


Jesus' interment in Mark 15:42–47: An identifying factor for Jesus' Jewishness

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The story of Jesus' burial in Mark 15 presents Jewish funeral traditions that show Jesus' connection to Judaism. This study looks closely at the burial process in Mark, focusing on what happens when Joseph of Arimathea asks for Jesus' body and makes it ready for burial and where it is placed before the Sabbath starts. It puts these practices into the context of Jewish funeral rituals when Jesus lived. Furthermore, by contextualising these burial customs, this research proposes that Mark uses these rituals to underline Jesus' conformity to Jewish identity and present a theological continuity between Jesus and the Jewish faith, despite the Gospel's eventual message to a broader audience. In exploring how these burial practices function as cultural identity markers, this article contributes to scholarship on the Jewishness of Jesus, arguing that Mark's burial account reinforces a communal and cultural bond that defines Jesus' identity within his Jewish heritage.

Contribution: This article underlines the importance of Jewish funerary customs in Mark 15:42–47 as identity markers affirming Jesus' Jewishness. By analysing burial practices such as body preparation and timing, it contextualises Jesus' burial within Second Temple Judaism, demonstrating his alignment with Jewish traditions. This study offers a nuanced perception of how Mark integrates cultural practices to portray theological continuity between Jesus and Judaism while addressing a broader audience.

Keywords: Jesus Jewishness; funerary rituals; Mark 15:42–47; second temple; rock-hewn tomb; burial law; practices.

Introduction

Mark 15:42–47 vividly portrays Jesus' burial, aligning with Second Temple Jewish funerary customs. Joseph of Arimathea secures Pilate's permission to claim and prepare Jesus' body, placing it in a rock-hewn tomb before the Sabbath, adhering to Torah mandates and Pharisaic traditions (Sanders 1992:212). These sacred rituals, such as purification and prompt burial, honoured the deceased while preserving community purity (Dt 21:23; Cohen 1999:64). Funerary practices also reflect Jewish beliefs about the afterlife and communal identity (Neusner 2004:153). By embedding these customs, Mark emphasises Jesus' conformity to Jewish traditions, reinforcing theological continuity with his heritage even as the Gospel extends its vision universally (Brown 1994:1240). These rituals preserved collective memory and asserted Jewish distinctiveness under Roman occupation (Meyers 2012:98; Wright 2003:537). The burial narrative functions as a cultural identity marker, underscoring Jesus' Jewishness and his connection to communal traditions (Brown 1994:1240; Hoffman 2011:85).

An exegetical analysis of Mark 15:42–47

I think at this juncture it is important to quickly note some of what I think is necessary as a build-up for this article. The burial account of Jesus in Mark 15:42–47 is a concise yet theologically rich narrative, presenting the perception into the Gospel writer's theological aims and narrative strategies. This section provides a literary and structural overview of the passage, analysing Mark's narrative design, choice of details and theological markers, particularly the references to the Sabbath and the timing of events (Gundry 2000:1095, see Stein 2008; Strauss 2014).

Literary and structural overview

The story in Mark 15:42–47 provides a critical bridge from Jesus' death to the resurrection, precisely constructed to stress continuousness in the developing narrative of salvation and the redemptive work of Christ. Mark's use of brevity and selectivity in detail features his theological focus. Unlike other Gospel accounts, Mark excludes extraneous details, creating a stark and

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solemn portrayal of Jesus' burial (Evans 2001:510). Mark's economy of words reflects the urgency of burial before the Sabbath begins. The mention of the evening [ὥρας γενομένης] situates the narrative within a pressing temporal framework, emphasising adherence to Jewish law (Ex 20:10). The legal and ritual necessity of burial before the Sabbath sunset amplifies the tension, highlighting Joseph of Arimathea's boldness in approaching Pilate for Jesus' body (Donahue & Harrington 2002:452). Joseph's introduction as a member of the Sanhedrin [βουλευτής], awaiting the Kingdom of God, serves dual purposes: it contrasts his courage with the disciples' absence and reinforces the eschatological focus of Mark's Gospel¹ (Witherington 2001:392). Mark's deliberate inclusion of Joseph's honourable character aligns with the Gospel's emphasis on the fulfilment of God's redemptive plan, even though an unexpected agent (Collins 2007:770).

The passage is tightly unified, progressing through three main actions: Joseph's request for the body (vv. 42–43), Pilate's confirmation of Jesus' death (vv. 44–45) and the committal itself (vv. 46–47). The story flow stresses the accomplishment of Jesus' prophecy concerning his death and interment (Mk 8:31; 9:31), attaching the entombment precisely to the passion predictions and supporting Jesus' identity as the suffering Messiah (Hooker 1991:376). The structural division of the narrative reflects its theological and narrative significance. Pilate's verification of Jesus' death, a unique feature in Mark, dispels doubts about the reality of Jesus' death, thus pre-empting later resurrection scepticism (Stein 2008:725). Mark's narrative choices are deliberate, with each detail contributing to the theological weight of the account. The reference to a rock-hewn tomb [μνημεῖον λαξευτὸν ἐκ πέτρας] and rolling a stone to close the tomb (v. 46) foretell the resurrection while underlining the finality of Jesus' death (France 2002:655). The presence of Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus as witnesses (v. 47) lends validity to the resurrection tale and emphasises the position of women as devoted disciples in Mark's Gospel (Edwards 2002:492).

Verse 42: Temporal setting and Jewish burial customs

Mark 15:42 introduces the burial narrative by specifying that it was the 'day of Preparation' [παρασκευή], which refers to the day before the Sabbath. This designation is crucial for understanding the urgency surrounding Jesus' burial. In Jewish tradition, work – including burial – was to be completed before the Sabbath began at sundown on Friday (cf. Ex 20:10; Neh 13:19). The Torah explicitly states that a body should not remain hanging overnight but should be buried the same day to avoid defiling the land (Dt 21:22–23). This law applied particularly to those who had been executed,

reinforcing the necessity of removing Jesus' body before the onset of the Sabbath. France (2002:662) notes that this urgency reflects the piety of those involved in Jesus' burial, especially Joseph of Arimathea. Despite Jesus' execution as a criminal, he was given an honourable burial, which was not a given under Roman law, where crucified victims were often left unburied as a further dishonour (Evans 2001:509). Roman practices contrasted with Jewish customs, where burial – even of criminals – was regarded as a duty of the community (Josephus, War 4.317).

Moreover, the 'day of Preparation' does not merely indicate the time constraint but also serves as a literary and theological marker in Mark's Gospel. Some scholars, such as Moloney (2002:332), suggest that this phrase highlights the transition from death to resurrection. The burial on the παρασκευή anticipates the resurrection on the third day, aligning with Mark's broader narrative framework. The emphasis on the immediacy of burial sets the stage for the discovery of the empty tomb (Mk 16:1–8). Besides, Mark's mention of the παρασκευή places Jesus' death within the framework of Jewish Passover traditions. In Johannine tradition, Jesus is crucified at the time when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered (Jn 19:14), drawing a theological parallel between Jesus and the paschal lamb. While Mark does not explicitly make this connection, his reference to the 'day of Preparation' subtly aligns Jesus' death with sacrificial imagery, reinforcing themes of atonement and redemption (Collins 2007:768).

Verse 43: Joseph of Arimathea's role

Joseph of Arimathea plays a crucial role in Jesus' burial, as he is depicted as a εὐσχήμων βουλευτής [respected member of the council] who boldly approaches Pilate to request Jesus' body (Mk 15:43). This portrayal presents Joseph as a figure of considerable social and political standing within Jewish society. His actions, however, mark a significant departure from the general stance of the Sanhedrin, which had condemned Jesus earlier in Mark 14:55–64. Brown (1994:1240) argues that Joseph's decision to request Jesus' body signals a personal devotion that distinguishes him from his fellow council members. Given that the Sanhedrin had largely conspired against Jesus, Joseph's intervention suggests either a silent dissent or a newfound allegiance to Jesus after his death. The fact that Mark describes him as one who was 'waiting for the Kingdom of God' [προσδεχόμενος τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ] aligns him with the broader eschatological hopes associated with Jesus' ministry. Some scholars, such as Collins (2007:769), posit that Joseph's boldness in approaching Pilate reflects a narrative contrast, whereas Jesus' disciples had fled in fear (Mk 14:50), Joseph demonstrates courage in his public request for the body.

Joseph's actions are also significant considering Roman and Jewish burial customs. Under normal circumstances, the bodies of crucified criminals were either left unburied as a form of dishonour or disposed of in mass graves (Hengel 1977:87). Roman authorities typically did not grant burial requests for those executed for sedition, unless there was

¹ Joseph of Arimathea's introduction in Mark 15:43 as a βουλευτής (council member) awaiting the kingdom of God reinforces Mark's eschatological focus by highlighting the paradox of discipleship and the ongoing expectation of divine fulfilment. While Jesus' closest disciples flee (Mk 14:50), Joseph, an unexpected figure, courageously requests Jesus' body, aligning himself with the kingdom's future realisation (Marcus 2009). His actions serve as a narrative contrast, demonstrating that eschatological hope persists even in Jesus' death, a theme central to Mark's Gospel (Hooker 1991). Furthermore, Joseph's role in the burial establishes the transition to the resurrection, the ultimate eschatological event that affirms Jesus' messianic mission (Collins 2007). His actions, therefore, underscore Mark's apocalyptic framework, where the kingdom is breaking through, often in unexpected ways.

intervention from an influential figure. Given Joseph's status as a βουλευτής [council member], his approach to Pilate may have carried enough political weight to ensure a favourable response. France (2002:664) notes that this detail adds historical plausibility to the account, as a prominent Jew's request for burial aligns with Roman governance practices of occasionally allowing honourable burials under specific conditions.

Furthermore, Joseph's role in the burial fulfils the requirement of Deuteronomy 21:22–23, which mandates the prompt burial of an executed individual. This suggests that, despite Jesus' execution as a criminal, he still received a burial consistent with Jewish customs, albeit through the intervention of an elite figure. This tension – between Jesus' criminal execution and his honourable burial – reinforces Mark's broader irony, where Jesus is rejected yet paradoxically honoured in death (Hooker 1991:382).

Verses 44–45: Verification of Jesus' death

Mark 15:44–45 records Pilate's reaction to Joseph's request: he is surprised at the speed of Jesus' death and seeks confirmation from the centurion. This verification serves both a narrative and apologetic function. In the Roman world, crucifixion was designed to be a prolonged and torturous process, with victims sometimes surviving for days (Hengel 1977:85). Jesus' relatively swift death – after approximately 6 h (cf. Mk 15:25, 33) – puzzles Pilate, prompting him to seek assurance from a trusted Roman officer. The centurion's confirmation functions as an official Roman attestation to Jesus' death, countering any suggestion that he merely appeared to die (apparent death theory). This is particularly significant given later claims that Jesus did not truly die but was only unconscious or revived later, as some early opponents of Christianity suggested (cf. Strauss 1864:412). Evans (2001:510) argues that Mark includes this verification to add historical credibility to the burial account, emphasising that Jesus' death was not a matter of speculation but a certified fact under Roman authority.

Also, this verification has Christological implications. The centurion's role in both Mark 15:39 (where he declares Jesus to be the 'Son of God') and 15:45 (where he confirms Jesus' death) links the acknowledgement of Jesus' identity with his actual death. In Markan theology, Jesus' true nature is fully revealed not in his miracles but in his suffering and death (Hooker 1991:385). The centurion, an unlikely witness, becomes a key figure in affirming both Jesus' divine identity and the finality of his death, reinforcing Mark's broader motif of irony and reversal. Moreover, the official confirmation from Pilate and the centurion underlines the legal and administrative aspects of Jesus' execution. Roman crucifixions were highly regulated, and a centurion's report would have carried significant legal weight (Hengel 1977:88). This detail aligns with Mark's tendency to provide historical verisimilitude by incorporating Roman legal procedures into his passion narrative (France 2002:665).

Verses 46–47: Witnesses to the burial

The presence of Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph as witnesses to Jesus' burial (Mk 15:47) serves multiple narrative and theological purposes. Their observation ensures that the location of Jesus' tomb is known, which is essential for the resurrection account that follows in Mark 16. In a legal and historical sense, their role strengthens the credibility of the burial event by providing continuity between Jesus' death, burial and subsequent resurrection appearances. This is particularly significant in a cultural context where women's testimonies were often marginalised. Lane (1974:578) highlights that Mark's inclusion of female witnesses adds authenticity to the burial narrative. If the burial were a later invention, it is unlikely that the testimony of women – who were generally not considered reliable witnesses in Jewish legal tradition (Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.8.15) – would have been emphasised. The prominence of these women in all four Gospel accounts (cf. Mt 27:61, Lk 23:55, Jn 19:25) suggests that their role was an established part of early Christian memory. France (2002:667) further notes that their presence at the tomb resolves potential scepticism about the resurrection, as it establishes continuity in the burial-to-empty-tomb sequence. Moreover, the mention of these specific women aligns with the broader Markan theme of discipleship and faithfulness. While the male disciples had abandoned Jesus (Mk 14:50), the women remain present, witnessing both the crucifixion (Mk 15:40) and burial. This challenges conventional expectations and subtly critiques the failure of the male disciples. As Hooker (1991:387) observes, Mark's Gospel consistently elevates unexpected figures – women, centurions and outsiders – as models of faith, in contrast to the disciples' failures.

Significant theological markers

Mark's burial account is laden with theological motifs, with references to the Sabbath and the timing of events playing central roles in highlighting Jesus' Jewish identity and the narrative's eschatological focus. The mention of the approaching Sabbath (v. 42) situates Jesus' burial within the broader framework of Jewish piety. By adhering to Sabbath regulations, Joseph's actions affirm Jesus' Jewish identity and situate his death and burial within the covenantal traditions of Israel (Bock 1994:374). This Sabbath reference also carries eschatological overtones. Jesus' burial marks the cessation of his earthly ministry, paralleling the divine rest of creation (Gn 2:2–3). This symbolic rest foreshadows the new creation inaugurated through the resurrection (Lane 1974:583).

Mark's emphasis on timing serves a dual purpose: it reinforces the narrative's historical plausibility and highlights the theological significance of Jesus' death and burial. Following the Deuteronomic prohibition against exposing a body overnight (Dt 21:22–23), the haste with which Jesus was buried before sunset highlights the fulfilment of Jewish burial customs (Guelich 1989:320). In addition, the timing builds suspense for the resurrection. Temporal markers in the story maintain theological continuity and narrative tension by bridging the gap between passion and resurrection

(Moloney 2002:330). The narrative of Mark 15:42–47 is well structured and combines profound theological meaning with literary simplicity. By highlighting Jesus' adherence to Jewish tradition and foreshadowing his resurrection, the narrative's succinctness, structural coherence and symbolic detail highlight his burial's historical and theological significance. Mark skilfully incorporates the burial into the more prominent themes of identity, redemption and divine sovereignty throughout the Gospel by framing it as a moment of solemn fulfilment and eschatological hope.

Historical overview of funerary practices in Jewish societies

Jewish burial customs during the Second Temple period² were intensely ingrained in religious, cultural and legal practices, reflecting the sanctity attributed to human life and the body. This section examines the historical context of these customs, focusing on respect for the deceased, rituals of body preparation and burial laws. These practices underlined Jewish identity and preserved community cohesion and compliance with Torah mandates (Hachlili & Killebrew 1993:89–102).

Respect for the deceased

Respect for the dead was central to Jewish ethics during the Second Temple period, grounded in the Torah's teachings. Deuteronomy 21:22–23 mandates the prompt burial of executed individuals to prevent the defilement of the land, a command that shaped burial customs throughout Jewish history. The Mishnah elaborates on this, emphasising the urgency and dignity required in burial rites (Neusner 2004:153). Josephus, a 1st-century Jewish historian, attests to this practice, noting that Jewish laws prohibited leaving a corpse unburied overnight unless for ceremonial purposes (Antiquities, 4.265; Sanders 1992:218). The duty to honour the dead extended beyond the immediate family to the broader community, reflecting a shared responsibility. The Talmud describes the concept of *chesed shel emet* – 'true kindness' – as acts of care for the deceased, performed without expectation of reciprocation (Hoffman 2011:85). Such practices reinforced community solidarity, particularly during a time when Roman occupation threatened Jewish religious traditions (Meyers 2012:108).

Rituals of body preparation

Body preparation was essential to Jewish burial customs, grounded in ritual purity laws. These laws dictated the handling of the deceased to prevent ritual defilement while preserving the sanctity of the body. According to the Mishnah (M. Oholot 16:1), contact with a corpse rendered individuals and objects impure, requiring specific purification rituals (Klawans 2000:72). Despite these restrictions, great care was taken to prepare the body, often involving washing, anointing with oils and wrapping in linen shrouds (Brown 1994:1241).

²The burial practices of the Second Temple Period (1st century BCE to 1st century CE) are primarily understood through the works of Josephus and subsequent rabbinic texts that address burial regulations (Hazer 2024:1–11, see also Hachlili & Killebrew 1993:89).

The Gospels corroborate these practices, as seen in the accounts of Jesus' burial. In Mark 15:42–47, Joseph of Arimathea requests Jesus' body, prepares it with a linen cloth and places it in a rock-hewn tomb. Similarly, the Gospel of John describes the application of spices and myrrh as part of the burial preparation, a common practice among the Jewish elite (Jn 19:39–40; Sanders 1992:219). These rituals symbolised reverence for the deceased and adherence to Jewish burial laws. Anointing and wrapping served multiple purposes. Firstly, they honoured the deceased by preserving the body's dignity. Secondly, they delayed decomposition, a practical consideration given the warm climate of Judea (Evans 2013:70–90). Thirdly, these practices reflected eschatological beliefs, as many Jews anticipated a physical resurrection, necessitating the body's preservation (Wright 2003:537). The Dead Sea Scrolls further reveal the importance of burial rituals within sectarian communities, emphasising their role in maintaining purity and covenantal fidelity (Vermes 2004:209).

Burial laws and praxis

Jewish burial laws during the Second Temple period were influenced by both biblical mandates and evolving rabbinic interpretations. Burial was considered a sacred duty, as seen in Genesis 23, where Abraham secures a burial site for Sarah, setting a precedent for purchasing and preparing family tombs (Levine 2006:58). By the 1st-century CE, tombs were often carved into rock and included niches or ossuaries for secondary burial, reflecting a shift in burial practices because of limited land and eschatological beliefs (Segal 1998:227). The timing of the burial was also significant. Jewish law required immediate burial, typically within 24 h, to prevent defilement and uphold the dignity of the deceased (Dt 21:23; M. Sanhedrin 6:5). This urgency was particularly important during the Sabbath when burial work was prohibited. In Mark 15:42–47, this concern is evident as Joseph of Arimathea ensures Jesus' burial before sunset on the day of preparation (Brown 1994:1242). This practice underscored the interplay between religious observance and practical considerations. Community involvement in funerals further emphasised the social dimension of burial customs. Mourning rituals, including wailing, sitting *shiva* and commemorative feasts, provided support to grieving families and reinforced communal bonds (Cohen 1999:68). Rabbinic texts highlight the importance of public participation in funerals, considering it an act of collective piety and solidarity (Neusner 2004:154). Burial practices in Jewish tradition during the Second Temple period served as pivotal rites of passage, deeply embedded in cultural and religious frameworks. These rites were integral to marking social and religious identity, facilitating transitions between life and death, and fostering communal and theological continuity. This section examines the dual role of burial rites as rites of passage and as markers of identity within the Jewish community.

Burial practices as rites of passage

The concept of burial as a rite of passage is grounded in Arnold van Gennep's classic framework, which identifies

three stages: separation, liminality and reintegration (Van Gennep 1960:10). In the context of Jewish burial, the act of separating the deceased from the community aligns with the physical removal of the body and the immediate burial required by Jewish law (Dt 21:23; M. Sanhedrin 6:5). This urgency reflects the theological and cultural imperative to honour the dead and prevent impurity within the living community (Neusner 2004:153). The liminal stage involves mourning rituals, such as sitting *shiva*, during which family and community members gather to support the bereaved and commemorate the deceased (Cohen 1999:72). This period serves as a transitional phase, where the living adjusts to the absence of the deceased while maintaining a sense of continuity through communal and religious observances. The reintegration stage, often marked by the cessation of mourning practices, reaffirms the bonds between the living and the larger Jewish community, emphasising the collective nature of life and death in Jewish theology (Hoffman 2011:85). Burial rites also reflect eschatological beliefs, particularly the expectation of bodily resurrection. The Pharisaic belief in resurrection, as referenced in Daniel 12:2 and later rabbinic literature, underscores the importance of preserving the body for eventual restoration (Wright 2003:538). The burial narrative in Mark 15:42–47, where Jesus' body is prepared and placed in a tomb, reflects this anticipation, illustrating how burial rites bridged the physical and spiritual realms (Brown 1994:1241).

Important ceremonial acts and their Jewish tone

Jesus' burial narrative, notably Joseph of Arimathea's deeds, is profoundly rooted in 1st-century Jewish burial rituals and cultural standards. This section investigates the legal and cultural implications of Joseph's request for Jesus' body, the purification rituals involved and the importance of a rock-hewn tomb in Jewish tradition. Joseph of Arimathea's act of requesting Jesus' body reflects a confluence of Roman legal protocols and Jewish burial customs. Under Roman law, executed criminals' bodies were often left exposed as a deterrent (Crossan 1994:172). However, Jewish customs emphasised burial as a sacred duty (Dt 21:22–23), even for those executed (Evans 2013:92). Joseph's intervention demonstrates piety and courage, as he risked association with a condemned man (Harrington 2000:245). Pilate's consent aligns with the Roman practice of granting requests for burial under special circumstances, particularly during religious festivals, to avoid unrest (Meyers 2017:56–57). This act underscores Joseph's fidelity to Jewish ethical norms of honouring the dead (Keener 1999:569).

Preparation of Jesus' body

The preparation of Jesus' body involved wrapping it in linen, a practice consistent with Jewish purity laws that sought to preserve the sanctity of the deceased (Bock 1996:556). The absence of embalming, typical in Egyptian and Greco-Roman practices, further highlights the Jewish context, as such processes were generally avoided among Jews (Brown 1994:1260). The use of linen aligns with Jewish burial shrouds

mentioned in rabbinic sources, emphasising simplicity and humility (Hengel 1977:206). The washing of the body before wrapping, though not explicitly mentioned in the Gospels, is implied by Jewish custom (Sanders 1993:282). However, the hurried burial because of the approaching Sabbath may have limited the application of spices, which women later intended to complete (Mk 16:1; Lk 23:56; Wright 2003:141).

Placement in a rock-hewn tomb

The placement of Jesus in a rock-hewn tomb aligns with Jewish burial practices among the wealthy elite of the Second Temple period (Magness 2011:212). Such tombs, carved into limestone, were common for primary burials, where the body decomposed before secondary burial in ossuaries (Finegan 1992:55–56). Joseph's provision of his tomb signifies not only his wealth but also adherence to the Jewish principle of familial or communal burial spaces (Smith 2016:134). This status carries implications for his influence and the boldness required to approach Pilate for Jesus' body (Mk 15:43). Scholars note that Joseph's actions were remarkable, given the potential reputational and personal risks involved. As a council member, aligning himself with Jesus – crucified as a criminal – might have subjected him to scrutiny or even alienation from his peers. However, Mark describes him as one 'waiting for the Kingdom of God', emphasising his faith-driven motivation, possibly aligning him with others who recognised Jesus as pivotal to divine fulfilment (France 2002:671). This phrase suggests not only religious devotion but a counter-cultural hope for a messianic age.

The intersection of social status and ritual fulfilment

Joseph's actions were deeply rooted in Jewish burial customs, emphasising the importance of burial rites within Jewish tradition (Brown 1994:1255). According to Jewish law, a corpse, particularly that of someone executed, was to be buried before nightfall (Dt 21:22–23). Joseph's initiative fulfilled this legal and religious obligation, marking a confluence of personal piety and adherence to societal norms. By preparing Jesus' body for burial with a linen shroud, he ensured that even in death, Jesus was treated with dignity.

Mark's portrayal of Joseph transcends a mere historical record. Some scholars interpret his actions as embodying a form of courageous discipleship despite his prior lack of overt alignment with Jesus during his ministry. His 'boldness' in requesting the body (Mk 15:43) may indicate a significant shift in his commitment to Jesus' mission following the crucifixion (Hooker 1991:378). This boldness juxtaposes the desertion of Jesus by other disciples, underlining the narrative tension between fear and faith. Motivations attributed to Joseph vary. Some argue his actions were primarily out of respect for Jewish customs, while others suggest a deeper messianic recognition. Mark's narrative supports both interpretations, balancing Joseph's adherence to tradition with his apparent hope in the Kingdom of God (Lane 1974:570). This dual portrayal situates Joseph as a liminal figure – simultaneously a product of his social status and an agent of divine purpose.

Funerary rituals as identity markers

Jewish burial customs served as powerful identity markers, distinguishing Jewish communities from their Greco-Roman counterparts. While Roman funerary practices often involved cremation or elaborate mausoleums, Jewish practices prioritised simplicity and adherence to Torah principles (Hoffman 2011:88). This distinction was particularly significant under Roman rule, as burial customs became a means of preserving cultural and religious identity (Meyers 2012:112). Moreover, funerary rituals reflected Jewish theological beliefs about life, death and the afterlife. The Pharisaic belief in bodily resurrection influenced burial practices, emphasising the importance of preserving the body for eventual resurrection (Wright 2003:538). This belief contrasted sharply with Sadducean scepticism and Greco-Roman notions of the afterlife, further delineating Jewish identity (Sanders 1992:222). The burial account in Mark 15:42–47 reflects these tensions, portraying Jesus' burial in conformity with Pharisaic expectations while gesturing towards his resurrection. The burial customs of Second Temple Judaism were greatly embedded in religious, cultural and legal traditions that reflected the sanctity of life and the communal nature of Jewish identity.³ This section highlights the significance of these practices as identity markers by examining the respect for the deceased, rituals of body preparation and burial laws. The burial narrative in Mark 15:42–47 stresses Jesus' conformity to these customs, reinforcing his Jewish heritage while setting the stage for the Gospel's broader theological message.

Burial as a marker of social and religious identity

Burial practices in Second Temple Judaism were not merely functional but served as profound markers of social and religious identity. These customs delineated Jewish communities from surrounding cultures, particularly Greco-Roman societies, where cremation and elaborate mausoleums were prevalent (Meyers 2012:108). The Jewish emphasis on burial in simple tombs or caves featured a commitment to humility and conformity to Torah principles, even in death (Levine 2006:58). Jewish burial practices reinforced communal identity by emphasising collective responsibility for honouring the dead. The Talmud describes the *mitzvah* [commandment] of burying the dead as a paramount act of kindness [*chesed shel emet*], highlighting its importance as a communal duty (Hoffman 2011:88). This principle is evident in the burial narrative of Jesus, where Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, assumes responsibility for Jesus' burial, exemplifying both personal piety and communal obligation (Mk 15:43; Sanders 1992:219). Communal participation extended to mourning practices, such as the recitation of the Kaddish and the organisation of commemorative meals, which served to integrate the bereaved into the community. These rituals underscored the interconnectedness of individual and collective identity, affirming the community's role in

navigating the liminal space between life and death (Cohen 1999:75).

Jewish burial practices were also pivotal in affirming religious identity and theological continuity. The meticulous observance of burial laws reflected adherence to Torah mandates and reinforced Jewish distinctiveness. For instance, the immediate burial of Jesus in Mark 15:42–47 adheres to the biblical injunction in Deuteronomy 21:22–23, illustrating Mark's portrayal of Jesus as fully integrated within Jewish law and tradition (Brown 1994:1242). These practices also embodied eschatological beliefs central to Jewish identity during the Second Temple period. The Pharisaic expectation of bodily resurrection, which gained prominence in this era, shaped burial customs, emphasising preserving the body as a vessel for eventual restoration (Wright 2003:537). Using ossuaries for secondary burial, common in 1st-century Judea, further reflects this belief, signifying a shift towards individual accountability and hope in resurrection (Segal 1998:227).

Jewish burial rites further distinguished Jewish communities from their Greco-Roman counterparts, who often practiced cremation or constructed grandiose mausoleums to honour the dead. The Jewish preference for burial in rock-hewn tombs or simple earthen graves signalled a theological and cultural departure from Greco-Roman values, emphasising humility, purity and eschatological hope over material extravagance (Meyers 2012:112). The burial of Jesus in a rock-hewn tomb, as described in Mark 15:46, illustrates this distinction while affirming his conformity to Jewish norms. The presence of women witnesses in the narrative further underscores the communal nature of Jewish burial practices, as they assume a vital role in mourning and commemorating the deceased (Levine 2006:61). Burial rites during the Second Temple period held profound cultural and religious significance, functioning as rites of passage and markers of identity. These practices facilitated transitions between life and death, reinforced communal solidarity and affirmed theological beliefs central to Jewish identity. By examining the burial narrative in Mark 15:42–47 within this historical and cultural framework, it becomes evident that Mark employs these rites to underscore Jesus' conformity to Jewish customs and his integration within the broader narrative of Jewish religious and social identity.

Funerary rites as identity markers in early Christian-Jewish relations

Mark's Gospel was likely addressed to a diverse audience, including Jewish and Gentile Christians. For Jewish-Christians, the burial narrative affirmed their cultural and religious heritage, providing a sense of continuity with the past. For Gentile Christians, it offered an entry point into understanding the theological and cultural underpinnings of their new faith (Myers 1988:389). By highlighting Jewish burial customs, Mark creates a cultural familiarity that resonates with both groups. This narrative strategy allowed the Gospel to serve as a bridge, bringing together believers with diverse backgrounds under a shared tradition.

³Burial customs in Mark 15:42–47 align with Second Temple Jewish traditions, emphasising Jesus' Jewish identity through practices like using a rock-hewn tomb and observing purity laws. These rites, vital for communal identity during Roman occupation, highlight continuity with Jewish heritage (Brown 1994:1243; France 2002:673; Hooker 1991:375).

The emphasis on burial rites also helped to legitimise the Christian movement as a fulfilment of Jewish messianic hopes (Witherington 2001:376).

The burial of Jesus reflects a boundary-crossing identity that is both distinctly Jewish and uniquely Christian. While rooted in Jewish tradition, the burial account carries theological implications that point towards the universality of Jesus' mission. For instance, Joseph of Arimathea's actions symbolise a faith that transcends cultural divisions, as he courageously aligns himself with Jesus in a manner that defies social and religious norms (Gundry 1993:959). The placement of Jesus in a rock-hewn tomb, a practice associated with wealth and honour, further points out the significance of burial rites in shaping early Christian identity. This act not only fulfils Jewish customs but also signifies the respect and dignity afforded to Jesus, challenging the shame typically associated with crucifixion (Nolland 2005:788). By preserving Jesus' Jewish identity through burial practices, Mark's Gospel positions him as a bridge between the Jewish tradition and the emerging Christian faith. This dual identity serves as a foundation for the early Church, emphasising both continuity with Jewish heritage and the inclusivity of the Christian message (Keener 1999:1023).

Continuity and shared customs in Jewish and early Christian funerary practices

Early Christian funerary customs were originally based on Jewish customs because Christianity developed within Judaism. The deceased was cleaned, anointed, wrapped in linen and buried, frequently in a family tomb or burial cave, according to certain Jewish burial practices during the Second Temple period (Grabbe 2010:105). Deuteronomy 21:23, which forbade leaving a corpse exposed overnight, meant that burial had to be done as soon as possible, usually the same day of death. Jewish-Christians adhered to these practices, as shown by the Gospels' descriptions of Jesus's funeral, which painstakingly adheres to Jewish customs (Mk 15:42–46; Jn 19:38–42). Jews of the time, especially those in Judea, also frequently used ossuaries, or bone boxes, for secondary burial. Although there is little concrete archaeological evidence to support this theory, some academics contend that Jewish-Christians were the first to carry on this practice (Sanders 1992:216). Further evidence of an early overlap between Jewish and Christian burial spaces can be found in the striking similarities between early Christian catacombs in Rome and Jewish catacombs, which include Hebrew inscriptions, rock-hewn burial niches and symbols like the menorah and the fish (Jensen 2016:56).

Emerging distinctions: Christian theology and funerary practices

Despite these common practices, early Christian burial practices gradually changed because of theological developments. The primary distinction was the Christian focus on bodily resurrection, which was essential to their religion and affected how they honoured the deceased. Although the Pharisees and other Jewish groups believed in resurrection (Dn 12:2; 2 Mc 7:9–14), it was not widely accepted in Judaism; the Sadducees, for example, categorically rejected

it (Mt 22:23) (Wright 2003:142). Christian theology, on the other hand, centred its eschatological hope on resurrection, which was mirrored in prayers, funerary inscriptions and collective burial customs. Christian graves frequently featured symbols that symbolised salvation and hope in the afterlife, such as the anchor, fish [*Ichthys*] or *Chi-Rho* (a Christogram) (Rutgers 1995:230). In contrast to Jewish tomb inscriptions, which tended to place more emphasis on ancestry and communal continuity than on individual resurrection, these inscriptions often conveyed messages of hope and triumph over death. This implies that burial customs were being used by Christians as a clear indication of their religious identity by the second century. Furthermore, collective Christian cemeteries replaced solely family-based burial plots in early Christian communities. The theological emphasis on the church as a new family, bound together by faith in Christ rather than blood, was reflected in this change (Jensen 2016:58). Burial customs served to strengthen this sense of collective identity, setting Christians apart from their Jewish neighbours, whose funerals continued to be connected to family and ancestry.

The role of rituals and commemoration

Reciting the Kaddish, participating in memorial feasts [*yahrzeit*] and sitting *shiva* (a 7-day mourning period) were all part of Jewish mourning customs (Fine 2005:109). While early Christians introduced unique commemorative rituals, some of these traditions continued among Jewish-Christians. Agape feasts or Eucharistic meals at gravesites, were one noteworthy development that strengthened the notion that the faithful continue to fellowship after death (Frend 1984:214). Although commemorative meals were also observed by Jews, the Christian version became more eschatological and Christocentric. Burial traditions were also influenced by the Christian emphasis on martyrdom. Christian martyrs were frequently interred in designated locations starting in the second century, and their tombs were used as pilgrimage sites. Instead of honouring individual graves, this practice deviated from Jewish customs, which expressed respect for the deceased by caring for family tombs (Rutgers 1995:242). Because graveyards were transformed into hallowed places for Christian worship, martyr cults further cemented a distinctively Christian identity.

Did a clear boundary exist?

The change from Jewish to Christian burial customs was a gradual process driven by community structures, sociopolitical contexts and theological developments rather than an abrupt break. Particularly in areas like Antioch and Jerusalem where there were sizeable Jewish-Christian populations, many Jewish-Christians probably carried on with Jewish burial practices well into the second and third centuries (Grabbe 2010:219). In addition, while claiming to be followers of Jesus, groups such as the Ebionites and Nazarenes continued to practice Jewish burial practices (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III.27.5). This makes it more difficult to draw a precise line because early Christian funerary customs changed at varying rates depending on the

community. It is more accurate to think of burial customs as a continuum, where some Christian innovations gradually separate them from their Jewish heritage, rather than as a rigid Jewish-Christian binary.

Conclusion

Mark's burial narrative intricately ties Jesus' death to Jewish funerary customs, affirming his identity as deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. The rituals of body preparation, burial in a rock-hewn tomb and the observance of purity laws highlight the continuity between Jesus' life and his cultural and religious heritage. These actions not only honour Jewish practices but also provide theological depth to the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus, emphasising his messianic role within a Jewish framework. This analysis underscores the significance of Jesus' cultural heritage in shaping early Christian narratives, providing a foundation for understanding the intersection of Jewish and Christian identities. By preserving and reinterpreting Jewish rituals, the Gospel of Mark fosters a theological identity that bridges traditions, illustrating the transformative role of cultural practices in early Christianity. This insight enriches broader New Testament studies by offering a nuanced view of how cultural and religious rituals inform theological expression and communal identity.

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