

3-1981

The Shroud of Turin and its Significance for Biblical Studies

Gary Habermas

Liberty University, ghabermas@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs

Recommended Citation

Habermas, Gary, "The Shroud of Turin and its Significance for Biblical Studies" (1981). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 27.

http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/27

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

THE SHROUD OF TURIN AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

Gary R. Habermas*

There is little question that the shroud of Turin has occasioned much recent interest in evangelical and nonevangelical circles alike. My own interest in this subject was aroused years ago by my studies on the apologetic value of Jesus' resurrection. Because of these studies it has been my privilege both to do research with some of the scientists who investigated the shroud in October 1978 and to have recently co-authored a manuscript along with the official spokesman for these scientists. My chief area of research has been the philosophical questions surrounding the shroud and any possible evidence for the resurrection of Jesus in particular.

These opportunities have given me a different perspective from which to view the shroud. Most reports concerning the scientific investigation have been based on news releases and on other incomplete (and often incorrect) data. As a result many articles have appeared, both pro and con, but based on these or other more superficial sources. Especially distressing are some evangelical critiques based on partial information. The major reason why such reports are based on largely incomplete data is simply stated: The final report of the scientists and much of the other material has not been released yet. One cannot refute what one does not know. But the most crucial data concerning the research has not been made public and therefore such critiques are quite incomplete.

One uncanny facet becomes immediately obvious in a study of the shroud. What looks at first report to be rather problematical has repeatedly turned out to fit very closely with the known facts. This essay will attempt to address the four areas most commonly questioned in a study of the shroud of Turin: its history, its relationship with the NT descriptions of Jewish burial techniques, correlations with the person of Jesus, and any possible evidence for his resurrection. Evangelical critics usually concentrate on the NT data related to Jesus' burial, and we will therefore give special attention to this area. However, a tremendous amount of data has already been compiled on these and other topics both from the scientific investigation and from other research. Therefore my only regret is the brevity of this essay and its inability to go into much detail. Yet I believe that it is better to cover much ground briefly than to leave some crucial questions unanswered. Thus any conclusions will have to be conditioned both by this limitation and also by the restriction against revealing certain data from the recent scientific experiments.

I. HISTORY OF THE SHROUD

Some evangelicals have charged that there is no historical data on the shroud before the thirteenth century.¹ This is nothing short of being absolutely inaccurate.

*Gary Habermas is associate professor of apologetics and philosophy of religion at William Tyndale College in Farmington Hills, Michigan.

Actually there are a number of references prior to this date. Very briefly, such data includes a few historical citations of the shroud, one as early as the second century (Braulio of Seville), a sermon concerning it given by a church official, and paintings of Jesus' face that, after an apparent rediscovery of the shroud, were plainly based on it even down to the exact position of numerous bruises. Additionally a detailed and very intriguing early Christian tradition exists that asserts that a mysterious cloth containing the imprint of Jesus' face had been carried by Thaddeus, Jesus' disciple, to Edessa, a small kingdom in what is today Turkey. After a stay of several hundred years it was moved to the city of Constantinople. From here its modern history is well known as it was taken to several cities in France and then to Turin, Italy.²

Not only do such historical citations dating from the second century, a sermon, these paintings and this Christian tradition exist, but there is also scientific data to confirm this historical movement of the shroud. Recent research by Swiss botanist Max Frei located pollen on the shroud from both Turkey and Palestine. In fact, at least six species of pollen were found on this linen cloth, which were limited almost exclusively to Israel.³ Since the shroud has not been out of France or Italy since about the fourteenth century, it must have been in Turkey and Israel earlier. At the very least there is interesting corroboration here of the early historical references to the shroud and especially to the probability of its general route from Israel to Turkey to France and Italy.⁴ We now have enough historical data to refute historical agnosticism concerning the shroud.

Most interesting is the question of whether the shroud can be dated as being from the first century. Although pollen can only relate where the shroud has been and not when it was there, Frei reported that the overlay of the pollen convinced him that it dates from the first century.⁵ Additionally the linen material and the weave itself have been dated by textile experts as being very possibly from the time of Jesus, plus or minus one hundred years.⁶

Most important, much attention has turned lately to the coins placed over the eyes of the man buried in the shroud, a practice known to have been used by Jews in the first century.⁷ Through the aid of image enhancement, a recent report reveals that the coins on the shroud may be identified most probably from the Greek letters and design as a lepton of Pontius Pilate, minted from A.D. 29-32.⁸

¹J. McDowell and D. Stewart, *Answers to Tough Questions Skeptics Ask About the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, 1980) 155; R. Blodgett, "Twelve Questions," *Eternity* (November 1980) 34-35; cf. G. M. Cocoris, "The Shroud of Turin—Fact or Fake?," *Biblical Research Monthly* (June 1980) 22-23.

²I. Wilson, *The Shroud of Turin* (New York: Doubleday) 105-194.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 60-64.

⁴*Ibid.* As an historian, Wilson's most distinctive work is in tracing the history of the shroud prior to 1204.

⁵See R. K. Wilcox, *Shroud* (New York: Macmillan, 1977) 167-168.

⁶Cf. Wilson, *Shroud*, 53-55, 205.

⁷R. Hachlili, "Ancient Burial Customs Preserved in Jericho Hills," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July-August 1979) 34-35.

⁸Cf. N. Harris, *The Numismatist* (Colorado Springs: American Numismatic Association, 1978) 1349-1357; F. Filas, "The Dating of the Shroud of Turin from Coins of Pontius Pilate," 1980.

In connection with the history of the shroud it might be mentioned that the scientific investigation revealed no paint, dye, powder or any other foreign substance in the image area of the shroud that could account for the image itself. After repeated tests the shroud has shown itself to be an authentic archaeological artifact.

II. JEWISH BURIAL

Probably the most common objection to the shroud from an evangelical viewpoint is the question as to whether it conforms to the NT accounts of Jesus' burial. The correct inference is that if the two contradict, then this cannot be the actual burial garment of Jesus.

The basic facts of Jesus' burial are recorded in the gospels, although exact specifics are rarely mentioned, as will be noted below. One interesting point concerns the gospel statements that Jesus' burial was not completed before the sabbath. Therefore the women were returning Sunday morning expecting to complete the anointing of Jesus' body with spices (Luke 23:54-24:1; Mark 16:1).

In comparing the NT accounts with the shroud, the most mentioned question is probably that which concerns the napkin. It is sometimes said that this handkerchief was opened and laid flat over the face and that therefore any image should be on the napkin and not on the main burial cloth. But careful investigation into the NT and other early Jewish literature clearly reveals that this napkin was folded up and tied around the head in order to keep the jaw closed during the onslaught of rigor mortis.

This practice is reported in both the Mishna (*b. Šabb.* 23.5) and the *Code of Jewish Law* in a section entitled "Laws of Mourning," which is a record of early Jewish burial practices.⁹ More important for the evangelical is that the gospels affirm the same. In John 11:44 the napkin is said to have been placed "around" the head (*perideō*). John 20:7 further explains that this cloth was "wrapped" or "rolled" up (*entyliissō*).¹⁰ The combination of being wrapped up and of being placed around the head clearly supports the position of the napkin explicitly taught in both the Mishna and the *Code of Jewish Law*. Interestingly enough, the man buried in the shroud also had just such a cloth tied around his jaw.¹¹ Not only is there no contradiction here but we find, rather, an unexpected verification of the method depicted on the shroud.

Another frequent issue involves the fact that the man buried in the shroud was not washed before burial, while such was a common Jewish custom (Acts 9:37). Although none of the gospels assert that Jesus' body was washed, it is often assumed that it was since he was buried according to Jewish tradition (John 19:40).

The *Code of Jewish Law* sheds some light on this matter, in that we are told that dead bodies were normally washed before burial. However, exceptions include a person who was killed by the government. In such an instance the blood

⁹*Code of Jewish Law*, "Laws of Mourning," chaps. 351-352.

¹⁰See BAG, 270, 646.

¹¹J. P. Jackson, E. J. Jumper, B. Mattern and K. E. Stevenson, "The Three-Dimensional Image on Jesus' Burial Cloth," *The Proceedings of the 1977 U. S. Conference of Research on the Shroud of Turin* (ed. K. E. Stevenson; Colorado Springs, 1977) 91.

was to remain on the body to be a payment for a person's acts against the state.¹² In other words, if Jesus was buried according to Jewish customs, as just mentioned (John 19:40), he could not have been washed. Therefore the tradition of the times required the exact opposite of what some believe is implied. Again, Scripture also provides added insight in that Jesus' burial was incomplete, and one of the purposes of spices (such as the women brought on Sunday morning) was to wash and cleanse the body.¹³

Therefore especially in light of the fact that the gospels never state that Jesus' body was washed, we have no contradiction here either. Again there is even an unexpected corroboration.

Other questions concern the nature of the linen clothing in which Jesus was buried. Some assume that he was wrapped like an Egyptian mummy instead of lengthwise as depicted in the shroud. It should be pointed out here that the term *enetylixen* (Matt 27:59; Luke 23:53) means "wrapped" or "folded" but is not specific, in that a number of possibilities are included.¹⁴

Very interestingly, some ancient Jewish examples portray the type of burial depicted in the shroud. For instance, in an Essene cemetery some persons were found buried like the man in the shroud.¹⁵ The *Code of Jewish Law* also states that the one killed should be buried in a single, plain sheet of linen.¹⁶ A consideration of Lazarus' burial also shows that while he was somewhat constrained, he was able to walk out of the tomb under his own power (John 11:44), which is inconsistent with burial like a mummy but quite consistent with the shroud. Thus this type of burial was practiced by at least some Jews at the time of Jesus and therefore is not a contradiction, especially in light of the fact that the gospels do not mention a specific method of wrapping Jesus' body.

Another question concerns whether Jesus was buried in one or more strips of linen. This is a difficult matter in that the gospels speak of these graveclothes in both the singular and the plural.¹⁷ However, at least one evangelical commentator states that his chief reason for rejecting the shroud is that the shroud depicts one linen sheet, while John uses the plural.¹⁸ This is a good example of a rejection made apart from the facts, for scientific testing indicates that the man buried in the shroud was, in fact, buried in at least four strips of linen. In addition to the major cloth known as the shroud, he was also wrapped around the head with a napkin as well as having his wrists and ankles tied together.¹⁹ Lazarus was also

¹²*Code of Jewish Law*, "Laws of Mourning," chap. 364.

¹³Strangely enough, Jewish tradition allowed washing the body on the sabbath, but only if the body was not moved in the process (*b. Sabb.* 23.5). Such is a very effective prohibition against any washing on the sabbath.

¹⁴BAG, 264, 270, 177.

¹⁵E. Wilson, *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea* (London: Fontana, 1955) 50-51.

¹⁶*Code of Jewish Law*, "Laws of Mourning," chap. 364.

¹⁷Cf. Mark 15:46; Matt 27:69 with John 19:40; 20:5-7. Especially instructive is that Luke uses both (cf. 23:53 with 24:12, which is probably original).

¹⁸Blodgett, "Questions," 34. Cf. McDowell, *Answers*, 165-166.

¹⁹I. Wilson, *Shroud*, 39.

bound around his head, wrists and ankles (John 11:44). Not only is there no discrepancy here, but the shroud actually agrees with and verifies the gospel accounts in spite of the fact that many object on partial data, illustrating the sort of objection referred to earlier.

These issues are the major ones connected with the relationship between the shroud and the NT.²⁰ A few points might now be stated. First, an exegetical study of the relevant portions of the NT does not render the shroud fraudulent. To the contrary: Not only are there no discrepancies, but the shroud is compatible with the data, and certain texts (such as John 11:44 and 20:6-7) actually favor the type of burial depicted in the shroud. Second, burial like that of the man in the shroud was apparently practiced by Jews in Jesus' time as revealed by the Essene community, the *Code of Jewish Law* and the Mishna. Although it is not known if this was the predominant type of burial practiced by these first-century Jews, it has been shown to be a viable option. Since we have found that the shroud is neither proven nor disproven by the gospel texts and that it is a viable option, a third point might now be stated. The actual authenticity of the shroud must be made on other grounds, such as scientific and historical investigation.

III. JESUS AND THE MAN IN THE SHROUD

The identification of the man in the shroud is of course quite a crucial issue. But a question that at first appears to be very difficult again reveals some amazing data.

A good place to begin is a simple comparison of the similarities between the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion and a description of the man buried in the shroud. This burial cloth also reveals a man who was cut throughout the scalp by a number of sharp objects causing him to bleed quite freely. He suffered a number of blows to the face, with large bruises on the cheeks and forehead, a twisted nose, one eye swollen half shut and a cut upper lip. Additionally he was beaten severely with an instrument identified as a Roman flagrum. More than 120 whipping wounds are visible on virtually every area of the body except the face, forearms and feet.

Further, the man of the shroud was forced to carry a heavy object across his shoulders after his beating, recognizable by the large rub marks on the shoulder blades, which smeared the bloody wounds of the whipping underneath. He must have stumbled and fallen down because there are contusions on both knees.

More important are the five major wounds associated with death by crucifixion. The man in the shroud has puncture wounds through both wrists and through the tops of both feet. He has also been pierced in the right side of the chest, from which there flowed a large amount of blood, mixed with a watery liquid that is very discernible.

A number of pathologists have studied the shroud image in great detail, not-

²⁰Two examples of lesser issues concern the use of the spices and the shroud's depiction of nailing through the wrists instead of the hands. It is stated that spices were used in Jesus' burial (John 19:39), but no one is certain what form these were in (powder or solid, for instance) or how they were placed in the burial process. Such could have been packed around the body or sprinkled over it. But there is no certainty with regard to Jewish burial at this point, so there is no contradiction. Concerning the nailing of the wrists in crucifixion, suffice it to say that evangelicals have long been convinced completely apart from the shroud that Jesus was nailed through his wrists. A discussion of this is beyond the scope of this brief essay, but there is agreement on this point, even in the Greek, as opposed to any discrepancy.

ing that the man is clearly in a state of rigor mortis. The wounds are so exact that they can even be identified as pre- or post-mortem. The crown, whipping and four nail wounds are all pre-mortem while the chest wound is post-mortem.

The similarities between the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion and the wounds of the man buried in the shroud are certainly apparent. But even more valuable in terms of this study is the fact that a number of the occurrences in Jesus' passion are known to have been out of the ordinary in usual crucifixion procedure, yet the same things happened to the man buried in the shroud as well.

For instance, how many persons crucified as criminals had a crown of thorns placed on their head? How about the severe beating that both Jesus and the man of the shroud had in common? We know that crucified persons usually had their legs broken in order to hasten death. This is both recorded in the gospel of John (19:31-32) and substantiated by archaeology in the 1968 discovery of a crucified victim. But not only do both of these men not have their ankles broken, but the same procedure was used to insure their deaths. Although a number of other options were possible, both were stabbed in the chest, blood and water proceeded from both wounds, and both were post-mortem. Crucified persons were often thrown in a common grave, but Jesus and the man of the shroud were buried individually. Adding to the unusual quality of burial, both men were wrapped in expensive linen and both were hastily interred.

How many other men in history were crucified in exactly the same way, especially when each had at least a half dozen unusual things done to him? What are the chances that they would not have contradicted on at least one point? The probabilities that both are the same person rise dramatically especially when we consider the very unusual qualities of the crown of thorns and the various intricacies of the chest wound, as well as the other items.

Because of these and other unusual points that both Jesus and the man of the shroud have in common, a number of scholars have studied the data and have concluded that it is highly improbable that the crucifixions of two different men would agree so closely. In other words, Jesus and the man buried in the shroud are very probably the same person.

The reason that many scholars have arrived at very high figures is that the improbabilities of each of these unusual but common points would have to be multiplied individually in order to arrive at a total improbability that Jesus is different from the man of the shroud. To my knowledge, the most conservative figure published to date was the conclusion of two University of Turin scientists, Tino Zeuli and Bruno Barbaris. After an in-depth study, they concluded that there was one chance in 225 billion that Jesus and the man of the shroud were different persons.²¹ Official scientific spokesman Kenneth Stevenson and I attempted a very skeptical figuring of these improbabilities and we still arrived at a one-in-83-million probability that the two men are not the same.

Two additional considerations make these figures even more impressive. First, there are no contradictions between Jesus and the man buried in the shroud. It would be very probable that if the two men were different, there would be one or more points in conflict. Perhaps they would agree in other points, but the man in the shroud would not have a spear wound or would be missing the crown of thorns, for instance. But this is not what we find. This point increases

²¹V. J. Donovan, "The Shroud and the Laws of Probability," *The Catholic Digest* (April 1980) 51.

the odds that these men are the same.

Second, the shroud has always been kept down through the centuries as the true burial garment of Jesus. In other words, it is not a recently-found relic that merely reminds us of Jesus. Rather, it has been kept as the real artifact long before science could test it. This makes the connection between Jesus and the man in the shroud even stronger.

Therefore while the identification of the man buried in the shroud cannot be made with absolute certainty, there are strong reasons that indicate that it is probably the actual burial garment of Jesus. This is especially so when it has been shown that there are numerous minute points of agreement, no contradictions, and the scientific consensus that this artifact is not a fake.

IV. EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION

The evidence reveals that the shroud of Turin is probably the actual burial garment of Jesus. As such it provides much information concerning both the physical cause of Jesus' death and also some exciting new evidence for his resurrection. The former subject cannot be discussed in the scope of this essay. But suffice it to say that the shroud provides confirmation of the fact that Jesus probably died of complications due to suffocation caused by either pleural effusion or by the more normal effects of crucifixion. At any rate the man in the shroud is dead and in a state of rigor mortis, evident to pathologists both from the condition of the body and from the condition of the blood, such as that from the chest wound discussed earlier.

Turning to the evidence for the resurrection, we find that the shroud provides three new and very strong arguments for the historicity of this event. First, the cause of the image on the shroud has received much attention. Hundreds of burial shrouds are in existence, but no others to date are known to have an image, but only blood and decomposition stains. To the contrary, the shroud of Turin not only has a double body image (observe and reverse) but there is much evidence that indicates that the image was caused by a burst of light/heat. Although I am not at liberty to discuss the recent experiments on this subject, previously published results reveal the probability of this conclusion. To say the least, a burst of radiation from a dead body that appears to be that of Jesus is very intriguing evidence for the resurrection, especially in light of the historical evidence for this event.

Second, scientific investigation reveals that there is no decomposition on the shroud, meaning that, in a Middle Eastern environment, the body did not remain in the cloth for more than a very few days. That the body probably identified as that of Jesus did not decompose in this cloth adds to the intrigue.

However, some may object that there are several possible reasons why a body might have been unwrapped. This is why the third evidence is so strong, since the pathologists examining the shroud found that the man was not unwrapped. The cloth contacted the body and the blood was transmitted directly to it, becoming somewhat attached. Separation in such conditions would involve dislodging a number of dried blood clots and disrupting the dried borders of the stains. However, the blood clots on the shroud are not only intact, being visible in almost every wound, but the borders of the wounds are also uninterrupted.

These three points are quite evidential even when taken by themselves. But

when combined, the evidence is much stronger.²² The man buried in the shroud did not remain in it for more than a few days, since no decomposition is present. Yet the body was not removed or unwrapped because, among other reasons, the blood clots and borders of the stains are intact. And as a grand climax, there is a probable burst of radiation from the dead body. What makes all of this data even more exciting is that it is empirical, scientific evidence that is repeatable.

Not only does the shroud provide some exciting new evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, but it complements the extremely strong historical evidence for this event as well. In fact the evidence from the shroud is strong enough that if Jesus was not buried in this garment, then we might have a problem, for it would seem that someone else would have appeared to have risen from the dead.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Even this very brief look at several aspects of the shroud of Turin reveals that it has much significance for Biblical studies. Scientific inquiry reveals that there is little chance that it is a fake. In particular, experiments show that there is no foreign substance that could account for the image. Historical inquiry provides much good material for a very early date that is seldom mentioned. Studies of the pollen samples have refuted historical agnosticism, while scientific studies of the material and especially the coins over the eyes point to a probable first-century date.

On the other hand, the shroud is consistent with the Biblical data concerning Jesus' burial. What appears at first to conflict turns out, on further investigation, to be interwoven. At any rate, there appear to be no contradictions and even some Biblical and extra-Biblical evidence for the type of burial seen in the shroud.

Further, a study of probabilities reveals that it is highly probable that the man buried in the shroud is Jesus. Both have many intricate and unusual points in common, with no discrepancies. In addition the shroud has been preserved throughout its history as the actual burial garment of Jesus, and legend links it with the apostles themselves.

Most interesting, at least for this writer, concerns the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. The man of the shroud was not buried in the material for more than a few days, but neither was he unwrapped. Instead an image on the cloth is clearly visible, probably caused by a burst of radiation from a dead body.

True, we do not have absolute proof for the identity of the man of the shroud. Neither do we need it to demonstrate the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus (or for anything else in the Christian faith). But it appears to provide strong empirical corroboration for Jesus' resurrection, and when combined with the historical evidence for this event I would submit that we have a twofold apologetic from both science and history.

As such there is good warrant for further study of the shroud. It appears that it can provide continuing confirmation of the most treasured of our beliefs: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

²²The extent of this essay does not even allow a discussion of some of the other relevant scientific data, which is so difficult to explain in terms of modern physics. For instance, the shroud image is three-dimensional, meaning that cloth-body distance is encoded on the linen. Additionally the image is superficial, meaning that it appears on the upper surface of the fibers only and does not even filter through the individual threads. Also the image is nondirectional, meaning that it was created by a uniform process as opposed to any painting or drawing motions. Such finds are integral parts of the shroud research.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.