

## *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).<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>2</sup> If this is what Jacob’s body was subjected to, the correct

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<sup>2</sup> 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.