

Is the Shroud of Turin the authentic burial cloth of Christ?

By Josh McDowell

The Shroud of Turin, an ancient linen cloth 14 feet by 4 feet, has been hailed around the world as the genuine burial garment of Jesus. Scores of people have supported its authenticity. Pope Paul VI proclaimed the Shroud to be “the most important relic in the history of Christianity” (U. S. Catholic, May 1978, p. 48). The image on the cloth is purported to be the very image of Jesus Christ and demonstrates tangible proof of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Many have called it the world’s greatest mystery. The Shroud’s proponents claim that the image stands up to twentieth century analysis as being humanly impossible to “fake” or “duplicate.”

After quite extensive research, we have come to view the Shroud with great skepticism. It seems that much of the Shroud research has been accomplished in the light of preconceived convictions about the cloth’s authenticity. There are many accurate problems with holding that the Shroud is authentic.

Prior to 1350, there is no historical evidence to prove authenticity or even the existence of the Shroud. A. J. Otterbein in The New Catholic Encyclopedia observes: “The incomplete documentation on the Shroud makes some hesitant to accept its authenticity. Such hesitancy is justified if one considers only the historical evidence.”

Forgery

About 1900, a letter was found in a collection of documents owned by Ulysse Chevalier. The letter was written in 1389 by the Bishop of Troyes to the Anti-Pope of Avignon, Clement the VII. The letter explained that an investigation had exposed the artist who had painted the Shroud and he had confessed. Many were disturbed that the cloth was being used for financial gain. The letter further pointed out: “For many theologians and other wise persons declared that this could not be the real Shroud of our Lord, having the Savior’s likeness thus imprinted upon it, since the Holy Gospel made no mention of any such imprint; while, if it had been true, it was quite unlikely that the holy evangelist would have omitted to record it, that the fact should have remained hidden until the present time.” The letter added that the forger had been exposed and referred to “the truth being attested by the artist who had painted it, to wit, that it was a work of human skill and not miraculously wrought or bestowed.”

Its History

Geoffrey de Charney acquired the Shroud sometime before 1357. It was displayed for veneration in 1357 at a collegiate church in Lirey, France, founded by Geoffrey. However, Geoffrey died in 1356 before he had revealed how he had obtained the cloth. The Shroud was put into storage when an investigation showed it to be a fake. Then, about 1449 Margaret de Charney, Geoffrey’s granddaughter, toured with the cloth and charged an admission fee. In 1452, she gave the Shroud to the Duke of Savoy in exchange for two castles. It was housed in the Sainte Chapelle of Chambéry where a fire damaged it on December 3, 1532. Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy moved the Shroud from France to Turin, Italy in 1578.

A photographer by the name of Secondo Pia photographed the cloth’s image in 1898. To everyone’s surprise it was discovered that the imprint on the cloth was a negative.

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3-D Image

One claim of the Shroud proponents is that the image on the cloth can be reproduced into a 3-D image with an Interpretations Systems YP-8 Image Analyzer. This equipment is supposed to transfer tonal values into a three-dimensional relief or image with very little adjustment. Drs. Jackson and Jumper observe: “A well-known argument has been that an artist, who must have lived prior to the 14th century, could not have produced a consistent negative image without the capability of checking his work by photographic inversion. “Similarly, we submit that an artist or forger living then would not have been able to encode three-dimensional information by adjusting the intensity levels of this work to everywhere correspond to actual cloth-body separations. “To demonstrate this point, we performed an experiment. We obtained photographs of Shroud paintings by two competent artists who had been commissioned to copy the Shroud as exactly as possible. “Then, we transformed these pictures into relief images to see how well each artist had captured the three dimensionality of the Shroud onto his painting. At the time, both artists were not aware of the three-dimensional property. “Varying the degree of relief did not help the situation because the abnormalities of these pictures were only altered proportionally, but not eliminated. Since two competent artists who had the Shroud itself to copy were unable to flawlessly

produce a three-dimensional image from the Shroud, it would seem remote that some medieval artist could have achieved such an accomplishment with no Shroud available for reference. "In fact, we consider it a challenge for pre-twentieth century technology to have placed a clear three-dimensional image of a human body onto a cloth either by artistry or any other means available" (from The 1977 Research Proceedings on the Shroud of Turin, p. 85). John German, a colleague of Drs. Jackson and Jumper, points out that the quality of the image is dependent upon how equipment is focused: "The nature of this relationship revealed an important source of error inherent in the construction of the three-dimensional image of the Shroud. The image on the cloth was formed by a process that resulted in a non-linear relationship between the image intensity and the cloth-body distance. "The image analyzer system, however, creates a three-dimensional image for which the relief (analogous to cloth-body distance) varies linearly with the intensity. The practical result of this linear relationship is that the image is distorted. If the gain (amount of relief) is reduced to produce an image with a realistic nose and forehead, the fainter portions of the image corresponding to large cloth-body distances have little or no relief. "On the other hand, if the gain is increased to bring out these fainter portions of the image, the nose and forehead grow way out of proportion" (from Proceedings, p. 235). The question here is with the lenses that are used to correct tonal distortions and a machine that relies heavily on simulation: Is the 3-D image of the Shroud so perfect as to be considered miraculous? It must also be considered that in order to get the necessary image, a human model approximating the Shroud's image is needed to correlate the distance of cloth to body interfaces. After that, the cloth on the model must be smoothed (resulting in distortion) and then camera images imposed upon the cloth distance correlations. The question here is: how can you know you have reproduced a 3-D image of the Shroud or just the Shroud's image on an actual man?

Dr. Marvin Mueller, Ph.D. in physics of the Los Alamos Lab, states: "The relative image darkness is determined by optically scanning a photograph of the Shroud image. Next, a correlation plot of image darkness vs. cloth-body distance is made. To maximize the correlation numerous adjustments are made in the detailed drape shape of the cloth. "The final adjusted correlation is fairly good, and a smoothly declining function approximating an exponential is extracted. However, except for measurement errors and except for the smoothing involved in extracting the function from scattered data, one winds up with just a 3-D relief of the human model chosen for the experiment! "The irony is that the smoothing process itself produces distortion of the relief, but it also affords the possibility that some of the characteristics of the Shroud image can now be superimposed on the relief of the human model chosen for the experiment! "Thus, the resultant 'statue' is some blend of the characteristics of the human model and the Shroud image-not, as has been asserted, a statue of the Man of the Shroud. "What STURP has done is to demonstrate it can obtain a fairly good correlation between the image darkness on the Shroud and the corresponding cloth-body distance obtained when a particular male body of the proper size is overlaid with a particular cloth draped in a certain way. But, because correlation is not causality, that is all STURP has done" (from The Los Alamos Monitor, December 16, 1979, p. B-6).

Blood Stains

Alleged blood stains on two small particles and twelve threads of the Shroud were analyzed for authenticity. Prior to recent testing done on the Shroud, it was determined by the scientists that no conclusive evidence existed for the stains on the cloth being human blood (Thomas Humber, *The Sacred Shroud*, p. 178). Recent tests conducted in 1978 have led protagonists to believe that "the blood stained areas had spectral-characteristics of human hemoglobin" (S. F. Pellicori, "Spectral Properties of the Shroud of Turin," *Applied Optics*, 15 June 1980, Vol. 19, No. 12, pp. 1913-1920). However, the issue still remains that a forger with a proper method would logically use human blood to create the most realistic image possible. The presence of blood or hemoglobin on the Shroud is not valid evidence to warrant claims of authenticity.

Duplication

The Shroud proponents set forth various pieces of evidence to support their claims of authenticity. Such pieces of evidence were (1) no brush mark; (2) no image penetration of the fibers (it is purely a surface phenomenon); (3) presence of a powder alleged to be aloes; (4) the "pollen fossils" found on the cloth alleged to be from the time of Christ.

Most of the above is answered by a bas-relief image created by Joe Nickell. A picture of the image is found in the November-December 1978 issue of *The Humanist* and in the November 1979 issue of *Popular Photography*. Nickell employed a technique using only fourteenth century material and methods to recreate or duplicate a negative imagery as found on the Shroud. This technique produces a negative. He did not paint his image, but used a bas-relief and applied a wet cloth to it, and when it had dried he used a dauber to rub on powdered "pigment." Nickell used a mixture of myrrh and aloes. It did not leave brush marks. Nickell writes: "My rubbings, even on close inspection, appear to have been created without 'pigment.' I used a mixture of the burial spices-myrrh and aloes-which duplicates the 'scorch-like' color and numerous characteristics. "It is interesting to note that (according to *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1978) aloes actually have 'served as a dye or pigment.' "A major point is that this 'pigment' does not penetrate the fibers, remaining (as is said of the coloration on the Shroud) a purely 'surface phenomenon'-shown by crosssectioning and microscopic examination... "Two members of the secret (and later exposed) official Shroud commission, appointed in 1969 to examine the cloth, suggested the imagery was the result of some artistic printing technique employing a model or molds. That is a pretty accurate description of the technique I found to be successful. "Shroud enthusiasts maintain they have found 'no evidence of pigment' on the cloth, although there is reportedly evidence of a 'powder' said to be aloes. They point out that there are no

brush strokes; that, around the burn holes (from a chapel fire in 1532), there is no darkening of imprinted areas; and that the imagery has ‘no directionality’ (as from brush or finger application). These, however, are all characteristics of my technique! “The report did mention the discovery of various yellow-red to orange ‘crystals’ (or ‘granules’) and certain ‘globules’ which tally with the appearance of myrrh and aloes. These spices (available to the forger at the twice-a-year Champagne Fair or at his local apothecary’s) probably contained the ‘pollen fossils’ from the Middle East that are alleged to be on the cloth” (“The Shroud,” *Christian Life*, February 1980, vol. 4, no. 10). A photographer’s negative showed a positive image of “lifelike” quality. Dr. Mueller says of Nickells’ image: “Joe Nickell describes his rubbing method of producing Shroud-like negative images from bas-reliefs. Qualitatively, at least, the resemblance is striking and extends even to the microscopic depth of color penetration of the threads. “The rubbing technique, even with a given bas-relief, can be varied easily by changing dauber size, pressure and the way the cloth is wet-moulded to produce images of greatly diverse character. Thus, the 3-D characteristics of rubbings can be varied almost at will” (“Shroud: Real McCoy or Hoax?” *Los Alamos Monitor*, December 16, 1979).

Christ’s Graveclothes

Probably the most damaging evidence against the authenticity of the Shroud is the disharmony of the Shroud burial procedure with the New Testament accounts of Christ’s burial. “In ancient times the hair was cut (T. B., Moed. Kat., 8b), but it is now only washed, and nine measures of cold water are subsequently poured over the corpse (during which, in some places, the dead is settled in an upright position), and this constitutes the actual religious purification... “The corpse is, of course, thoroughly dried, care being taken not to leave it uncovered the while. Women have to undergo the same process of purification at the hands of their own sex. In Acts 9:37 we have an instance of a woman being washed before burial in New Testament times. “It was formerly the custom also the anoint the corpse, after cleansing, with various kinds of aromatic spices... . It will be remembered that when Mary was reproached with an unnecessary waste of ointment, Jesus exclaimed, ‘Suffer her to keep it against the day of my burial’ (John 12:7). And we find it recorded that a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 100 lbs. weight, was subsequently brought for the body of Jesus (Ibid 9:39). “After the rite of purification has been carried out in the customary manner, the corpse is clothed in grave-vestments (Mish. Sanhed. 6.5)... They are identical with the sindon of the New Testament (cf. Matthew 27:59, etc.) being made of white linen without the slightest ornament, and must be stainless. “They are usually the work of women, and are simply pieced together, no knots being permitted, according to some, in token that the mind of the dead is disentangled of the cares of this life, but in the opinion of others, as representing the expression of a wish that the bones of the dead may be speedily dissolved into their primitive dust (Rokeach, 316). No corpse, male or female, must be clothed in less than three garments” (from *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 7, 1895, pp. 260, 261).

There are several problems that arise when Shroud proponents study the New Testament. The first is that there is a conflict with the burial cloth. It is clear in the Jewish burial customs and in the New Testament that there were several pieces of cloth involved in Christ’s burial, not one 14-foot-by-4-foot piece of material such as the Shroud. John 20:5–7 clearly indicates there was a separate piece wrapped about Christ’s head. It was found by itself apart from the body wrappings. However, the cloth of Turin depicts a fact on the sheet as well as the rest of the body. Not only does the text indicate several pieces of cloth used for Christ’s body, but also that they were “strips,” “wrappings,” or “linen bandages” such as used with mummies. Even more significant than the words used to describe Christ’s burial with strips of linen are *Kalutto* (I Kings 19:13) and *Periballo* (Genesis 38:14) which are words used in the Septuagint specifically for garments such as the Shroud but not found in the New Testament texts. Their absence is quite significant. Second, the burial account in the Gospel of John (19:40) uses a plural form: wrappings. In fact, all of the Gospel accounts are in agreement that the body of Christ was “wrapped” or “folded. “And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth” (Matthew 27:59, NASB). “And Joseph bought a linen sheet, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth” (Mark 15:46, NASB). “And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth” (Luke 23:53, NASB). “And so they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews” (John 19:40, NASB). The verb *Entulisso*, used by Matthew and Luke, means to wrap (up), to fold. Mark uses *Eneileo*, which connotes to wrap up, to confine. John, who was an eyewitness, is very clear that the body of Christ was wrapped. The verb *Deo* means “to bind” or “tie” with the result of imprisonment. So in light of the textual evidence, the conclusion is well founded by word choice and placement that, as John most explicitly described, Jesus was bound with linen strips and not wrapped in a cloth. The words regarding the cloth clearly indicate it. The verbs used warrant it, and the specific choice of words makes it inescapable.

A third problem with the cloth of Turin is that the Shroud proponents admit that its authenticity is dependent upon the body not being washed. This is important for several reasons: (1) the alleged appearance of dried blood on the body that was not washed, and (2) the need for morbid sweat to act as a refraction lens to focus the radiation to record the image. Ian Wilson expresses the view that Christ’s body was not washed. He writes: “Some have argued that washing was a prescribed ritual that would have been permissible to carry out irrespective of the sabbath. Some eminent New Testament scholars do not share such a view. Even among the best exegetes there seems little major objection to the concept that there simply was on time for Jesus’ body to be washed before the sabbath, particularly in view of the various Jewish requirements relating to this rite. “When, as events proved, it was also impossible to carry out this rite after the sabbath, one can understand a certain reluctance on the part of the Gospel writers to admit this directly. Only on the view that Jesus was not washed can

the authenticity of the Turin Shroud be upheld” (from *The Shroud of Turin*, by Ian Wilson, p. 56). The above conclusions are erroneous at best. The idea of there not being time to wash the body clean with water because of the approaching sabbath is equally weak because the Scripture says they still had time to anoint the body with over a hundred pounds of spices. This is also made clear in the fact that a body could indeed be washed and anointed on the sabbath: “The corpse may, however, be washed and anointed on the sabbath, provided the limbs be not strained out of joint; the pillow may be moved from under the head, and the body may be laid on sand that it keep the longer from putrefaction; the jaws may also be tied, not to force them closer, but to prevent them dropping lower (Mish. Shabb. 33:5, from *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 1895, vol. 7, p. 118). John would not and could not have said that the Jewish method of burial had been followed if it hadn’t been washed.

The Spices

A fourth problem with harmonizing the Shroud with the New Testament burial accounts is the spices. The body would have had to have been washed. Ian Wilson observes: “St. John tells us that Nicodemus, assisting Joseph of Arimathea, brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about a hundred pounds. He also tells us that these were wrapped with the body in the burial linen (John 19:39, 40). “Had such spices been used for anointing, it would have been requisite in Jewish ritual and indeed in that of any other culture to wash the body first. “As it is quite evident from the Shroud that the body was not washed, and as the weight of spices described would be vastly excessive even for the most lavish anointing, the most likely explanation would seem to be that they were dry blocks of aromatics packed around the body as antiputrefacients” (from *The Shroud of Turin*, by Wilson, pp. 56, 57). Also, if spices were applied to the body, as emphatically stated in the Gospels, the image could not have been transferred to the cloth by radiation as Shroud proponents advocate.

Other Shrouds

Many people are not cognizant of the fact that after the Crusades many different Shrouds circulated throughout medieval Europe at the same time as the cloth of Turin. It is estimated there are more than forty “true Shrouds” that were circulated. Many are still being displayed today.

No New Testament Witnesses

It is totally unthinkable that the apostles and Christians of the first years of Christianity would not mention a cloth that had an image scorched on it of the crucified and resurrected Christ. In the face of death they proclaimed Jesus Christ alive. They constantly gave personal testimony of Christ’s resurrection appearances in the most adverse situations. Is it conceivable that no one, especially the New Testament writers and church fathers, would ever mention the Shroud in relationship to Christ and His resurrection?

Conclusion

The evidence so far in no way supports the Shroud’s authenticity as the burial cloth of Christ.