

Bahá'í Burial

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I. EXTRACTS FROM THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

- 1 It is forbidden you to transport the body of the deceased a greater distance than one hour's journey from the city; rather should it be interred, with radiance and serenity, in a nearby place.

("The Kitáb-i-Aqdas", The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1993, p66) ¹

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- 2 QUESTION: Is the ordinance that the body of the deceased should be carried no greater distance than one hour's journey applicable to transport by both land and sea?

ANSWER: This command applieth to distances by sea as well as by land, whether it is an hour by steamship or by rail; the intention is the hour's time, whatever the means of transport. The sooner the burial taketh place, however, the more fitting and acceptable will it be.

("The Kitáb-i-Aqdas", The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992, pp. 111-112) ²

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- 3 In brief, the Bahá'í law for the burial of the dead states that it is forbidden to carry the body for more than one hour's journey from the place of death; that the body should be wrapped in a shroud of silk or cotton, and on its finger should be placed a ring bearing the inscription "*I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him,*

holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate”; and that the coffin should be of crystal, stone or hard fine wood. A specific Prayer for the Dead (see note 10)³ is ordained, to be said before interment.⁴ As affirmed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian, this law precludes cremation of the dead. The formal prayer and the ring are meant to be used for those who have attained the age of maturity, i.e. 15 years of age (Q and A 70)⁵

*(“The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book, Bahá’u’lláh”, Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992, p. 229)*⁶

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- 4 The Prayer for the Dead (see Some Texts Supplementary to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas)⁷ is the only Bahá’í obligatory prayer which is to be recited in congregation; it is to be recited by one believer while all present stand in silence (see note 19).⁸ Bahá’u’lláh has clarified that the Prayer for the Dead is required only when the deceased is an adult (Q and A 70),⁹ that the recital should precede the interment of the deceased, and that there is no requirement to face the Qiblah when saying this prayer (Q and A 85)¹⁰

*(“The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book, Bahá’u’lláh”, Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992, pp. 169-170)*¹¹

II. EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS WRITTEN ON BEHALF OF THE GUARDIAN

- 5 Regarding the Bahá’í funeral service: it is extremely simple, as it consists only of a congregational prayer to be read before burial. This prayer will be made available to the friends when the “Aqdas” is translated and published. In the meantime your National Spiritual Assembly should take great care lest any uniform procedure or ritual in this matter be adopted or imposed upon the friends. The danger in this, as in some other cases regarding Bahá’í worship, is that a definite system of rigid rituals and practices be developed among the believers. The utmost simplicity and flexibility should be observed, and a selection from the Bahá’í Sacred Writings would serve the purpose at the present time, provided this selection is not rigidly and uniformly adopted on all such occasions.

(From a letter dated 10 January 1936 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

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- 6 Both the Bahá’í marriage service and the Bahá’í funeral service are extremely simple in character, and you must have certainly read in the “Bahá’í News” the explanation given by the Guardian on these two points. As already stated all forms of rigidity and uniformity in such matters should be avoided by the believers. What is of vital importance is to strictly observe the laws and directions specifically revealed by Bahá’u’lláh. These will be gradually brought to the attention of the friends and explained to them by the Guardian. In the mean time great care should be taken to prevent the introduction of unnecessary details and additions of a man-made nature to the body of the Teachings.

(From a letter dated 19 May 1936 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

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- 7 There is no objection whatsoever to non-Bahá’ís being present when the long prayer for the dead is read, as long as they respect our manner of reading it by rising and standing as the Bahá’ís do on this occasion. Nor, indeed, is there any objection to non-Bahá’ís being

present during the reading of any Bahá'í prayer for the departed.

In reporting Bahá'í marriages it is much better to mention that the ceremony was performed by the Assembly, as this is the proper thing to do, and an individual only acts for the Assembly on this occasion. As a funeral is not a legal ceremony more latitude can be allowed, especially as the family of the deceased may want some particular Bahá'í friend to officiate.

Mr. and Mrs....are naturally quite free to be buried in their own plot in the Cemetery, if that is what they desire.

An official Bahá'í funeral service should only be given for a believer, but there is no objection to the reading of Bahá'í prayers, or indeed to a Bahá'í conducting the funeral service of a non-Bahá'í, if this has been requested.

(From a letter dated 20 July 1946 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

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- 8 The body may be conveyed by any means to a distance that can be covered in one hour's journey.

(From a letter dated 5 August 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

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- 9 The Guardian thinks the ideal thing would be for the believers to have a Bahá'í Cemetery....

(From a letter dated 5 September 1950 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

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- 10 Regarding the questions which you ask, concerning Bahá'í burials, etc. At the present time, the Guardian is not stressing these matters, as their establishment might divert attention from the supreme tasks we have before us. However, the answers are as follows: Under the Bahá'í teachings it seems clear that the body is not to be embalmed. The burial should take place within an hour's travel time from the place of death. The preparation for the body for burial is a careful washing, and placing in a shroud of white cloth, silk preferably. There is nothing in the teachings with regard to turning the body over to Scientific Institutions for scientific research, and therefore the individual may do as he wishes, until such a time as the Universal House of Justice may legislate on this matter, if they ever do. The practice in the Orient is to bury the person within 24 hours of the time of death, sometimes even sooner, although there is no provision in the teachings as to the time limit.

(From a letter dated 2 April 1955 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

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- 11 There is nothing in the Teachings against leaving our bodies to medical science. The only thing we should stipulate is that we do not wish to be cremated, as it is against our Bahá'í Laws.

As many people make arrangements to leave their bodies to medical science for investigation, he suggests that you inquire, either through some lawyer friend or through some hospital, how you could do this, and then make the necessary provision in your

Will, stipulating that you wish your body to be of service to mankind in death, and that, being a Bahá'í, you request that your remains not be cremated and not be taken more than an hour's journey from the place you die.

The spirit has no more connection with the body after it departs, but, as the body was once the temple of the spirit, we Bahá'ís are taught that it must be treated with respect.

(From a letter dated 22 March 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

III. EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS WRITTEN ON BEHALF OF THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

- 12 For the burial of the dead the only requirements now binding in the West are to bury the body (not to cremate it), not to carry it more than a distance of one hour's journey from the place of death, and to say the Prayer for the Dead if the deceased is a believer over the age of 15.

(From a letter dated 9 June 1974 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iceland)

- 13 You have asked whether it is permissible for the friends to chant a prayer collectively. There is a difference between chanting a prayer collectively and congregational prayer. The latter is a formal prayer usually led by an individual using a prescribed ritual. Congregational prayer in this form is forbidden in the Faith except in the case of the Prayer for the Dead. While reciting prayers in unison and spontaneously joining in the recitation of the Words of God is not forbidden, the friends should bear in mind the advice of the beloved Guardian on this subject when he stated that:

although the friends are thus left free to follow their own inclination, they should take the utmost care that any manner they practice should not acquire too rigid a character, and thus develop into an institution. This is a point which the friends should always bear in mind, lest they deviate from the clear path indicated in the Teachings."¹²

(From a letter dated 6 February 1975 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 14 The Universal House of Justice advises that the place of death may be taken to be the city or town in which the believer passes away, and therefore the hour's journey may be calculated from the city limits to the place of burial. However, it should be borne in mind that the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's law is to be buried near where one dies.

At the present time there are no definite regulations for preparing Bahá'í cemeteries. However, in a Tablet of the Master's, He emphasizes the need for the cemetery to have a beautiful outward appearance and states that the graves should not be joined together but that each one should have a flower bed around its four sides. He also indicates that it would be pleasing if a pool were located in the center of the cemetery and beautiful trees were planted around it as well as around the cemetery itself.

(From a letter dated 20 February 1978 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Brazil)

- 15 The Prayer for the Dead should be recited at the funeral if the deceased is 15 years old or more. If there is no one at the funeral able to read, it is sufficient to say only that part of the Prayer which requires the repetition nineteen times of each of six short verses.

The body must be placed in the grave in such a position that the feet point towards 'Akká (the Qiblih).

(From a statement prepared by a National Spiritual Assembly in Africa and approved by the Universal House of Justice on 14 June 1982)

IV. ENDNOTES

1. A newer translation of this passage has been substituted for the translation originally included. ↩
2. A newer translation of this passage has been substituted for the translation originally included. ↩
3. "note 10," "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas", The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 169-170. ↩
4. See Extract 4 ↩
5. "Q and A 70", "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh", p. 127. ↩
6. A newer translation of this passage has been substituted for the translation originally included. ↩
7. see "Some Texts Supplementary to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh", pp. 91-102. ↩
8. "see note 19," "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh", pp. 172-173. ↩
9. "Q and A 70", "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh", p. 127. ↩
10. "Q and A 85", "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh", p. 131. ↩
11. A newer translation of this passage has been substituted for the translation originally included. ↩
12. ""Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", No.2 of Notes, p. 57 [Ed. note: This reference is also available in Note 19 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (on pp. 172-173).] ↩