

**‘Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead’ (Lk 9:60):
Interpreting Jesus’ Harsh Saying in Contexts**

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Vietnamese mourning customs and rituals are elaborate and quite diverse. Each region of the country has its own traditions to show respect for the dead. One mourning custom, which is brought over from Vietnam and is commonly practiced by Vietnamese Catholics in the United States, is the series of memorial services called *lễ giỗ*, that is performed for a deceased family member, especially for the father or mother. There are three important memorial services. The first anniversary is held one hundred days after the death to celebrate the end of the period of tears. The second important memorial service is held one year after the death. After three years, another memorial service is held to mark the end of the mourning period. During these memorial services, a priest is usually invited to come to the home of the deceased to celebrate Mass to pray for the soul of the departed. Before the Eucharist, various traditional prayers and the Rosary are recited, and after the Mass a dinner with many traditional foods is offered to everyone who came. These anniversaries are meant to help the family grieve and remember the deceased. The rituals are also important expressions of filial piety that fall under the umbrella of ancestor veneration. Peter Phan keenly notes, “Filial piety, and especially filial piety as demonstrated in ancestor worship on the part of the eldest son on the state, village, and family levels, no doubt constitutes the heart and soul of the Vietnamese ethical system and religion.”¹

Interestingly, ancient Judaism likewise valued the importance of caring for the dead. The Torah demands a proper burial for the dead because it is an expression of kindness and love (Tob 1:16-20). Even a criminal who has been put to death is entitled to be buried (Deut 21:23). Slain enemies too deserved a rightful burial (1 Kings 11:15; Ezek 39:15). If a criminal or a slain enemy deserved a proper burial, how much more would it be so for family members, especially one’s parents? The task of burying one’s own father and mother is considered a fulfillment of the fourth commandment (Deut 5:16). Many ancient writings attest that the duty to bury one’s father and mother was rigidly followed in Palestine during the first century C.E. Consequently, it is terribly shocking for Asians, who deeply value the practice of filial piety, to hear Jesus’ stern instruction: “Let the dead bury their own dead!” To the ears of first century hearers and to Asians, Jesus’ harsh saying is not only insensitive and unsympathetic but a blatant transgression of law and tradition. Given the importance of the sacred obligation and cultural expectation to bury one’s parents, several pressing questions arise: How should we interpret this difficult and mysterious saying of Jesus? Could Jesus really teach us to completely sever our family ties? Is the commitment to follow Jesus so radical that we have to transgress our own cultural values and obligation of filial piety? Jesus’ remark, if taken out of its appropriate contexts, could pose a huge obstacle to evangelization and missionary endeavors in a culture that pays great honor to the dead. The saying seems to stand in opposition to family ties and disregard the cultural

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¹ Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (New York: Orbis, 2003), 135.

principles of filial piety, which are values that are widely accepted and upheld by Asian communities worldwide. As such, the aim of this article is to provide the appropriate contexts for interpreting this controversial and enigmatic saying of Jesus. To understand how difficult it is for Asians to accept Jesus' embarrassing statement, let us begin by examining Confucius' teaching on filial piety.

Filial Piety as the Cardinal Virtue of Confucianism

Confucianism, founded by Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.), is considered one of the most influential cultural traditions in China and many other Asian countries, including Vietnam, the author's country of origin. For Confucius, the central focus of one's life is cultivating virtues. While humaneness, etiquette, and loyalty are core virtues, filial piety (*hiếu thảo* in Vietnamese or *xiao* in Chinese) is "the foundation and root of all virtues."² Since filial piety is one of the founding pillars of Confucianism and a cardinal virtue in Confucian ethics and tradition, it shapes people's mindset, ethical behaviors, and lifestyle. Daniel Qin writes,

[Filial piety] emphasizes the affection and duty of the children in parent-child relationships. Children are obliged to obey, support, and honor their parents. Filial piety is both a recognized virtue and a cultural norm. In other words, it is both an inward virtue that children should follow with sincere hearts and an outward etiquette toward their parents.³

Right or honorable relationship between parents and children, in particular between the father and the eldest son, is greatly esteemed in the Confucian cultural system and quite distinct from Western cultures. Guo Qiyong states, "Feeling for one's family members constitutes the most sincere, most beautiful, and most important form of the various human feelings Loving our own family members is the basis for loving other people in society."⁴ Consequently, a son who fulfills his filial obligation is regarded as the ideal person in society and is considered a real "gentleman."⁵ In fulfilling filial responsibilities, he exercises the virtues of humaneness, kindness, or goodness and thus contributes to the public welfare. Carrying out filial obligation is so important that it even takes precedence over public service. His patriotism is never questioned since being loyal to the family is considered being loyal to the state or country.⁶ As such, filial responsibility should take precedence over all other duties, "including obligations to emperor, Heaven, or any other source of temporal or divine authority."⁷

Nurturing or caring for one's father and mother while they are still alive is only one of the many expressions of filial piety. When asked about the meaning of filial piety, Confucius

² Phan, *Christianity*, 131; see also Heidi M. Szpek, "Filial Piety in Jewish Epitaphs," *International Journal of the Humanities* 8, no. 4 (2010): 183-201.

³ Daniel Qin, "Confucian Filial Piety and the Fifth Commandment: A Fulfillment Approach," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 16, no. 2 (2013): 139-164, here 140.

⁴ Guo Qiyong, "Filial Piety, Three Years Mourning, and Love," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 42, no. 4 (2011) 12-38, here 19.

⁵ Phan, *Christianity*, 129. The literal translation of the Chinese (*jūnzi*) or Vietnamese (*quân tử*) word for "gentleman" is "lord's son." It is a description of the ideal man.

⁶ See Phan, *Christianity*, 131, and Qiyong, "Filial Piety," 19.

⁷ Mary Yeo Carpenter, "Familism and Ancestor Veneration: A Look at Chinese Funeral Rites," *Missiology: An International Review* 24, no. 4 (1996): 503-17, here 505.

himself explains: “When your parents are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and make sacrifices to them according to ritual” (*Analects* II, 5).⁸ Consequently, Peter Phan notes, “A good son also wants to be near his parents so that at their death he may be able to come back and perform the rites of mourning.”⁹ Phan’s observation comes directly from the *Analects of Confucius* where it states, “While father and mother are alive, a good son does not wander far afield; or if he does so, goes only where he has said he was going.”¹⁰

Mencius, a Chinese philosopher who lived around 372-289 B.C.E. and was one of the principal interpreters of Confucianism, greatly emphasized funeral ceremonies for sending off the dead. Mencius said, “It is reasonable that filial sons and benevolent men should bury the remains of their parents.”¹¹ Mencius believed that “funeral and mourning rituals represented an inevitable and natural development of human nature and human feelings.”¹² Since mourning is an important expression of filial piety, children should not be stingy in burying their parents and must observe a three-year period of mourning. During the period of mourning, their grief must be seen to be sincere by carefully avoiding any show of joy or happiness. For example, if he eats sweets, he does not relish them, or if he hears music, he does not enjoy it.¹³ During the period of mourning, family members wear special mourning garb. The children of the deceased parent normally wear coarse gauze turbans and tunics. The daughters and daughters-in-law of the deceased also wear a white muslin veil covering most of the body. Relatives of the deceased wear white headbands.

The Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue

Confucius was not the only person in ancient times who taught the importance of honoring one’s parents. The ancient Israelites also valued the human virtue of filial piety since they too considered it as the basis for all human relationships. While the term “filial piety” is not found in the Bible *per se*, many passages emphasize the importance of this virtue. Among them, the fourth commandment bears the most significance because it is a fundamental divine commandment. In Exodus 20:12, God says, “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”¹⁴ This commandment is repeated in Deuteronomy 5:16, reinforcing that it is the LORD God who commands it. According to the Jewish Torah, children are expected to treat their parents with deep respect and reverence (Lev

⁸ <https://brownbeat.medium.com/analects-of-confucius-book-1-5-eleven-quotes-on-ritual-from-confucius-8b5b45afb083> (accessed on September 5, 2024).

⁹ Phan, *Christianity*, 131.

¹⁰ *Analects* IV, 19; quoted in Phan, *Christianity*, 131. Also see <http://www.confucius-1.com/analects/analects-4.html> (accessed on September 5, 2024).

¹¹ Mencius 3A5, quoted in Qiyong, “Filial Piety,” 27. Not burying one’s parent could have tragic consequences. Mencius warns: “Now in the past ages, there were those who did not bury their parents. When their parents died, they took them and abandoned them in a ditch. The next day they passed by them, and foxes were eating them, bugs were sucking on them. Sweat broke out [on the survivors’] foreheads. They turned away and did not look. Now, as for the sweat, it was not for the sake of others that they sweated. What was inside their hearts broke through to their countenances. So, they went home and, returning with baskets and shovels, covered them. If covering them was really right, then when filial sons and benevolent people cover their parents, it must also be part of the Way” (Mencius, 3A5).

¹² Qiyong, “Filial Piety,” 27.

¹³ Phan, *Christianity*, 133.

¹⁴ All Scripture citations are cited from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

19:3). They ought to hear and obey the instruction and teaching of their parents (Prov 6:20) and must do everything possible to avoid causing them shame and dishonor (Prov 30:17).

The book of Proverbs reinforces the importance of keeping the fourth commandment by giving many helpful counsels concerning child-parent relationships. Several notable citations are worth highlighting:

- “Hear, my child, your father’s instruction, and do not reject your mother’s teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck” (1:8-9).
- “A wise child loves discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke” (13:1).
- “Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old” (23:22).

While children who honor their parents are rewarded with longevity and blessings (Ex 20:12), disobedient and rebellious children are cursed (Deut 27:16) and shall even be put to death (Deut 21:18-21). The author of Leviticus gives a very stern warning saying, “All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them” (20:9). The author of Proverbs also admonishes, “If you curse father or mother, your lamp will go out in utter darkness” (20:20). Proverbs depicts a horrific death for children who disobey their parents saying, “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures” (30:17).

As a faithful Jew and an obedient son, Jesus of Nazareth knew the importance of keeping the fourth commandment. Jesus actually referred to this divine commandment many times in his teaching and expected everyone to observe it (Mt 15:4; 19:19; Mk 7:10; 10:19; Lk 18:20). The Gospel writers also show that Jesus makes a great effort to observe this commandment. The evangelist Luke says that Jesus was submissive to his parents (Lk 2:51). The evangelist John shows that Jesus was obedient to his mother at the wedding in Cana (2:1-12) and fulfilled his filial duty before dying on the cross (19:25-27). These two stories serve as bookends, one at the beginning and other at the end of his ministry, to highlight the theme of filial piety in the Fourth Gospel. The evangelist John repeatedly portrays Jesus as the obedient son who came to fulfill the Father’s will (5:30; 10:17-18; 12:49-50; 14:31; 17:1-26). In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus calls God in a very endearing and unusual way, namely, “Abba Father” (Mk 14:36). In his prayer and in his parables, Jesus often referred to God as his Father (Lk 15:11-32; Mt 11:25-27). As an obedient son, he seeks to do the Father’s will, even to death on the cross (Lk 22:42). Similarly, Saint Paul taught the new believers at Philippi that Jesus was an obedient son who emptied himself and took the form of a slave to the point of death—even death on a cross (Phil 2:8-11). In a similar vein, the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote, “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (5:8). It is clear that many New Testament writers take pains to show that Jesus fully observed the fourth commandment by the way he fulfilled his filial duty to both his earthly parents and his heavenly Father.¹⁵ Since the fourth commandment is the perfect expression of filial piety, it corresponds with Confucian filial piety. As a result,

¹⁵ Other New Testament writers also stress the importance of fulfilling the filial obligation. The author of Colossians writes, “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord” (3:20). The letter to the Ephesians states, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother—this is the first commandment with a promise: so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth” (6:1-3).

Daniel Qin concludes, “Jesus came, by his words and deeds as the fulfiller of both the [fourth] commandment and Confucian filial piety.”¹⁶

As a culturally sensitive Jew, who knew the importance of honoring one’s parents, one would think that Jesus would fully understand the request of the would-be-disciple who says: “Lord, let me first go and bury my father” (Lk 9:59). Since burying one’s parent is a fulfillment of the fourth commandment and of the filial piety, such a request is quite reasonable according to the conventional Jewish customs.¹⁷

Burial as Act of Piety and Universal Duty

The Hebrew Bible records many passages emphasizing the importance of one’s obligation to bury the dead: Gen 47:29-31; Deut 28:26; 34:6; Jer 7:33; 8:1-2; Ezek 6:5; 29:5; 39:17; Ps 4:19.¹⁸ One notable example comes from the book of Tobit. In this Jewish folktale, Tobit’s piety is demonstrated by his faithfulness in burying the dead (Tob 1:16-20), and his son Tobias is praised and remembered because he takes seriously his filial duty to bury both his father and mother (Tob 4:3; 6:15). Since burying one’s parents was an act of piety that derived from the fourth commandment, neglecting to do so was shameful and liable of harsh punishment (Deut 28:26; Jer 7:33; Ezek 6:5; 2 Macc 5:10; 9:15).¹⁹ Both pre-rabbinic and rabbinic sources took for granted the burial of the dead, especially one’s parents, as a “*halakhic* duty” and a “*fortiori*.”²⁰ According to the Talmud, burial of one’s family superseded all other commandments, “He who is confronted by a dead relative is freed from reciting the Shema, from the Eighteen Benedictions, and from all the commandments stated in the Torah.”²¹ Even Gentile authors from the Greco-Roman period, for example Josephus and Suetonius, saw the burial of one’s family member or friend as an act of piety and esteemed virtue.²²

Evidence from the Hebrew Bible to rabbinic sources and even from the wider Greco-Roman sources supports the importance to bury the dead, especially one’s parents. Having assessed the evidence, Markus Bockmuehl confidently concludes, “No one would deny that burial of the dead was, in the first century, viewed as a universal duty and an important act of kindness, and that not to be buried was widely considered the ultimate disgrace.”²³ Fletcher-

¹⁶ Qin, “Confucian Filial Piety,” 160.

¹⁷ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (vol. II: Matthew VIII-XVIII) (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1991), 53; see also Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina Series; Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 163-64, and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-LX)* (Anchor Bible; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981), 834-37.

¹⁸ Other biblical passages that refer to burial, often father by son, are as follows: Gen 49:29-32; 50:5, 25; 2 Sam 21:10-14; Tob 1:17-18; 4:3-4; 6:14-15; 12:12-13; 14:10.

¹⁹ Other passages are: Jer 8:1-2; 16:4; 25:33; Ezek 29:5; 1 En 98:13. In the Old Testament there are two exceptions to the expectation that a son will take care of his parents’ burial. The high priest (according to Lev 21.11) and the Nazirite (according to Num 6.6- 8) are both prohibited involvement in the care of the dead, even of their close relatives.

²⁰ Markus Bockmuehl, “‘Let the Dead Bury Their Dead’ (Matt. 8:22/Luke 9:60): Jesus and the Halakhah,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1998) 553-81, here 554. *Halakhah* is the entire body of Jewish law and tradition comprising the laws of the Bible, the oral law as transcribed in the legal portion of the Talmud, and subsequent legal codes amending or modifying traditional precepts to conform to contemporary conditions.

²¹ Berakoth 3.1a, quoted in Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (Edinburg, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1981), 9.

²² See Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.465 and Suetonius, *Vespasian* 2.3, quoted in Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 208.

²³ Bockmuehl, “‘Let the Dead,’” 558.

Louis also states:

For the Jew, the commitment to care for the dead in general was a Torah-based expression of ‘works of love’ and, more importantly, the duty to bury one’s own father was a taken-for-granted intention in the [fourth] commandment’s ‘honor your father and your mother’ . . . Judging by material in Josephus, Philo and, especially, in the rabbis, it can be established that the duty was uncontested and rigidly followed in the first century CE.²⁴

Not surprisingly therefore when Jesus invited someone to follow him, the disciple felt obligated to fulfill his filial duty first, namely, the burial of his father. The man makes a filial request, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father!” Taken at face value it is a reasonable request and falls perfectly in line with the demands of the Decalogue. The problem however is that at the request of the would-be disciple, the response that Jesus gave, “Let the dead bury their own dead,” apparently contradicts the divine command to honor and respect one’s parents and also departs from conventional Jewish tradition. Based on all the ancient sources that are available concerning the duty to bury the dead, especially one’s father or mother, Jesus’ statement is not only shocking but also scandalous.²⁵ One scholar even comments that there is something inhuman about what Jesus said.²⁶ As a result, Bockmuehl aptly remarks, “There is hardly one logion of Jesus which more sharply runs counter to law, piety and custom.”²⁷

Jesus’ Shocking Statement in Contexts

Jesus’ hard saying, “Let the dead bury their own dead,” which is found in Luke 9:60 and Matthew 8:22, derives from the “Q” Source.²⁸ Both Luke and Matthew preserved this apparently authentic saying of Jesus from “Q”²⁹ and appropriated it into their gospels along with other independent sayings of Jesus to emphasize the nature of discipleship. Unfortunately, the original context of this specific saying is unknown.³⁰ It is reasonable to conclude that Luke took this saying and grouped it together with two other similar sayings about the cost of discipleship to form one unit of three episodes with three sayings of Jesus addressed to three would-be followers (9:57-62). As Jesus was going along the road, the first would-be follower comes up to him and makes an enthusiastic promise of unconditional commitment saying, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus soberly responds to the man, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests;

²⁴ Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, “‘Leave the Dead to Bury Their Own Dead’: Q 9.60 and the Redefinition of the People of God,” *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 1 (2003) 39-68, here 40.

²⁵ For Warren Carter, Jesus’ response is “stunningly iconoclastic” (*Matthew*, 208).

²⁶ Due to the difficulty of the saying, Ulrich Luz interprets the logion as an “oxymoron” and not a metaphorical riddle for it intends to shock and alienate. *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 19.

²⁷ Bockmuehl, “‘Let the Dead,’” 555.

²⁸ “Q” or *Quelle* in German is a hypothetical source that contains materials only found in both Matthew and Luke.

²⁹ There is almost a unanimous agreement among scholars in attributing this logion to the historical Jesus. See John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35B; Dallas, TX.: Word Books Publisher, 1993, 540). Fitzmyer, for example, says that the harshness and obscurity of the saying are a guarantee for its authenticity (*Luke (I-IX)*, 835). The saying also passes the criterion of dissimilarity; see Byron R. McCane, “Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead: Secondary Burial and Matt 8:21-22,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 1 (1990) 31-43, here 41.

³⁰ Fitzmyer suggests that this saying along with the other two sayings found in Luke 9:57-62 may have come “from entirely independent contexts in the ministry of Jesus.” *Luke (I-IX)*, 834.

but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Contrasting with the first man who eagerly volunteers to follow Jesus, the second would-be follower is invited by Jesus himself. The man is more than willing to accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship, but he requests a brief delay with enough time to bury his father in order to fulfill his filial duty dictated in the Torah and conformed to cultural expectations. Nevertheless, Jesus responds to the man saying, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” The third would-be follower, who is similar to the first man, also spontaneously offers to follow Jesus; however, like the second man, he too makes a condition saying, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”³¹ Jesus responds to him saying, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Interestingly, while the first and second sayings found in Luke 9:57-60 are closely paralleled by Matthew 8:18-22, the third saying is found nowhere else in the Gospel tradition except in Luke. Whether it is a purely Lucan composition drawn from his special source (“L”) or whether it is the case of Matthew’s omission from the “Q” Source, we cannot really know with certainty. In any case, Luke took these independent sayings of Jesus and grouped them together to form a concentric unit, with Luke 9:60 as the central piece emphasizing the motif of discipleship that transcends even personal security (as in the case of the first saying), filial piety (as in the case of the second saying), and family affection and ties (as in the case of the third saying). Furthermore, by placing the triple-sayings before the sending of the seventy-two disciples on their mission (10:1-16) and within the traveling narrative from Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51—19:27),³² Luke not only reconstructs the narrative context but even supplies the motif for interpreting Jesus’ most shocking statement, “Let the dead bury their own dead” (9:60).

Consequently, the Lukan narrative context has led many biblical scholars to misinterpret the saying as part of the call to radical discipleship that requires a complete break with the Torah or family ties by taking precedence over the care for one’s parent (living or dead).³³ One scholar proposes that the saying indicates that Jesus took the Nazirite vow and therefore encouraged his followers to practice it.³⁴ Furthermore, since Jesus’ demand is so uncharacteristically stringent, some scholars even suggest that it is a Semitic hyperbole or metaphor that is not meant to be taken literally.³⁵ Unfortunately, none of the above proposals adequately resolves the mystery of this difficult saying simply because its social context has not been appropriately considered.

³¹ The man’s request to bid farewell to his family echoes Elisha’s found in 1 Kings 19:19-21. Unlike Elijah, Jesus’ response seems to indicate the unconditional demand of the call to discipleship that does not even allow bidding farewell to one’s family.

³² It is interesting to note that while Luke places the triple-sayings in the context of Jesus’ journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, Matthew’s double-sayings are situated within the section of Jesus’ miraculous works (8:1—9:35). Furthermore, while in Luke the sayings serve as the context for the sending of the seventy-two on their mission (10:1-16), Matthew’s sayings serve as the introduction of the miraculous stilling of the storm on Jesus’ journey by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (8:23-27).

³³ For an interpretation that emphasizes a break with law and custom, see Hengel, *Charismatic Leader*, 3-15. For a reading that focuses on Jesus’ redefinition of God’s family in which blood ties are relativized by obedience to the will of God because of the urgency of the eschaton, see Fletcher-Louis, “‘Leave the Dead,’” 39-68.

³⁴ Bockmuehl, “‘Let the Dead,’” 553-81. Nazirites were regarded as uniquely dedicated to God, for example, Samson (Judg 13:7) and Samuel (1 Sam 1:11, 22). According to Bockmuehl, the Torah prescribes two exceptions prohibiting both High Priests (Lev 21:11-12) and Nazarites (Num 6:6) to contract corpse impurity even in the case of close relatives or parents. As such, Jesus’ saying is not a deliberate attack on the Torah as suggested by Martin Hengel; rather his religious duty as a Nazirite took precedence over even the basic family obligation of burying one’s parent.

³⁵ Culpepper, 216; Carter, 209.

Secondary Burial

The key to solving the riddle of Jesus' hard saying lies with a burial custom, known as secondary burial, that was practiced by Jews in first-century Palestine, especially among the elites living in Jerusalem.³⁶ In his seminal work on Jewish death rituals in early Roman Palestine, McCane correctly points out that biblical interpreters have *incorrectly* assumed that "the saying presupposes the ritual of primary burial, that is, the initial interment of the body at the time of death."³⁷ Jews in first century Palestine promptly buried the dead within the same day. During the first few days after burial, family members of the deceased were expected to observe the mourning ritual and to remain at home to receive the condolences of relatives and friends.³⁸ Under such circumstances, it would not be possible—without violating the cultural script and custom of the time—for the would-be disciple to be out and about conversing with an itinerant preacher when his father either had just died or recently been buried. Consequently, the most plausible social context of Jesus' hard saying is not the ritual of the primary burial but the secondary burial.³⁹

The ritual of secondary burial takes place a year after death and has two main purposes. First, it is the closing act of mourning for the family members of the deceased. Second, and more importantly, it is a ritual that symbolically enacts the transferring of the deceased to a permanent residence in the world of the dead. In other words, after the body has decomposed the bones were collected and placed with those of other members of the family. This ritual possibly reflects the ancient biblical practice known as "to be gathered to their ancestors" repeatedly referred to in the Old Testament (Judg 2:10; 2 Sam 21:12-14; 2 Chr 34:28).⁴⁰ However, sometime during the Greco-Roman period (from 3rd century to 1st century B.C.E.), Jews in Palestine discontinued the gathering of bones of their loved ones *en masse* or into a communal familial depository.⁴¹ Rather, the remains were now placed into a separate box or ossuary highlighting the individuality of the person. Furthermore, by the second half of the first century B.C.E., many of the elite class of Jerusalem, including the high priests, embraced the Hellenistic culture. The practice of gathering bones into ossuaries, according to Jodi Magness, "is one aspect of the adoption of Hellenistic and Roman fashions by Jerusalem's elite during Herod's reign."⁴² Magness provides further clarification stating:

³⁶ McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the Time of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003), 9-14. See also McCane, "'Let the Dead'," 31-43.

³⁷ McCane, *Roll Back*, 74.

³⁸ The portrayal of Martha and Mary staying home to mourn for their dead brother Lazarus in John 11 reflects the mourning ritual and custom of Jews in Palestine. See also the story of Jesus' raising the young girl in Mark 5:35-43. For rabbinic sources confirming this common practice, see McCane, *Roll Back*, 74-75.

³⁹ Brink is correct to point out that understanding the practices of burials in the ancient world provides another lens with which to interpret this and other passages in the Bible concerning death and burial. See Laurie Brink, "'Let the Dead Bury the Dead': Using Archaeology to Understand the Bible," *The Bible Today* 49, n. 5 (2011): 191-196. See also McCane, "'Let the Dead'," 40.

⁴⁰ Other references alluding to the practice of gathering of the bones to be with the ancestors are found in the burial of Abraham (Gen 25:8), Moses (Deut 32:50), David and Solomon (1 Kgs 11:21, 43) and Josiah (2 Kgs 22:20).

⁴¹ Brink, "'Let the Dead'," 294.

⁴² Jodi Magness, "Ossuaries and the Burials of Jesus and James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124/1 (2005): 211-154, here 122. Magness provides archaeological evidence for Jewish tombs and burial customs in the late Second Temple period, focusing on Jerusalem. From her findings, she attributed the appearance of ossuaries to the influence of Roman cinerary urns. In other words, in the late first century B.C.E. and first century C.E., cremation was the

The appearance of ossuaries and other aspects of Romanization in Jerusalem should be understood in the context of the close contacts and interactions between Augustus and his family, on the one hand, and Herod and his family, on the other. It is not surprising that beginning around 20 B.C.E., the style of life—and death—of Jerusalem's elite was heavily influenced by Roman culture.⁴³

Archaeological evidence shows that the practice of secondary burial, namely, the gathering of decomposed remains (bones) into ossuaries primarily served as a fashion statement to enhance the social status of the wealthy class residing primarily in Jerusalem.

Since ossuaries were mainly used in rock-cut tombs and since rock-cut tombs were only available for the wealthy, the practice was not for the masses but primarily for the wealthier members of the Jewish society. In contrast, the poorer classes were buried in simple individual trench graves dug into the ground. Perhaps Magness' assessment is correct in concluding that the practice of secondary burial, along with its numerous features and trappings, "has little or nothing to do with religious beliefs in the afterlife and everything to do with social status."⁴⁴

Challenging the Roman Social Status

Against the background of secondary burial, Jesus' hard saying, "Let the dead bury their own dead," is given a new perspective for interpretation. The social context shows that the would-be disciple is asking for a temporary postponement to perform the Roman secondary burial practice of depositing decomposed remains into an ossuary. The ossuary is then placed in a family rock-cut tomb. The request reveals that the would-be disciple, who probably came from an elite class and had assimilated into the Hellenistic and Roman culture and lifestyle, needed to fulfill a Roman burial ritual to maintain his and the family's status. Consequently, Jesus' response directly and uncompromisingly challenged the would-be disciple to renounce all forms of wealth and prestige that promoted a privileged social status. Furthermore, our context indicates that Jesus' reply does not necessarily imply a complete renunciation of family ties as a criterion for discipleship. Scholars usually justify this harsh and anti-family hostility to Jesus' imminent eschatological worldview. In other words, the reason Jesus required a radical commitment and allegiance that transcended and even abandoned family ties is because of his conviction of the imminent arrival of the End-time.⁴⁵ Contrary to this popular interpretation, I propose that the

prevailing burial rite among the Romans. The ashes of the deceased were placed in small stone containers called *cineraria* (cinerary urns). Since the Jewish law prohibited cremating their dead, Jews in Jerusalem could only adopt the external trappings of cremation by depositing the bones of the deceased in ossuaries (urns) instead of their ashes.

⁴³ Magness, "Ossuaries," 140.

⁴⁴ Magness, "Ossuaries," 135. Magness convincingly argues that the use of ossuaries was not connected with the concept of the individual, physical resurrection of the dead; rather, it was greatly influenced by Roman cinerary urns. Magness writes: "If the use of ossuaries was connected with the concept of the individual, physical resurrection of the dead, they should have become even more popular after 70 C.E., when this belief became normative in Judaism. In fact, the opposite is true. After 70 C.E., ossuaries disappeared from Jerusalem. This is because the Jewish elite who used the rock-cut tombs were now dead or dispersed. The appearance of cruder ossuaries in Galilee after 70 is probably connected with the emigration or displacement of some of Jerusalem's elite to that region after the First Revolt. By the mid-to-late third century, the custom of ossilegium died out." "Ossuaries," 136.

⁴⁵ See Stephen C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 140-55. Barton correctly points out that this logion in Matthew does not oppose filial piety or promote anti-family sentiments; however, similar to other scholars, Barton has no other explanation for its harshness

saying is not about the subordination of family ties or about the opposition of filial piety; rather, with this saying Jesus severely opposed the Roman burial practice that had little or no religious significance but rather promoted a practice that preserved the social status of an elite wealthy class. For Jesus, authentic discipleship demands a complete renunciation of the security of such status.

Conclusion

As we have shown, Confucius was not the only person in ancient times who taught the importance of honoring one's father or mother. The ancient Israelites already valued the human virtue of filial piety since they too considered it the basis for all human relationships. As one who knew the sacred duty of honoring one's parents, Jesus from Nazareth observed the fourth commandment of the Decalogue and expected everyone to keep it. Evidence from the Hebrew Bible to rabbinic sources and even from the wider Greco-Roman sources strongly supports the obligation to bury the dead, especially one's parents. Since burying one's parent fulfills the fourth commandment and the duty of filial piety, the request made by the would-be disciple in Luke 9:59, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father," would meet the demands of Torah and conventional Jewish customs if he were referring to the first burial. However, our investigation demonstrates that the most plausible social context of the man's request and Jesus' shocking reply, "Let the dead bury their own dead," is not connected to the ritual of the primary burial but rather the secondary burial. Sometime during the second half of the first century B.C.E., probably during Herod's reign, the elite class in Jerusalem preferred to collect the decomposed remains (bones) of their loved ones into ossuaries rather than into a communal family depository. This practice of secondary burial, which had been influenced by the Roman burial practice of placing the ashes of the deceased into cinerary urns, had little or nothing to do with Jewish belief in the afterlife and everything to do with the promotion of Roman culture and preservation of the social status of the elite class that Jesus directly challenged and opposed. Consequently, the social context of secondary burial gives us a new lens and perspective to correctly interpret and understand one of Jesus' most difficult and enigmatic sayings.

other than to blame it on the eschatological motif. Likewise, McCane concludes that this saying is "anti-family" because it is shaped by "unusually intense eschatological convictions." *Roll Back the Stone*, 83. For similar conclusions, see also Carter, *Matthew*, 209; Fitzmyer, *Luke (I-IX)*, 836; and Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 540.