

1982

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Recommended Citation

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THE SHROUD OF TURIN: A REJOINDER TO BASINGER AND BASINGER

Gary R. Habermas*

The response to my article (and partially to my book) on the Shroud of Turin by Basinger and Basinger is a fair treatment. It is much more pleasurable and certainly preferable to answer such honest queries than it is to respond to attacks. Because this is a subject that generates questions, I welcome such an opportunity to explain my research.

Initially I must point out that, while Basinger and Basinger have raised some good issues, they have generally failed to take note of clear indications in both the article and the book that point out that my argument is somewhat different than they surmise. In the introduction to the *JETS* article two limitations were specifically listed. First, a limitation of space was mentioned,¹ and I noted my preference to cover much ground briefly rather than to specialize on certain issues. I also stated that I especially concentrated on the questions frequently asked by evangelicals. Second, I indicated my limitation in not having shared certain facts. Yet I also referred to my manuscript on this topic as a more complete treatment of the subject.² Basinger and Basinger include the book in their article but appear to miss the fact that this volume both voices the same concerns that they have and also answers them.

Basinger and Basinger are generally accurate in their statement of my premises (1) to (10). Concerning one more or less minor point, they switch the order of (8) to (10), as they acknowledge. Since the (9)-(8)-(10) order was originally used in both the article and the book, I will maintain this sequence in my rejoinder.

I. THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE MAN IN THE SHROUD

Basinger and Basinger deal with two major issues in their response. First, can the man buried in the shroud be identified with the Jesus of the gospels? Second, does the shroud present new evidence for the resurrection of Jesus? An additional implicit issue concerns whether there is enough evidence on the shroud to conclude that the man buried in it was raised from the dead, whoever he was (i.e., apart from his identification).

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¹The article was originally a lecture presented at the annual ETS meeting in Columbia, South Carolina, in December, 1980, and I had very definite limitations (such as length of material and time).

²G. R. Habermas, "The Shroud of Turin and Its Significance for Biblical Studies," *JETS* 24 (March 1981) 47-54 (hereafter "Shroud").

We will deal first with the question of whether the man in the shroud can be identified to any degree of probability. Basinger and Basinger appear to argue in the following manner: (1) It is not clear whether I am arguing from trustworthy gospels as an independent basis for comparison with the man in the shroud. If not, we do not know if the gospel accounts properly depict what happened to Jesus. (2) A stronger case is made if we argue from independently attested gospels to the shroud. (3) If (2), then the question becomes whether the similarities between Jesus and the man in the shroud make it probable that the two are the same. (4) If non-(2), then we do not know if the gospels are reliable on independent grounds and we cannot make historical comparisons with the shroud. (5) Even if (2), then we must still remember two qualifications: (a) Some do not accept the historicity of the gospels. (b) We cannot require the shroud to verify the gospels and then use the gospels, in turn, to verify the shroud.

In response to these claims it must first be noted that it was not the purpose of the *JETS* article to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the gospels. As pointed out earlier the article noted certain limitations, not the least of which was my addressing of it to an evangelical audience and my reference to my book as providing a broader basis for facts not discussed there. Since these were the limitations that I imposed on myself in the introduction to the article, I can hardly be faulted for not doing otherwise. Yet even so the point concerning the gospels was still stated in the article.³

Nonetheless, concerning (1) I do take care in arguing for the independent trustworthiness of the gospels before considering the identity of the man in the shroud. At the beginning of a chapter devoted to the topic of the historicity of the gospels I state:

The man of the Shroud can be identified as Jesus Christ only by the use of the scriptural accounts of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial. Before we compare the Shroud image to the gospel accounts, we need to ask whether the Scripture is historically reliable.⁴

It is only after an investigation of the evidence that I conclude that the Scriptures, and the gospel accounts in particular, are reliable and accurate sources. I also show how the shroud itself is independently verified by history and archaeology as an authentic artifact. I assert that this must be done before any comparison is made between the gospels and the shroud.

Thus I am arguing from the reliable gospels to the shroud and I agree with thesis (2). I assert that the gospels must be shown to be reliable first, which was explicitly stated and was clearly the approach that I pursued.⁵

Since the gospels are reliable we may then pursue a study of the similarities between Jesus and the man of the shroud, to which I only proceeded after a study of the gospels.⁶ Basinger and Basinger similarly appear to admit that, under such

³"Shroud," esp. 53-54.

⁴K. E. Stevenson and G. R. Habermas, *Verdict on the Shroud* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981) 113 (hereafter *Verdict*).

⁵*Ibid.*, chap. 8, esp. 113, 116; "Shroud" 53-54.

⁶*Verdict*, chap. 9.

conditions, we can assert the probability that the two men are the same. Thus a conclusion on this question is reached in light of the present evidence, one that should present no difficulty for Basinger and Basinger in light of (3).

Under these conditions thesis (4) does not apply in our case. Basinger and Basinger rightly point out that it is an incorrect procedure and it is not even in view in my study.

However, they do pose two conditions even if (2) is pursued. In (5a) they remind us that some do not accept the historicity of the gospels. While this is true, several points should be made.

First, a number of secular historians have pointed out that the NT writings, and the gospels and Acts in particular, are reliable sources for facts concerning the life of Christ, noting that if we apply the same rules of historical inquiry as we do to other works of ancient history we gain a trustworthy picture of the historical Jesus.⁷ It is interesting that many of these scholars express dismay at the radical theologians who question this thesis and chide them for their antifactual skepticism in matters that are historically researchable.

Second, as A. M. Hunter and other critical theologians have noted, the more radical form criticism that would question the historicity of the gospels has been largely rejected, especially by most British scholars and, we might add, by many American critics as well. Hunter notes that the main reason for this rejection is the radical disinterest in history, the very issue at stake here.⁸ Additionally even continental theologians and radical NT scholars often accept the historicity of the gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion in spite of doubts on other matters.⁹

Third, although no elaboration is possible in this article, even many critical scholars have shown the reliability of the NT and accept at least the general historical reliability of the gospels. This conclusion is based on data such as the eyewitness sources behind the gospels, historical and archaeological confirmation, and excellent manuscript evidence regarding both manuscript number and the close comparative proximity of the dates to the originals.¹⁰

Fourth, for thesis (5a) to note that not all scholars will agree with this evidence¹¹ is hardly relevant to the central issue of what the factual data reveals. It is

⁷M. Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Scribner's, 1977) 199-200, esp. chaps. 8-9, Appendix; A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (London: Oxford University, 1963) esp. 186-193.

⁸A. M. Hunter, *Bible and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 37-40; J. A. T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

⁹Cf., e.g., G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper, 1960) 163-168; H. Küng, *On Being a Christian* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976) 332-334; Robinson, *Can We Trust* 114-120.

¹⁰Hunter, *Bible* 27-37; Robinson, *Can We Trust* 71-94; R. M. Grant, *An Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Collins, 1963) 119, 127-129, 134-135, 160; F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 29-61. See *Verdict*, chap. 8, for the case presented before looking at the question of the identity of the man in the shroud.

¹¹While many scholars do not accept the NT as a modern, "straightforward" account of history, this position should not be confused with the view that the gospels still contain a generally historical record of Jesus' life. Both positions are popularly held by the same scholar, such as with some of those footnoted above. Also the reliability of the NT is not merely an "assumption" that is believed or disbelieved. Rather, it is a question of factual data, and here I would assert again that our conclusions are firm.

true that some will always doubt our conclusions, and we will always write and teach in the presence of such doubt. But the real question concerns the factual data and whether we can correctly account for it. Basinger and Basinger realize that anyone can doubt anything they say and that all of our statements are made in such a context. But in this instance the reliability of the NT is based on solid data such as ancient historical methodology, the rejection of radical NT criticism by many critical theologians themselves and, most important, evidences for the reliability of the NT. We are thus on strong grounds when we accept the trustworthiness of the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion.

Concerning thesis (5b), Basinger and Basinger correctly note that the gospels must be established on independent grounds and that we cannot require the shroud to verify them if they are then going to be used to corroborate the shroud. It is for this reason that I outlined a case for the independent trustworthiness of both the gospels and the shroud in *Verdict*, chap. 8. The two complement each other after being established independently. At any rate, the shroud is not needed to demonstrate the gospels' trustworthiness. I have never held that this artifact is required to prove this or any other element in the Christian faith and, in fact, I have affirmed the opposite.¹²

To imply that I contradict myself is both to ignore my earlier discussion in chap. 8 immediately preceding their reference where an independent groundwork for the reliability of the gospels has already been laid and also to argue from a questionable antecedent clause in this chapter without even considering the possibility that it refers to a different assertion.

Therefore there is an independent basis for the view that the gospels are established as reliable sources. In light of this, we are able to compare their testimony to the evidence from the man in the shroud. It is the conclusion of Stevenson and myself that the evidence strongly favors the conclusion that the man buried in the shroud is very probably Jesus. Future data may alter this conclusion, but at present it is indicated by the facts.¹³ As noted above, Basinger and Basinger have apparently admitted the plausibility of this line of argument.

II. THE SHROUD AND THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

The second major issue raised by Basinger and Basinger is whether the shroud provides new evidence for Jesus' resurrection. The point they make appears to be as follows: (6) There is no direct evidence on the shroud that the body in it returned to life, whether it is Jesus or someone else, since none of the shroud phenomena are either necessary or sufficient conditions for a resurrection. In fact they argue that the effect of radiation on a body is to destroy tissue. (7) What follows from science alone is "that some dead body 'disappeared' in a very strange manner." (8) The strongest conclusion that the shroud by itself allows is that a theory of resurrection is consistent with it, but it does not prove this event. (9) If it is asserted that the shroud demonstrates the resurrection because it complements the historical evidence for this event, then the shroud provides no independent evi-

¹²"Shroud" 54; *Verdict* 186-187.

¹³"Shroud" 51-53; *Verdict*, chap. 9.

dence for the resurrection—no “new and very strong arguments” for it.

According to these theses, the two main issues here appear to be concerned with whether the shroud provides completely independent evidence for the resurrection and, if it does not, then in what sense can it be said to provide a new, scientific argument for this occurrence?

Concerning thesis (6) and the first portion of this twofold issue, I agree that the shroud does not supply necessary conditions for a resurrection. But neither have I claimed direct proof for a resurrection on this cloth. Even my reference to the possibility of someone else having risen from the dead if this was not Jesus’ burial cloth was carefully guarded by the use of three qualifiers (“might . . . seem . . . appeared . . .”). It must be remembered that just because the shroud does not contain necessary conditions for a resurrection this does not at all rule out the possibility of there being some evidence on it for a resurrection of some man nonetheless, an issue to which we will return below.¹⁴

We should also clarify whether “radiation on the human body” would destroy it. Here it must be remembered that Stevenson and I are postulating that light and/or heat radiated “from” a dead body, not that radiation focused “on” a body. There is a significant difference, especially when it is remembered that the indications concerning the three-dimensional, superficial and resolute image on the shroud reveal that if this is the cause, it is not normal radiation as far as is presently known.

Before discussing whether the shroud by itself presents any new evidence for a resurrection of some kind, I will briefly address thesis (9). A valid argument for the resurrection can be made by combining the reliable NT records with the scientific, medical, archaeological, historical and Biblical information concerning the Shroud of Turin.¹⁵ A study of probabilities then indicates that the man of the shroud is probably Jesus, a conclusion based particularly on the detailed agreement between Jesus’ passion and that of the man of the shroud, especially in areas of abnormal crucifixion procedure.¹⁶ Then the gospel records of Jesus’ literal resurrection provide the needed explanation for the scientific mystery of the strange disappearance of the dead body of Jesus from the shroud. Any independent shroud evidence could also, by itself, establish new evidence for a resurrection.

Are we in a dilemma when we point out that the shroud does not provide direct proof for the resurrection of Jesus (or anyone else)? Are we left with only an interesting burial cloth from which a body strangely disappeared, as in thesis (7)? Or must we say that the shroud (at best) is compatible with the resurrection, as in thesis (8)?

The case is actually much stronger than this. The shroud is more than just an enigma that provides no evidence whatever for Jesus’ resurrection or that can only demonstrate this event solely through the gospels. The facts indicate that

¹⁴I would like to briefly clarify my usage of the words “proof” and “probability.” By the former I refer to an absolute case in which the evidence completely determines an issue, while the latter refers to any of varying degrees of evidence that render a conclusion more likely than other alternatives.

¹⁵See *Verdict*, chaps. 1-9 and p. 158 for a summary of this argument.

¹⁶For instance, if a person was simply crucified to appear like Jesus, then one must still explain shroud phenomena such as the three-dimensionality, superficiality and nondirectionality of the image.

the shroud, even apart from the gospels, provides new evidence for a resurrection of someone.¹⁷

The shroud contains no decomposition (indicative of a hasty bodily departure), the further indication that the body was probably not unwrapped and the probable presence of a scorch from a dead body, all of which point to a scientific mystery surrounding the death of the man buried in it. Basinger and Basinger admit that these facts indicate that the dead body in the shroud " 'disappeared' in a very strange manner," which could be consistent with a resurrection theory.

But what sort of theories could account for such a strange disappearance of a dead body? Such possible theories could be naturalistic, supernaturalistic¹⁸ or unknown. Under no condition will this essay conclude that any resurrection was a miracle, for this is a difficult and separate topic. But at the same time the evidence indicates that the other two alternatives appear to miss the mark. While this does not prove the supernatural thesis by any means, it is an interesting "dilemma" nonetheless.

Naturalistic hypotheses that would account for this phenomenon must explain at least (a) the absence of decomposition, (b) the fact that the body was apparently not unwrapped but still separated from the cloth, and (c) a probable light or heat scorch from (d) a dead body in a state of rigor mortis. Theories involving an unwrapped, rewrapped or stolen body are confounded by (b) and (c). Those purporting that the person in question never died are disproved by (b), (c) and (d). Most other theories are refuted by at least three of the four phenomena. Concisely stated, scientists involved in examining the shroud reported that no known natural causes could account for the shroud image.

Some might prefer to wait and trust an unknown or future natural hypothesis. While such could be forthcoming it is not adequate, at least for this writer, to both beg the question in favor of an unknown naturalistic theory and to indefinitely postpone an investigation when adequate data is available. This could be done to sidestep any issue.

Once again this does not demonstrate any miraculous thesis, and such is not even in view in this essay. Yet the opposite is true as well: We should not conclude that there is no evidence for any kind of resurrection on the shroud. Without even discussing the question of miracle I would conclude that the shroud does provide new evidence for a resurrection, yet without reaching any sort of proof.

In addition to the absence of viable alternative theses and the inadequacy of unknown hypotheses, there are other new considerations for a resurrection on the shroud. (a) The physics and mechanics of the light/heat image would strongly imply the mechanics of the process of bodily separation from the cloth, which is independent of other data. (b) Most of the facts concerning the shroud, such as the three-dimensional, superficial and nondirectional image, are empirical and repeatable, which is certainly a new type of evidence not otherwise available. (c) There are indications that the image is actually a quasi-photograph of the process of separation, again a new phenomenon. (d) That the man was clearly in a state of

¹⁷Again the reader must distinguish between proof and probability at this point.

¹⁸It must be understood that in the current philosophical debate concerning miracles, even to argue for a resurrection would not necessarily be to argue for a miracle, and we must add that the former topic of resurrection is the subject of this section of the essay, not the latter question of the miraculous.

rigor mortis indicates that whatever else occurred we are not talking about a near-death experience or a resuscitation.

While it is true that none of these conditions proves a resurrection, we also should not continue to assert that the shroud presents only a strange occurrence. Indications such as a quasi-photographic image (c) caused by heat or light (a) having the unique empirical and repeatable characteristics of (b), all proceeding from a completely dead body (d), and that the body apparently exited from the cloth without being unwrapped (as noted earlier), produce strong considerations for a resurrection. It could have happened another way, and we do not claim any sort of proof, but there is certainly some evidence here for a resurrection. And this data is independent, new and apart from the gospels or historical evidences.

Completely independent of the gospels we have evidence for a resurrection. When we reintroduce these independently verified documents, however, the man of the shroud is identified as Jesus, according to probability. The reliable gospel testimony provides strong evidence for Jesus' resurrection. But we conclude that the shroud adds new empirical evidence for this event.

The analogy of a court case may be instructive here. Even if there is enough evidence to convict a person, extra evidence that may be discovered is still very important, and there is a meaningful way in which it is additional or new evidence. Similarly, independently reliable gospels indicate the identification of Jesus and his resurrection. The shroud adds new empirical evidence to the case.

At any rate, one could either accept this preliminary shroud apologetic as providing evidence for the resurrection of a person or one could still reject it in spite of the evidence. It cannot be emphasized enough, however, that even if this argument for the resurrection of an individual is rejected, the case that this essay has made still stands—namely, when the scientific shroud evidence is combined with the previously and independently validated gospels, the result is more than the probable identification of Jesus with the man of the shroud. The reliable gospels also record Jesus' literal resurrection. The shroud adds new, empirical evidence for this event, thereby explaining the scientific mystery that is at least partially generated by the probable and strange disappearance of the dead body of Jesus from the cloth.

III. THE SHROUD AND A RESURRECTION APOLOGETIC

The purpose of this section is to answer an additional question referred to a few times in this dialogue: the relationship between the shroud and an apologetic for the resurrection as a whole. In my recent writings on this subject I have differentiated between two lines of argumentation for the historicity of the resurrection.

One line of evidence has been pursued in this essay and will not be repeated here. It utilizes both the independently verified gospels and the new evidence from the shroud.

The other line of evidence consists of historical arguments for the resurrection based not on a reliable NT but on historically demonstrable facts that even critical scholars who reject this reliability still accept as having actually occurred.

In addition to a more or less traditional set of arguments that both disprove naturalistic alternative theories against the resurrection and also set forth a series

of historical evidences in favor of this event, some new twists can be added to these approaches. For instance the liberal scholars of the nineteenth century themselves decimated each other's theories, revealing the many weaknesses in each view, while twentieth-century critical theologians generally reject these theories as a whole.

But the third and strongest (as well as least traditional) aspect of this second apologetic asserts that, using only a minimum number of facts accepted as historical by virtually all scholars, it can be shown that there is enough of a basis to demonstrate the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Since these "core facts" are established by strict historical and critical methodology and are accepted even by contemporary skeptical scholars, they cannot properly reject the conclusion of the literal resurrection in spite of their doubts on other areas of Scripture. This event is established by the minimal amount of historically validated and accepted facts.¹⁹

It is not the purpose of this essay to present this second line of argumentation in any detail, which the interested reader can pursue elsewhere, but only to point out the distinction between it and the first approach dealt with here. The major difference is that all three arguments contained in the latter are built on demonstrated historical facts accepted almost unanimously by more radical critics who reject the reliability of the NT, while the former utilizes the trustworthiness of the gospels and scientific corroboration from the shroud.²⁰ These two lines of historical argumentation represent different approaches to the resurrection of Jesus and together provide a strong historical demonstration for this event.

IV. CONCLUSION

Basinger and Basinger have carefully set forth their conclusions. They make the two following points: (10) I overstate the apologetic value of the shroud. (11) To move from science to theology is more difficult than I ascertain in this essay.

To answer (11) briefly, I am not attempting to demonstrate or argue to theology at all in this essay. My concern has been to defend my thesis concerning the identity of the man in the shroud and whether he rose from the dead. Both are historical conclusions and do not rely on theological evaluation.

Additionally, I realize that the move from history to miracles or theology is a very complicated issue, but it has not been my purpose to deal with either here at all. I do believe, however, that such an approach is both needed and possible, as I have shown elsewhere.²¹

Have I overstated the apologetic value of the shroud (10)? I do not believe so.

¹⁹For details see *Verdict*, chap. 11; G. R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), chap. 1.

²⁰It should be noted that the use of "history" with regard to this first line of argumentation is not a reference to the historical evidences for the resurrection but to historical confirmation of either the NT or the shroud (cf. e.g. *Verdict* 112, 116, 158). The historical evidences of our second line of argumentation can be used with the gospels and shroud, however, in order to provide two strong converging lines of evidence for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection (as in *Verdict* 159).

²¹Habermas, *Resurrection*, esp. chaps. 2-5.

To answer in terms of the original query raised in section two above, the shroud cannot provide independent proof for any resurrection, or even conclusive proof of anything in the Christian faith. I still hold, however, that the shroud does offer new evidence for a resurrection and that this is in accordance with the known facts. Other theories appear to be less than probable.

But even if this view of resurrection is rejected, the major thesis of this essay is still established. The reliable gospels both provide probable identification of the man of the shroud as Jesus and record his literal resurrection. The Shroud of Turin adds new, empirical and repeatable evidence for the resurrection, as the best explanation for such data as the strange disappearance, the absence of decomposition, the lack of unwrapping and the quasi-photographic image caused by a probable scorch from the dead body of Jesus. We must not only note the mere strangeness of these conditions but look beyond them to ascertain a cause. The improbability of viable alternative theses and the suggestive new evidence, as well as other new information, reveal the probability of Jesus' resurrection.



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