

Bathing the Dead & Shrouding

1. Bathing the Dead

Bathing the dead is undoubtedly an important ritual in the overall preparation of the deceased for burial. Scholars differ on its legal ruling. The majority of jurists hold that it is ‘compulsory’ (*wājib*), whereas the Malikites hold that it is merely ‘recommended’ (*sunna*). Because the arguments of the latter group have been refuted, perhaps the preferred view is that bathing the deceased is *wājib*. Allah knows best.

A. How to Bathe the Dead

Umm ‘Aṭīyah narrated that the “Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) came to see them when his daughter Zaynab died and said to them: ‘Bathe her three times, or five, or more than that—if you see fit—with water and *sidr* [leaves of the Christ’s Thorn or ‘downs’ tree as it is known locally], and in the final (bath) with *kāfūr* (camphor, bot. eucalyptus globulus lab.). When you have finished, inform me.’ When we were done, we informed him and he gave us his loincloth and said, ‘Cover her with it’ (Reported by al-Jamā‘ah). He (ﷺ) also said, “Begin bathing her from her right side and the areas of wudū” (al-Jamā‘ah) and “Bathe her odd number of times—3, 5, 7, or above that if you see fit” (al-Jamā‘ah). Umm ‘Aṭīyah continued, “We braided her hair in three hitches and placed them behind her” (Reported by al-Bukhāri).

Lessons from the *hadīth*:

1. That it contains a description of how the deceased is bathed according to the Sunnah of the Prophet (ﷺ).
2. That it is proper that women should bathe women. This, however, does not negate a

man bathing his deceased wife and vice versa (see below C. i.).

3. That the women who perform the act of *ghusl* (“bath”) should be pious and experienced. The attribute of piety is essential, for it is expected that the bathers would guard the secrets or faults of the deceased uncovered during the *ghusl*. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “Whoever bathes a dead and conceals for him, he is forgiven 40 times....” (Reported by al-Hākim). As for experience, it is highly desirable, since the bather ensures that the Sunnah is observed as well as excellence achieved. Imam Muslim reported that when Zaynab, the Prophet’s (ﷺ) daughter died, he sent for none other but Umm ‘Aṭīyah who was well known to be the official bather of deceased Muslim women in Medina.
4. That the deceased is stripped with only a covering placed over his/her private parts (*‘awrah*), while the *ghusl* is performed. Concerning the covering, of the *‘awrah*, the Prophet (ﷺ) said, “A man does not look at the *‘awrah* of a man, neither does a woman look at the *‘awrah* of another woman” (Reported by Muslim).
5. That gentleness is required in bathing the dead: this attribute should also be a quality of the bather. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “The breaking of a bone of the deceased is like breaking a bone of someone alive” (Reported by Aḥmad, Abū Dawūd, & Ibn Mājah).

6. That in the case of a deceased female, her plaits or braids are to be undone except for three of them. As Umm ‘Aṭīyah narrated, “We undid it (her hair), then we washed it, next we made it into three braids” (Reported by al-Bukhāri).
7. That the use of water is mixed with leaves of *sidr* and camphor to bathe the deceased or substitutes like potash in the event that the other ingredients cannot be found.

On these rituals, Shaykh Shah Waliyullah commented, “The basis of bathing the deceased is induced from bathing of the living because the person used to do it and the bathers themselves do it, so there is nothing quite like it in respect of the deceased. Since disease is the most likely source of filth and foul smelling odors, the order of *sidr* and extra baths was given. The order to use camphor (*kāfūr*) in the last bathing is because it has the characteristic of delaying the decay of the corpse. It is claimed that it also wards off predatory animals from coming close to the corpse. The bath of the deceased is begun from the right side, so that it will be on the level of the bath of the living, honoring these bodily organs.” Perhaps the use of *sidr* leaves and camphor also function as a temporary repellent of certain insects and bacteria as well as preservation against immediate decomposition of the dead body. Allah knows best. This area calls for further research by those more qualified in the medical or forensic fields.

8. That the bath is begun from the right side of the deceased after the areas of *wudū* are washed or wiped. ‘Ā’ishah narrated that “the Prophet (ﷺ), when he took a bath because of sexual impurity (*janābah*), he would wash his hands, then perform *wudū* like

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that for the *ṣalāh*, then he would bathe and pass his fingers through his hair until he felt that his scalp was moistened, then he would pour water over it 3 times and then wash his entire body” (Reported by al-Bukhārī).

9. That disbelievers (*kuffār*) are excluded from performing this act, since the Prophetic bequest of bathing the deceased was specifically addressed to Muslims.

10. That the bath of the deceased must be performed an odd number of times, at least three times.

Those are the main points of the Prophet’s (ﷺ) instructions to Umm ‘Aṭīyah concerning the bath of the deceased.

B. Other important acts in relation to bathing the dead

These may benefit the deceased or do not contradict Islamic principles, such as the use of warm water, clipping the hairs and nails, including cleanliness (*tahārah*), which are ‘permissible’ (*mubāḥ*) in the absence of any Islamic legal proof (*dalīl*) which prohibit them.

C. FAQ on Bathing the Deceased

i) Can a husband bathe his deceased wife, or vice versa? The answer is yes based on the following.

‘Ā’ishah (may Allah be pleased with her!) narrated that “one day the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) returned to me from a funeral at al-Baqī’ (the cemetery of Medina). I had a headache, so I cried, “Oh, my head!” He said, “What is your hurt? Were you to die before me, I would bathe you, shroud you, pray over you, and bury you!” (Reported by Aḥmad & Ibn Mājah).

Also Abū Bakr aṣ-Ṣiddīq left instructions to his wife, Asmā’ (may Allah be pleased with them!) to bathe

him when he died. She did just that. ‘Alī too bathed his wife Fāṭimah (may Allah be pleased with them!) when she died, as reported by ad-Dāraquṭni & al-Bayhaqi. None of the Companions objected to these actions, so what they did tantamount to an *ijmā’* (‘consensus of opinion’) of them on this matter. That a woman can bathe her deceased husband, if she so desires, is permissible is based on *qiyās* (‘juristic analogy’) on the principle that it is permissible for a man to bathe his deceased wife.

ii) Can men bathe a deceased woman who is of no relation to them, that is, she is not their mother or their sister? And can woman bathe a deceased man who is a stranger (non-*maḥram*) to them?

There are two views on this issue, according to Mustafā al-‘Aduwi:

a). Sinnān b. Ghurfah narrated that he had companionship from the Prophet (ﷺ) regarding a woman who died amongst men who were not her *maḥārim* (sing. *maḥram*—a relationship either by marriage or by close blood ties of such degree that marriage is permanently prohibited). He (ﷺ) said, “*She has to have tayyamum (‘dry ablution’) with clean dust done on her and she is not to be bathed. The same goes for men*” (Reported by al-Ṭabarānī). Many scholars hold this view.

b). Other scholars opine that if a man dies and there is not found men or his wife to perform the bath, or similarly a woman dies and no women around or her husband are around, then both of them are to be bathed from above their clothes (i.e. those parts of the body are washed which are not covered by clothes).

iii). Bathing of a minor child: Ibn Mundhir said, “The scholars unanimously agree that a woman (or women) can bathe a minor boy who has not attained puberty.”

2. Shrouding (kafan) of the Deceased

a). It’s Legal Ruling: it is *wājib* (‘compulsory’) to shroud the deceased for burial with at least his or her *‘awrah* being covered. It is narrated that Mus’ab bn ‘Umayr, who was killed in the Battle of Uḥud, did not leave anything except a *nimarāh* (i.e. a cloak or garment made of wool containing white and black stripes worn by Arabs at that time). When they covered him with it up to his head, his feet were uncovered; and when they covered his feet with it, his head became uncovered. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) ordered them to cover his head with it... (Reported by al-Jamā‘ah except Ibn Mājah).

b). Proficiency in Shrouding the Deceased: The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “*If one of you shrouds his brother Muslim, let him do it well*” (Reported by Muslim).

c). Permissibility in Exceeding the Minimum Requirement in Shrouding the Deceased but Avoiding Extravagance:

i). ‘Ā’ishah (may Allah be pleased with her!) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) was shrouded in three new, white garments of Yemeni origin without a shirt or a turban and completely embodied in it (Reported by al-Jamā‘ah).

ii). Laylā bint Qānif ath-Thaqafiyah narrated, “I was among those who bathed Umm Kulthūm, daughter of the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) when she died, and the first thing that the Prophet (ﷺ) gave us was a loin cloth (*ḥaqw*), then a coat (*dir’*), then a head covering (*khimār*), then a blanket (*milḥafah*), and then she was embodied after that in another garment” (Reported by Abū Dawūd).

Ash-Shaykh Ṣiddīq Khān (1832-89 CE), one of the most authoritative

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scholars of the Indian sub-continent, stated in his renown book *ar-Rawḍat-un Niddiyyah*: “It is not established from the Prophet (ﷺ) the manner of shrouding (*kafan*) in any particular way, or the number of shrouds, or the number of times—except what was narrated of him (ﷺ) in respect of shrouding his daughter Umm Kulthum (see above)...The aim of that is the recommendation that shrouding the female should be in this fashion. As for shrouding the male, nothing has been confirmed from him (ﷺ) except his order of shrouding in one garment, as what occurred in respect of those killed in the battle of Uhud, and in two garments as in the case of the pilgrim whose camel broke his neck (Reported by al-Jamā‘ah). Multiple shrouding and its extravagant costs are not praiseworthy things. Had not the Law (*Sharia*) commented on it (*kafan*), it would be a waste of wealth because the deceased does not benefit from its cost and its benefit does not return to the living. May Allah have mercy on Abū Bakr as-Ṣiddīq who said, “Verily, the living is more worthy of the new than the dead,” when his daughter ‘Ā’ishah, wife of the Prophet (ﷺ), told him that the garment he wished to be buried in was old (Reported by al-Bukhāri).

d.) The *kafan* should, preferably, be white. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “*Wear white garments, for it is the best of clothes, and shroud with it your dead*” (Reported by Aḥmad, Abū Dawūd & Ibn Mājah) That is the Sunnah.

e.) Perfuming the *kafan* and the body of the deceased. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “*When you incense the deceased, do so 3 times*” (Reported by Aḥmad).