WITH
SACKCLOTH
AND
ASHES

ANCIENT EXPRESSIONS OF GRIEF

By E. LeBron Matthews

THE DRAMATIC EVENTS described in Esther 4 threatened Jewish survival. Haman's genocidal scheme would eradicate all Jews. Upon learning that the king had enacted Haman's plan into law, Mordecai tore his clothing, dressed in sackcloth, covered himself with ashes, and cried bitterly. In ancient cultures, tearing one's garments was a common reaction to bad news, such as the death of a relative (Gen. 37:34) or the defeat of an army (2 Sam. 1:11). Sackcloth was a course, dark fabric fashioned from the hair of camels or goats.[1] Mordecai's reactions were common biblical expressions of grief. Abstaining from routine hygiene tasks such as washing or anointing with oil likewise signified mourning.[2]

Tears are more of a biological or emotional reaction rather than a cultural expression to some deeply felt loss. But every civilization observed certain expressions of grief and mourning.

The Egyptians are known for their tombs. From their earliest history they held a fervent belief in an afterlife. This strongly influenced their attitudes and rituals concerning death. Egyptians did not consider death to be the end of life but the beginning of a new phase of existence. Thus, early in life Egyptians began planning and preparing for their deaths.

Economic ability and social status determined the type of burial an Egyptian would receive. For Egyptians who could afford it, mummification was a lengthy process. They dried the corpse with natron salt for 70 days. Afterward
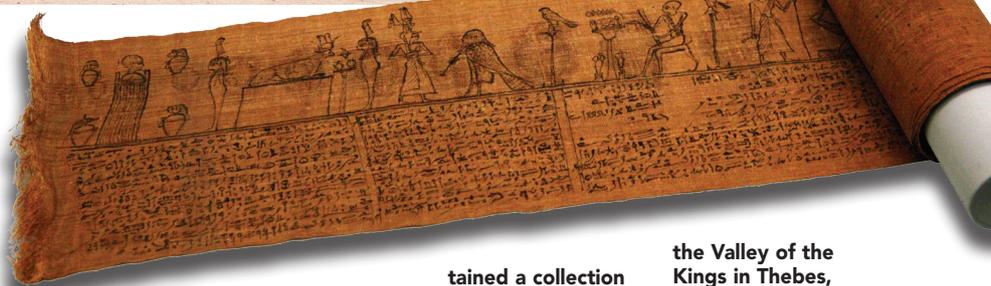
Above: From Akhmim, Egypt, a hieratic Book of the Dead; written on linen; dated after 664 B.C. The Book of the Dead contained a collection of magical spells to help the deceased in his journey toward paradise in the afterlife.

Top: Overview of the Valley of the Kings in Thebes, Egypt. From the 16th to the 11th centuries B.C., Egypt's royalty and powerful elite were buried in this area of Upper Egypt.

they decorated and wrapped the body in linen before encasing it in a coffin. Burial handlers gathered various objects they thought the deceased might need in the afterlife and placed these along with the coffin in a stone tomb. The most elaborate of these tombs were for pharaohs. On the other hand most poor people were buried in shallow graves in the desert. For these bodies the dry sand and arid climate provided the only mummification they would receive.[3]

Even though the extended period of preparation surely moderated the initial shock, ancient Egyptians deemed public expressions of mourning as essential. A long procession accompanied the deceased to the place of interment. Male relatives walked beside oxen that pulled the sarcophagus on a sledge. Female members of the immediate family walked at the head and foot of the coffin. Behind them walked other mourners. Egyptian tomb art depicts mourners making dramatic gestures. The images show women exhibiting less self-control; tears roll down their cheeks, their garments are torn, and they rub dust on their heads. Families sometimes

Left: In Yazd, Iran, this Tower of Silence was a hold-over from the burial rituals of Zoroastrianism. The tower, always circular, has a flat roof with a round hole in the middle and an elevated perimeter wall. Bodies are placed on the flat roof and exposed to the elements and scavenging birds. After the bones are bleached dry, they are dropped through the hole in the middle. Such burials, which date to the 5th cent. B.C., were discontinued in many parts of the world late in the 20th cent., when newly enacted laws prohibited the practice.

Lower left: Bronze vase decorated with bull and horses in high relief; from Susa, which was the setting for the Book of Esther. Thinking the honor should have gone to him instead, Haman "clothed Mordecai and paraded him through the city square, crying out before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king wants to honor'" (Esth. 6:11, HCSB). Afterward Haman went home and covered his head in grief.

hired professional mourners to accompany the procession. These hired mourners pulled their hair and tossed dust on their heads. Egyptians also wrote letters to the dead, which they left at the burial place.[4]

Grief was not limited to funeral rites. Other disasters equally generated anguish. An inscription on one stela describes the elderly grieving during a famine. They sat on the ground with their legs drawn up and clasped by their arms.[5] The Egyptians normally did not record military defeats or other disasters. Nevertheless such tragedies certainly occurred and brought some form of grieving.

Archaeologists have uncovered numerous Hittite graves. Cremation was common. The Hittites commonly placed the ashes of the dead in jars and buried them in shallow graves. They also buried funeral gifts with their loved ones. These gifts often had little intrinsic value. For instance, mourners would place broken farming implements in the grave. The broken state indicated they were for use in the afterlife. Funeral rites included incantations, prayers, sacrifices, dirges by musicians, and wailing lamentations by women.[6]

Prior to the establishment of Israel, Egypt dominated most of Canaan. Consequently Egyptian culture influenced the Canaanites. Some Canaanite graves reveal efforts to mummify corpses. Even dating to the Persian period (586–332 B.C.), graves in the region display a strong Egyptian character.[7] Cutting one's hair or beard and lacerating the skin were common pagan practices especially when mourning the dead. Mosaic Law prohibited both in Israel (Lev. 19:27-28).[8] Phoenician burial rituals are poorly documented. Archaeology of ancient Phoenicia has revealed, however, depictions of lamentations that include wearing sackcloth, pulling hair, and beating one's chest.[9]

The Babylonians commonly buried their dead within the precincts of their house, usually under a wall or floor.[10]

Right: Basalt relief orthostat showing musicians playing tambourines and lyres; from the palace of the Hittite King Barrekup; dates from 8th cent. B.C. Music was regular part of Hittite funerals.

Lower right: Andesite-stone statue of a man seated and holding a bowl; likely Neo-Hittite; dated mid-9th to mid–8th centuries B.C. Typically placed in tombs, these statues were believed to ensure that the deceased would never go hungry in the afterlife.

Right: Bowl with scene from Homer's *Illiad*, shows Achilles dragging the body of Hector behind his chariot; dates to the Hellenistic period.

They believed properly performed burial rites were important, but the role of personal religion for ordinary Babylonians remains unclear. A vast library of incantations and rituals for warding off evil spirits and witchcraft exists, but these offer almost no details about how the Babylonians grieved and mourned.

The Persians generally wrote in Aramaic on perishable materials such as parchment and papyrus. Consequently few documents survived. Much of our knowledge about Persia comes from the observations of other cultures, particularly the Greeks.[11] Zoroastrian Iranians today still practice many of the centuries-old traditional funerary customs. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the Persians chiefly were concerned with religious purity.[12] They elevated their king above the rest of humanity and worshiped him as the image of god. Society thus imposed certain restrictions on his behavior. For instance, he directed battles but was prohibited from fighting.[13] This religious concept likely also was the basis of the Persian law that barred Mordecai from entering the King's Gate (Esth. 4:2). Since the law of Persia did not conflict with the law of God, Mordecai obeyed the law of the land.[14]

The Persians believed the dead were punished in hell or rewarded in heaven. Funeral rites took place immediately after death. Persians left their dead in exposed locations for the flesh to decay or for scavengers to consume it. Mourners, all dressed in white, conducted the burial procession in silence in order not to interfere with prayers for the dead. During the first three days after death, the deceased's family fasted, prayed, and sacrificed to the gods. Later the family buried the bones in graves to await the judgment day.[15]

The Greeks believed burial was a divine obligation. Their wild laments were expressions of emotions that survivors felt. Homer described the Trojan's King Priam covering himself in dirt and rolling on the ground when his son Hector was killed. The Greeks also cut their hair and wore special garments as a sign of grief.[16]

Every ancient Near Eastern culture exhibited sorrow.

Some signs of grief, such as crying, were universal. Some, such as exposure of corpses, were limited to specific societies. Other practices, such as wearing sackcloth and ashes, were widespread throughout the region in every age. 🔥

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6. Trevor Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 176-77; J.G. Macqueen, *The Hittites and Their Contemporaries in Asia Minor* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1975), 135-38.

7. Jonathan N. Tubb, *Canaanites, Peoples of the Past* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 90, 131-32.

8. F.B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16 in *The New American Commentary* [NAC] (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 167; Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, vol. 3a in NAC (Broadman & Holman, 2000), 262.

9. Glenn E. Markoe, *Phoenicians, Peoples of the Past* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 138.

10. Gwendolyn Leick, *The Babylonians: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 117, 131.

11. J.M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 12-14.

12. Ibid., 154.

13. Geo Widengren, "The Persians" in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. D.J. Wiseman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 345-46.

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