

Embalming Jacob

By: JUDAH LANDA

Introduction

When the patriarch Jacob/Israel dies in Egypt at the age of 147 (Gen 47:28, 49:33), his son Joseph, the powerful second-in-command to Pharaoh, falls on his father's face, weeps upon it and kisses it (50:1). We are then informed that "Joseph ordered his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father," as most translations render the original ancient Hebrew text (50:2). The biblical account then proceeds with "so the physicians embalmed Israel" (50:2), followed by "his forty-day term was completed, for such is the term of the embalmed, and Egypt bewailed him for seventy days" (50:3). Then we are told that "when his bewailing period passed, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's household" to present his request for permission to fulfill his oath to his father to transport his body to the land of Canaan for burial (50:4). Permission was granted by Pharaoh (50:6) and Jacob was laid to rest in Canaan, in the cave (in Hebron) where his ancestors, Abraham and Isaac, rested in peace with their wives, Sarah and Rebecca, together with Jacob's own wife, Leah (50:12-13, 49:31, 23:19).¹

The Hebrew words that appear in this context that are translated above as 'embalm' and 'embalmed' are based on the root-word *hanat* (*Het, Nun, Tet*). This formulation appears only five times in the entire Hebrew Bible (HB). Three of these appear here (quoted above) in the context of treating Jacob's body; one appears a few verses later in the same context except that the body is Joseph's (50:26); and one appears in a much later text in reference to the sprouting of new buds on fruit trees (S. of S. 2:13). Since this last use of the word sheds no light on its meaning in the context of the treatment of a corpse, we are left to wonder as to what precisely *hanat* implies in our context where all the other appearances of this word

¹ Translations of Hebrew Scripture in this essay are based upon the work of N. Scherman and M. Zlotowitz, editors, *The Artscroll Series, The Stone Edition* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1993) with emendations where deemed appropriate.

Judah Landa is a retired physicist with a lifelong interest in the interaction of Torah with all areas of secular knowledge. Currently residing in East Brunswick, NJ, he is the author of numerous published books and articles that reflect this interest. His weekly lectures on the subject are still popular and well-attended going into the tenth year.

pertain to the treatment of a corpse. The customary rendition of ‘embalm,’ it turns out, raises a host of difficulties.

Strictly speaking, to embalm a body is to treat it with various oils, spices and perfumes. This serves the purpose of temporarily inhibiting the onset of decay that would otherwise soon lead to the disfiguration of the exterior of the body, and to mask the foul odors produced by the inevitable decay of the interior organs of the body. These days the word ‘embalm’ has come to include the injection of chemicals and drugs that act to further delay the decay of the interior organs. In ancient times, however, these modern techniques were unavailable; all they could do was delay the degradation of a corpse for a few days by covering it with oily mixtures, a process that should take a few hours, at most.

If this is the treatment provided to Jacob’s body, it is difficult to see how his body was maintained in a respectable state for the period of three months from his passing in Egypt to his burial in Canaan (seventy days of mourning in Egypt [50:3] followed by the trek to Canaan accompanied by an imposing crowd [50:9] plus seven additional days of mourning in Canaan [50:10]). In addition, the biblical account speaks of a forty-day process, one practiced in Egypt (“such is the term of the embalmed”). The forty-day Egyptian practice consisted of mummification, not embalment (which takes a mere few hours). This entailed the evisceration of the body by removing many of the internal organs, followed by the placement of hundreds of pounds of natron (a naturally occurring blend of salts found in Egypt at dried lake beds) inside and outside the body in order to thoroughly dehydrate it (remove the water), a process that the historical evidence and experimental data indicate takes just about thirty-five days. This was then followed by tightly wrapping the body in overlapping layers of strips of linen treated with spices, oils and perfumes. This took a few more days, yielding a total of about forty days, in agreement with our text.² If this is what Jacob’s body was subjected to, the correct

² Information regarding ancient Egyptian mummification comes to us courtesy of the Greek historians Herodotus (fifth century BCE) and Siculus (first century BCE), and from scattered Egyptian documents such as Papyrus Boulaq 3 (Cairo Museum), Papyrus 5158 (Louvre), the Rhind Papyri and others.

The University of Maryland Medical School duplicated the ancient Egyptian mummification process in 1994 with great accuracy on a man who donated his body to science. The resulting mummy, named Mumab, is currently housed at the Museum of Man in San Diego, CA. In addition, many experiments and investigations have been conducted on ancient Egyptian mummies. These activities have revealed much about the process of mummification.

translation would inform us that Joseph ordered his physicians to **mummify**—not embalm—his father (50:2) and the physicians **mummified** Israel, for such was the term of the **mummified** (50:2-3). But this, in turn, leads to a host of new difficulties.

First, the evisceration aspect of mummification is highly problematic from the perspective of biblical law which strictly prohibits the desecration of a human corpse. Even the corpse of one executed for heinous crimes must be treated with respect (Deut 21:22-23) since the human form was created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). And while biblical law, as such, did not yet exist in Jacob's and Joseph's time, those laws presumably reflect Israelite values going back to earlier times.³ Stating this otherwise, it is highly unlikely that the HB would be depicting its heroes the patriarchs (in this case Jacob) as condoning activity it condemns as abhorrent. Besides, the mummification process was unique to the Egyptians and their belief system pertaining to the afterlife and how to prepare for it. None of the other peoples in the Middle East, certainly not in the land of Canaan whence hailed Jacob and his family, practiced anything comparable to it in ancient times and presumably would have deemed the procedure to be utterly repugnant.⁴ We therefore ought to expect that Jacob would never have consented to have this done to his body, nor would his sons have tolerated it. And the powerful Joseph should have had the wherewithal to prevent it.

It is true that the particulars of the mummification process in ancient Egypt, a practice that goes back to as early as the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2600 BCE), many centuries before Jacob's time in the Twelfth Dynasty (ca. 1800 BCE), varied across the centuries and millennia. At first it was only the wealthy and the elite classes who had access to the full treatment, while ordinary folk had to make do with abbreviated versions or none at all. Sometimes the removed organs were stored in jars and buried with the body; other times these organs were simply discarded. Some would apply the natron treatment to the removed organs, and when completely dehydrated would re-insert them into the interior cavity of the corpse. All of these variations on the basic procedure would, however, involve mutilation of the human form, not to mention the ugly and abhorrent pulling

Many fine reviews of mummification are available. Among them are: B. Adams, *Egyptian Mummies* (Bucks, England: Shire Publications, 1984) and J. Davis, *The Mummies of Egypt* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986).

³ This is the deeper meaning of Gen 26:5 based on *Midrash Bereshit* (Genesis) *Rabbah*, 64:4 and 95:3. See also Babylonian Talmud (BT) tractates *Yuma* 28b and *Kiddushin* 82a.

⁴ K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 350–352 with notes.

out of the brain through the nostrils with a specially designed hook, then discarding the brain as ‘useless.’ Joseph could have spared his father’s body all these horrors by simply asking Pharaoh for permission to transport Jacob’s body to Canaan on day one, rather than wait seventy days to do so (50:4).

Another highly problematic aspect of Egyptian mummification from the Israelites’ perspective is the idolatrous practices associated with the procedure. While the dehydration and wrapping of the body could be completed in forty days, the ancient Egyptians would take seventy days getting through the process. We know this from assorted Egyptian documents and from Greek historians acquainted with the procedure. The reason for this is that the priests performing the mummification would introduce time-consuming rituals, prayers, incantations and ceremonies at various stages of the process.⁵ Many of these religious activities invoked particular gods worshipped in Egypt, thereby rendering them idolatrous. How could the dedicated monotheist Jacob and his sons, who as descendants of Abraham recognized only the one God creator of the universe, the God who was not to be represented by images and statues (see Gen 35:2–4), condone such activities in association with Jacob’s body?

On the other hand, if these difficulties animate us to revert back to translating the Hebrew *hanat* as ‘embalm,’ we face the problem of the text’s reference to a forty-day Egyptian process, which is indicative of mummification, as discussed above. Additionally, we confront the problem of the degradation of Jacob’s body over the course of about three months (between his passing in Egypt and burial in Canaan). Embalming a body does not arrest the decay of the interior organs, a process that produces bloating and the emission over time of foul odors. This too is disrespectful of the human form; it is why Jewish law mandates the immediate burial of the deceased.

So either way we are beset by difficulties. The purpose of this essay is to attempt to address this conundrum.

The Text

Students of the HB know that it is a meticulously calibrated and exquisitely nuanced text. Words that appear at first glance to be superfluous frequently turn out, upon careful analysis, to convey important and relevant information.⁶ Question and difficulties that emerge from its stories

⁵ See sources cited at the end of note 2.

⁶ See BT tractate *Pesahim* 22b where every *et* in the Pentateuch—and there are hundreds of them, normally considered as useless expressions—is to be turned into a meaningful addition to the text.

and laws are often resolved in this manner by the text itself; all we need do is to examine its words with the requisite due diligence.

So let us take a second look at the words of our text after Joseph “ordered his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father” (assuming now, for the sake of simplicity, that ‘embalm’ is the meaning of the Hebrew *hanat*). The text then states: “So the physicians embalmed Israel.” Then, in the next verse, we are informed that “his forty-day term was completed, for such is the term of the embalmed.” Is this not a very convoluted and verbose way of saying, ‘so the physicians embalmed Israel forty days’? Is the text interested in teaching us Egyptian embalming customs? Are we, its readers, at all concerned that Jacob’s embalment may not have met Egyptian standards? Should not the text have been focused here on what happened to Jacob after he died, rather than insert a distracting mini-primer on Egyptian practices? Many words could have been dispensed with here by simply stating, ‘so the physicians embalmed Israel forty days,’ then continuing with, “and Egypt bewailed him for seventy days,” followed by, “when his bewailing period passed, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh’s household” about his oath to his father. There must be a message embedded here in the digressive presentation of the text that is directly relevant to the story that is its focus—the progress of Jacob after his passing.

Another anomalous aspect of the text to draw our attention is the rather sudden appearance of Egyptian ‘physicians’ on the scene. We have by now encountered Egypt’s priests (Gen 41:45, 47:22) and *hartumim* (the *bery-tep*, best translated as ‘experts’) and wise men (41:8),⁷ but not its physicians. While it is true that some of these professions overlapped in ancient Egypt, with medical people doubling up as priests (treating the sick and injured with drugs and incantations) and magicians/necromancers serving as sages, the text’s abrupt shift at this point away from the already introduced categories should alert us to the distinct possibility that there is a reason for this change, one that is relevant to the story.

Here is an alternative understanding of the text, one that differs from the usual interpretation but that, in my opinion, flows quite naturally from its carefully chosen words and therefore merits our consideration. First we are informed that Joseph ordered his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father (whatever the Hebrew *hanat* implies) and they do so. We are **not** told that this process, as performed on Israel, took forty days, and it did not. This part of the story is contained within verse 50:2 and it represents the complete description of the treatment of Jacob’s body.

⁷ See Kitchen, *ibid*, with references.

Then we are told that Jacob's "forty-day term was completed," meaning that Joseph and his extended family waited for those forty days to pass, because "such is the term of the embalmed." In doing so, Joseph and his brothers were sensitive to, and chose to respect, Egyptian practice. As the father of their second-in-command political leader, whose outstanding wisdom and foresight (41:38–44) just recently saved them from the grip of a severe famine, Jacob became a revered and beloved figure to the Egyptian people.⁸ The Egyptian people were therefore focused on Jacob's illness, death and treatment; they expected Jacob's body to be prepared for the world of the afterlife in the style of their Pharaohs and nobility. Nothing less would do. Joseph waited forty days while the Egyptian people **assumed** that Egyptian priests were doing what they were supposed to do, that is, mummify Jacob, a process that takes about forty days. In reality, however, no priests tended to Jacob, no mummification was performed and no priestly religious rituals were conducted. Only medical people were allowed near Jacob's body (Joseph saw to that), and Jacob's body was treated only externally for temporary maintenance until his burial in Canaan.

Joseph and his brothers then took this a step further. They waited an additional thirty days, for a total of seventy days, the time it takes the mummification process with all its associated rituals to be completed. This is referred to in the text as "his [Jacob's] bewailing period." All this was done to honor Egypt's "bewailing him for seventy days." Considering that the Israelites were to remain in Egypt as citizens in good standing, who wished to maintain good relations with their fellow Egyptians, they could do no less.

The text does not provide the particulars of how Jacob's body was maintained. Since his body needed to remain in a respectful state for about three months, it is likely that his treatment consisted of what can best be described as embalment-plus. They certainly coated his body with oils and spices, perhaps doing so repeatedly at various intervals, since this is the core of embalment. It is likely that the physicians also wrapped his body tightly in treated linen strips to minimize swelling. Perhaps they also applied natron externally (before wrapping) to achieve some measure of dehydration from the outside, and to allow the water-removal process to work its way inward to some extent, thereby slowing down the decay process. (The water-laden salts, we know today, raise the pH of the environment to the point that it becomes inhospitable to bacteria that cause the decay.) But there is no basis in the text to assume that Jacob's body was

⁸ See commentary of *Rashi* on Gen 47:19 and 50:3 taken from *Tosefta*, tractate *Sotah* 10:3.

subjected to the forty-day Egyptian practice of evisceration and mummification. All the text tells us is that the family allowed this forty-day period to pass while Jacob's body was treated by physicians—not priests—for some unspecified duration. We are left to fill in the details of that treatment, if we are so inclined, and we have good reason to exclude mummification from that treatment.

Joseph's Body

Joseph dies at the age of 110 (50:26), 54 years after Jacob and 73 years after the great famine began.⁹ His spectacular feats of organization and administration that rescued the nation from starvation (41:55, 47:13–25) had by then faded from memory; Joseph had presumably been retired from public service for many decades. The Israelites had multiplied greatly and were firmly ensconced in the land (47:27), but no Israelite of Joseph's stature appeared in the public arena to succeed him. So Joseph did not request, nor could he reasonably expect, that his body be transported to Canaan for burial.¹⁰ Even Joseph needed Pharaoh's permission to pull this off (transport Jacob's body to Canaan), permission that appears to have been granted reluctantly and only because it was none other than Joseph who requested it (50:4–6). The text tells us very briefly that “they [presumably the Egyptian physicians] embalmed him and he was placed in a coffin in Egypt” (50:26). There is no mention of a forty-day period (of mummification) or one of seventy days (of bewailing). Before he dies Joseph expresses his conviction that “God will surely remember you [the Israelites] and bring you up from this land to the land He swore to [give to] Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (50:24). He adjures the descendants of Israel to then “bring my bones up from here” (50:25). The fulfillment of this request is left to some unknown and distant time in the future, to the day when God will bring the Israelites up from Egypt.

When that distant day finally arrives at the Israelite exodus from enslavement in Egypt, some 140 years later, we are informed that Moses indeed “took the bones of Joseph with him for Joseph had adjured the

⁹ Joseph is 30 years of age when appointed vizier of Egypt (Gen 41:46). After 7 years of plenty and 2 years of famine, Jacob arrives in Egypt with his family (41:53–54, 45:6). At this time Joseph is 39 years old (30+7+2) and Jacob is 130 years old (47:9). So when Jacob dies at the age of 147 (47:28), Joseph is 56 years old (39+17). Joseph's death at the age of 110 therefore occurs 54 years later (56+54=110). Since Joseph was 37 when the famine began (30+7), his death takes place 73 years after that benchmark event (37+73=110).

¹⁰ See commentary of *Rashi* on Ex 13:19 taken from *Mekhilta* (a treatise of Talmudic origin).

Israelites” to do so (Ex 13:19). After wandering the wilderness of Sinai for forty years with the Israelites, “the bones of Joseph were buried in Shekhem ... in the plot of land purchased by Jacob ... a heritage of the descendants of Joseph” (Josh 24:32). One can these days visit the site (albeit with some difficulty) where tradition informs us this burial took place, near present-day Nablus, in the West Bank.

Was Joseph merely embalmed, or was his body subjected to the Egyptian evisceration-mummification process? Stating this otherwise, did he and his fellow Israelites adhere to the long-standing Semitic custom in the land of Canaan (whence they hailed) of immediate burial of the deceased, or had he (and they) become assimilated and acculturated in Egypt to the point of adopting the Egyptian custom of mummification to properly prepare the body for the world of the afterlife? Did the Israelites carry Joseph’s **bones** along with them through forty years of wandering (if he was buried soon after embalment), or did they endure the much more burdensome task of carrying his intact **body** around all that time (if he was mummified)?

These questions, it turns out, can also be addressed by careful analysis of the text. There is a discernable pattern in how Jacob’s and Joseph’s remains are described, a pattern that prevails despite multiple opportunities to deviate from it. Joseph’s remains are **always** referred to as bones, while Jacob’s remains are **never** so described. Joseph adjures the Israelites to “bring my **bones** up from here” (50:25), Moses “takes the **bones** of Joseph” with him (Ex 13:19), and the Israelites “bury the **bones** of Joseph” at Shekhem” (Josh 24:32). On the other hand, Jacob says, “transport **me** [not my bones] out of Egypt and bury **me** [not my bones] in their [his ancestors’] tomb” (47:30, 49:29). Joseph speaks of “burying **my father**” (50:5), not my father’s bones, and the sons of Jacob “carry **him** [not his bones] to the land of Canaan where they “bury **him**” (50:13), not his bones. Then Joseph returns to Egypt after “burying **his father**” (50:14), not his father’s bones.

This pattern is not likely to be an accident, not only because there are no accidents in the HB, but also because there are too many occurrences (not all of them cited above) that fit the mold for such to be the case. And the basis for the pattern is readily discernable. Jacob’s body was transported to Canaan for burial only three months after his passing; his body was not mummified or eviscerated (as discussed above) but was carried intact to the burial point. In other words, it was Jacob they buried there, not his bones. Joseph’s body, on the other hand, was placed in a coffin to repose in Egypt and over a period of 140 years was rendered down to

bones.¹¹ Joseph may not have known just how long his remains will rest in Egypt before “God remembered the Israelites and brought them up from Egypt,” but he had every reason to believe that it would be a long time. This is inherent in the idea that God is to ‘remember’ (in the sense of ‘become reminded of’) the Israelites before they are brought up from Egypt. It was Joseph’s bones, not his intact body, that Moses later took with him and that the Israelites buried in Shekhem. Had mummification been the plan for Joseph he would likely have adjured the Israelites to ‘bring **me** [not ‘my bones’] up from here,’ much as his father said, “transport **me** out of Egypt.”

In addition, the archaeological and historical evidence strongly suggests that Semites who died in Egypt would typically be buried in cemeteries and not be mummified. In particular, many Semitic-style burials dating to the early to mid-second millennium BCE (Joseph’s time frame) have been found in the vicinity of Tel el-Daba (Avaris), the area where the Israelites later built “store cities for Pharaoh,” among them Pi-Rameses¹² (the biblical Ramses, Ex 1:11). It should therefore not have been incongruous for the Israelites to deviate from Egyptian practice by avoiding mummification. Unlike the situation at Jacob’s passing more than five decades earlier, when his son prominently ruled over Egypt and had just recently saved it from starvation, the eyes of the Egyptian people were now not focused on Joseph’s death and the treatment of his body. Joseph had long since ceased being active in public affairs and, as stated earlier, the memory of his amazing contributions to Egypt had by now—more than seven decades and two generations after the great famine—receded into the background. The native Egyptians probably could not have cared less about the goings-on around Joseph’s body.

It is therefore highly likely that there was no seventy-day bewailing period for Joseph in Egypt, nor a forty-day waiting period to disguise the absence of mummification, as there was for Jacob. This is reflected in the absence of any mention in the text of such developments in the case of Joseph’s passing, unlike that of Jacob’s passing. Joseph was embalmed and promptly laid to rest in a coffin, as was Semitic practice, and in harmony with Israelite values.

¹¹ Joseph was presumably laid to rest in Egypt’s Nile Delta area (the Land of Goshen) where the Israelites lived and worked. This region is well watered, moist and humid, unlike Egypt’s arid desert areas. No ‘natural mummification’ was thus to be anticipated in Joseph’s case.

¹² See Kitchen, *ibid*, with references.

Conclusions

Careful analysis of the text in light of the archaeological and historical data supports the idea that the forty-day Egyptian process of mummification was not actually performed on Jacob's body, nor was the customary priestly religious rituals that extended this process to one of seventy days' duration performed at Jacob's bier. Instead, the Israelites (Jacob/Israel's family) honored Egyptian custom by allowing these respective time periods to pass while Jacob's body reposed in Egypt. During this time frame Jacob's body underwent enhanced embalmment, in order to maintain the body in as respectable a state as circumstances allowed. His body was (repeatedly) treated with oils and spices, probably tight-wrapped in overlapping strips of treated linen, and conceivably also covered externally with natron to dehydrate the body from the outside inward. This was done by Egyptian physicians who were servants of Joseph and subject to his instructions, not by priests or religious ritual practitioners. Jacob's intact body, with perhaps some naturally induced internal decay, was then transported to Canaan for burial with his ancestors and his wife Leah (49:29–31).

Joseph's body was also not mummified. Instead, it was promptly placed in a coffin and allowed to naturally deteriorate in Egypt over many decades, as was the general practice of Semites who died in Egypt. Presumably this was also the procedure employed with his brothers upon their passing, and upon the passing of their descendants. Joseph's bones were then transported to Canaan by the liberated Israelites—at the initiative of Moses—and buried at Shekhem. His body was embalmed for temporary maintenance only; there is no indication, nor any reason to presume, that either a forty- or seventy-day period was observed. The reason for the divergent treatment of these leading Israelite personalities is to be found in the evolving political atmosphere in Egypt vis-à-vis the Israelites, during the period between their deaths.

Since neither Jacob nor Joseph was mummified, the remains of both these biblical figures have by now, more likely than not, turned to dust. They rest not far from each other, Jacob in Hebron and Joseph in Shekhem (near Nablus). May they, of blessed memory, continue to rest in peace. ❧