'.
- The remains of the deceased were clothed in special wrappings. The burial practices required that the body be washed and anointed with spices (Jn 19:39). The practice of bringing aromatic spices to the tomb derived from the necessity of disguising the smell of decay for the benefit of those visiting the tomb for mourning rituals in the first days after the burial.
- Anyone who touched a human body or a grave would have been considered ritually unclean. Hence burial sites were not allowed within the confines of a town.
- Burial in caves was a practice only carried out by wealthy people who could afford the land and labourers to hew out a twin-chambered tomb. The two chambers allowed for a preparation room to conduct the mourning rituals and a secondary space to place the bones of the deceased. The grave was sealed by a large round rock about one metre in diameter that was rolled across the opening in a grooved trench (Jn 20:1).
- Poorer people were buried in the ground in shaft (vertical) graves about 2 metres deep.



THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF JESUS

Lk 23:26-56

Related
Scripture
Passage:
Mt 27: 27-66

cultural context

CRUCIFIXION:

- The Romans viewed crucifixion as the most shameful and degrading of penalties and deterrents. This punishment could not be inflicted upon a Roman citizen. Typically victims were stripped and scourged at the place of judgement prior to being forced to walk naked (to compound their shame) and carry the crossbeam of their cross to the place of their execution. During their final journey criminals were subjected to the abuse and ridicule of the crowd.
- Victims were crucified by hanging or nailing their arms to the crossbeam. The full weight of a body, hung by the arms, would prevent the functioning of the lung muscles, thereby causing death by asphyxiation. The victim's feet were partially supported by a small block of wood, requiring the person to continually push up against their body weight in order to continue breathing.
- If a criminal survived for an extended period of time, death could be hastened by breaking the victim's legs (to prevent them pushing upwards to breathe) or by piercing their heart with a spear.
- In the Roman tradition, the body was left on the cross after death as an additional sign of disgrace and as a warning to the general community.
- It was customary for a placard to be placed on the top of the cross with the name of the victim and the nature of the crime.

CRUCIFIXION IN AN HONOUR AND SHAME SOCIETY:

- As the Palestinian culture placed great importance on public decency, the Jews objected to a man going naked in public, so the Romans allowed condemned criminals to be covered as they were driven along the public streets.
- In an honour and shame society, the ability of a male to absorb extreme pain in a dignified manner added to his sense of honour. The depiction of Jesus suffering in relative silence without abusing his executioners was indicative of an honourable death.
- In Palestine, as another concession to the Jews, victims were offered a drink of spiced wine (mixed with myrrh or gall) to numb the pain. Christ's refusal to drink it was another sign of his intention to die in an honourable manner.

PREPARATION OF THE BODY:

- Jewish law required that the body of a criminal should not remain on the cross overnight to rot (Deut 21:23) and had to be buried the same day. Hence the order to break the legs of the victims and allow the burial to take place immediately.
- The body was anointed with perfumes, such as nard and myrrh (cf The gift of the wise men – Mt 2:1-12) and aloes were also used.
- The body was wrapped in a shroud, the face veiled and the feet tied with linen strips.

ROLE OF WOMEN:

- Women played a significant role in the Passion narratives. An honour and shame society offered protection for women and allowed them to accompany Christ to Calvary and stand at the foot of the cross. The disciple 'whom Jesus loved' (Jn 19:26) must have still been a young boy, under the protection of Mary, to have also been present.
- Similarly on the Saturday evening (at the end of the Sabbath) it was the women who ventured out to buy spices for the anointing of the body.

Related Cultural Sources: *Burial Rites* (5.11) and *Role of Women* (2.9)

cultural context

VIEWS ON RESURRECTION:

- The first strong indication of a belief in the afterlife among the Jewish community was recorded in the Book of Daniel. The death of the Maccabean martyrs in defence of their faith stirred a belief in immortality and resurrection as a reward for their sacrifice ('Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt' - Dan 12:2).
- The Jewish people believed the Messiah would inaugurate the messianic age. Whilst expectations varied, there was a strong underlying belief that with the coming of the Messiah there would be a manifest difference in the manner in which people interacted together ('nation shall not lift up sword against nation...' Mic 4:3).
- The majority of Jews believed in the concept of resurrection. Some thought that all people would rise to face a final judgement, whilst others believed only the righteous would rise while the wicked would stay dead (cf Martha's response to Jesus after the death of Lazarus: 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day' - Jn 11:23-24)
- The Sadducees, who were associated with the upper echelons of the priesthood and the elite of Jewish society, did not accept the idea of resurrection. They saw the reintegration of body and soul after death as unnecessary, particularly as this teaching was not contained in the Torah.

BURIAL SITE:

- Generally a Roman procurator would refuse the request of anyone but a family member to bury an executed criminal. By acceding to the request of Joseph of Arimathea (a member of the council, the Sanhedrin, a prominent wealthy citizen) Pilate showed that he was aware of Joseph's honourable status and of Jewish religious sensitivities with respect to burial occurring after the commencement of the Sabbath.
- The burial chambers of wealthier citizens comprised two distinct compartments: a preparation chamber for the washing and anointing of the body, and an internment chamber which might also contain the remains of previously deceased family members.
- The placing of guards on the tomb (cf Mt 27:62) was done in response to the fear of the Jewish authorities that a 'resurrection event' would be staged by the apostles of Jesus.

VISIT TO THE TOMB:

- Once again the honourable status of women would have allowed them to travel to a guarded tomb with impunity. The soldiers guarding the tomb would not have seen them as a threat and would have expected the body to be treated with the utmost respect, as dictated by Jewish tradition.
- The presence of an angel is a constant theme in Jewish literature. An angel was usually the messenger when there was a profound interaction between humanity and the divine.
- In first-century Palestine, the testimony of a woman was generally not trusted in the courts or in wider civil society, hence the disbelief of the apostles ('these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them') and the necessity for a man (Peter) to validate their story.

Related Cultural Sources: *Burial Rites* (5.11) and *Jewish Law* (5.6)