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THE SHROUD OF TURIN: PROTESTANT  
OPPORTUNITY OR EMBARRASSMENT?

A shroud now in the Italian city of Turin is allegedly the burial cloth in

which the body of the Jesus was placed after His crucifixion (Matthew 27:19; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53; John 19:40). Should the Shroud of Turin continue to pass the scientific tests, it would have to be the most significant historical artifact yet to be unearthed. Christianity is not without historical proofs at the present time, but the shroud, if authentic, would have to go to the head of the line.

Attention was focused on the shroud when two photographers in the last century discovered the form of a crucified man when they were developing a photograph they had taken of the Shroud of Turin. Here was one relic among the myriads of relics in the storehouse of the Roman Catholic Church that had to be taken seriously. Societies both in America and Europe have since been founded to foster further scientific and historical research on the shroud. To date not one shred of negative evidence has surfaced. Discussion about the shroud has been carried on in scientific journals as well as in newspapers, magazines, and television programs. While Roman Catholic authorities have exercised an admirable hesitancy to solve an historical problem by means of an infallible dogmatic assertion (it is officially called the Shroud of Turin and *not* the Shroud of Jesus), *The Christian Century* has pontificated upon the shroud in the following manner: "There's one chance in a billion times a billion times a billion times a billion that the image on the cloth could be Christ" (May 10, 1978).

This weighty pronouncement is certainly an overstatement. The image on the shroud fits perfectly the accounts of the suffering and death of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels. The nails in the feet and hands, the wounded side, the excessive number of stripes on the back, the blow to the head, the wound on the knee from falling, and the crown of thorns are all easily detected on the shroud. The hair style of the victim indicates a member of the Jewish race. Recent pollen tests show some connection with Palestine. The science of pathology, developed in connection with modern homicide investigation, has provided further arguments for the authenticity of the shroud. There is absolutely no evidence that the image was painted or artificially imposed on the shroud. The chances that another Jewish victim of the Roman soldiers would so perfectly fit the Gospel description of Jesus are statistically insignificant. The idea that a man was deliberately crucified in such a way as to match the account in the Gospels cannot be considered seriously. Such a theory makes a good horror story, but not good history. In spite of the increasing attention being given to the shroud, the Protestant world has been remarkably reticent about its possible authenticity.

One basic reason for the lack of any widespread Protestant enthusiasm for the shroud may be a general negativism towards relics that is part of the heritage of the Reformation. Luther's doctrine of free grace flew right in the face of the medieval idea that one could obtain forgiveness of sins through the veneration of relics. It cannot be doubted that there will be mass veneration of the Shroud of Turin if the Pope puts his stamp of approval on the garment. Pilgrimages from all parts of the world will be organized. The Roman Catholic Church authorities will doubtless claim the working of many miracles by the shroud.

One's judgment, however, as to the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin should not be influenced by the use or abuse of relics in the Roman Catholic Church or any decision which the Pope may make. We object, to be sure, to the idea that the grace of God is conveyed through relics. Yet evidence of the shroud's authenticity cannot simply be dismissed on the grounds that most relics are frauds or that they have been abused. By this kind of reasoning, the existence of Palestine itself would come into question. The question of the shroud's authenticity must be judged on its own merits.

Two questions must be addressed to the shroud that must be asked of any other artifact which is supposed to have a particular history. (1) Can the

claims concerning the relic be shown to be in direct contradiction to evidence derived from the relic itself? For example, if the shroud were woven in a style developed centuries after the death of Christ, it could not possibly be authentic. To date, however, the shroud has not produced any evidence against the claims attached to it. In fact, it would be difficult to find an historical artifact that has been tested and investigated for a longer time and with more intensity. The number of possible forms of investigation now available has been nearly exhausted. (2) Even if no effective negative evidence can be brought to bear against the reputed authenticity of an historical artifact, are other explanations of its origin just as plausible? If the victim whose image is outlined in the shroud is not that of Jesus, to whom then does it belong? Here we are dealing with the laws of probability; each possible explanation must be weighed against the others. No one has offered a satisfactory alternate explanation of the image on the shroud. The similarity between the testimony of the shroud and the Gospel accounts is simply uncanny. Can anyone offer any sound reason why the Shroud of Turin should not, in fact, be the very cloth in which Jesus was buried? Simply stating that it cannot be is only a refusal to face the evidence.

Contemporary interest with past is hardly on the decline. People have stood in line for hours to see the treasures of a pharaoh's tomb. No one seriously doubts the authenticity of these artifacts, even though they do not have the broad spectrum of corroborating evidence provided in the Gospel accounts for the Shroud of Turin. The search for Noah's Ark has also sparked public interest. The arguments for the authenticity of the ark depend on photographic evidence taken from planes and the hearsay testimony of those who have seen the evidence. The Shroud of Turin is an object which has been seen by many scientists and which is still undergoing scientific tests. Evidence here is of the most valuable variety. Those who have done research on the shroud have included those who cannot, by any definition, be called believers. Yet, despite the growing weight of evidence of the shroud's authenticity, *The Christian Century* has offered the verdict of "No, it cannot be" without any serious discussion of the evidence.

One suspects that the noticeable lack of Protestant enthusiasm for the shroud stems not only from the natural aversion to relics previously noted, but also from an ideological bias engendered by the thought of Barth and Bultmann. Karl Barth based his theology upon a concept of "God's Word" which had no need of real history. The reluctance of much of conservative Protestantism to tackle such thorny historical questions as the authenticity of the shroud may, in fact, derive from an unrecognized and undiagnosed Barthianism that relies on the "Heavenly Word" and ignores historical questions. Answering historical questions is often, in fact, considered the height of unbelief by the followers of Barth.

Revelation in both Biblical and Reformation theology, however, is not a message given directly from heaven, but one given by God in and through history. The incarnation when "the Word became flesh" is the quintessential instance of divine revelation. The Word which became flesh was also "crucified, dead, and buried." Part of this burial was the placing of the corpse of Jesus within a shroud in a tomb. A shroud was part of the history of the salvation of the world. There is, therefore, no valid theological objection to identification of the Shroud of Turin as the shroud in which Jesus was buried.

Modern biblical scholarship, to be sure, has narrowed itself down to a bare-bones historical minimalism. Scarcely the shadow of Jesus is left. Although most Biblical scholars pride themselves on practicing the "historical-critical method, it would be better described as the "philosophical-critical" method. In fact, the "historical-critical" method is a collection of methods controlled by an anti-historical bias! The probability that the Shroud of Turin is the actual burial cloth in which the corpse of Jesus was laid as described in the Gospels

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threatens these contemporary exegetical methods at the very heart of the matter. If the shroud be authentic, we have no longer a mere shadow of Jesus, but the *corpus dilecti* itself.

Many Christians of the first decades saw almost daily the palace of Pilate, the temple, Golgotha, and the tomb where Jesus was laid. These things were constant historical reminders that the Jesus who was now reigning in glory at the Father's right hand had indeed lived and died among these people. For them these sacred places were authentic ties to the life of Jesus. The Shroud of Turin may very well be an authentic link with a past which was not only sacred but real. Acceptance of the authenticity of the shroud obviously cannot be made a criterion of orthodoxy, but a prior refusal to consider the question borders on disregard of the historical claims of Christianity. Perhaps we shall be given the same opportunity as Peter and John to see the burial garments of the Lord (John 20:6, 7).

David P. Scaer