

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

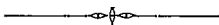
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

not plead that miracles may be wrought on our behalf. While recognising this, however, we shall not forget how extremely difficult it often is to determine what does or does not involve a violation of the natural order. We shall remember how little we know of those relations which exist between the spiritual and the natural world, and how constantly and in what a variety of ways material things, as we call them, are being affected by what is happening in the spiritual domain. We shall remember how, within the sphere of our own experience, thought and will are incessantly producing changes, though none can guess by what process, in things belonging to the regions which natural science claims as its own. And, bearing these things in mind, we shall seldom be hindered, for fear that we may be demanding a miracle, from asking any good thing of Him whose relation to the visible world we may presume to be analogous to our own, and whose power to modify or control, without doing violence to, the laws which are the expression of His own mind and will, can scarcely be inferior to that which He has entrusted to His creatures.”

A. COLCHESTER.

(*To be concluded.*)



## ART. II.—THE LEGEND OF THE VERONICA HANDKERCHIEF.

THE legends which have sprung up, as a kind of parasitical growth, around the simple narratives of the earthly life of our Lord, are interesting from many points of view, and not least from the contrast they present to the clearness of aim and simplicity of form in which the real facts of the Divine life are presented to us in the sacred record. Their relationship to one another is as curious a subject of investigation as the manner in which they were developed from age to age.

The germ of them is often to be found in some careless expression of an early writer, whether genuine or apocryphal,<sup>1</sup> or in the traditions imported from the East in the earlier days of the crusades, which were eagerly accepted and treasured by the monks and ascetics of the western world. These were soon enriched by visions and revelations of a later origin, and by the translations into Latin of the apocryphal gospels and acts, upon whose fables the Koran has drawn so largely. Not

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.* : The professed ignorance of Epiphanius of the death of the Virgin Mary, which led to the legend of the Assumption, and the reticence of St. Augustine on her liability to sin, which forms the germ of the doctrine of the “Immaculate Conception.”

unfrequently a legend is the product of a number of separate elements, constituting a kind of composite formation, and rendering the earlier lines of its pedigree as difficult to trace as those of the mediæval nobility. Among this class, a notable example is presented by the legend of St. Veronica and her fabled handkerchief, which, notwithstanding its acknowledged lateness of origin and obvious incredibility, has found a place in the so-called "Stations of the Cross," of which it forms one of the most sensational pictures. This legend, which has entirely superseded the earlier traditions out of which it has grown, has been successfully traced to its origin by many recent writers. In the last century it has a place in the interesting collection of dissertations of Ern. Salom. Cyprian (Jena, 1704), the second and third of which, "De Sudariis Christi" and "De Fasciis Christi," enter fully into the history of the handkerchiefs and napkins which form the materials for this legendary lore, including specially that of the Veronica Handkerchief and its origin. In the present century the subject has found incidental treatment in the critical investigation of the "Pilatus-Acten," of the late learned and lamented divine, Professor Richard Lipsius of Jena, whose loss to the theological world, as well as to his own university, is irreparable.<sup>1</sup> But it has had a larger and more direct treatment in an article in Herzog's "Real-Encyclopädie," and in various Roman Catholic writers who are quoted by Cyprian in his treatise. The story of the Veronica Handkerchief is one of the many legends which sprang up in connection with the apocryphal correspondence of our Lord with King Abgarus, to which Eusebius, unfortunately for his repute as a historian, gave currency and credence. It represents, however, rather a combination of conflicting legends than a clear and legitimate pedigree from that early "romance of history." Abgarus, a prince or ruler of Edessa, is said to have sent a letter to our Lord, praying Him to come and heal him of a disease which greatly afflicted him, and offering Him a place of refuge from His persecutors in his own town. Our Lord's reply (which Eusebius appears to have accepted as authentic) promises, after His ascension, to send to Abgarus one of His disciples to heal him. After the resurrection and ascension of Christ, Thaddæus, one of the seventy, is sent to Edessa, where his healing miracles awaken the wonder of the prince and lead him to the belief that he is the emissary designated in the letter of Christ. Then follows the usual narrative of a great and general conversion of the people of the city. In all this history we find no mention of a handkerchief as the curative medium,

<sup>1</sup> "Die Pilatus-Acten kritisch untersucht" (Kiel, 1871), pp. 34-38.

and it is clear that Eusebius gives us all that had been hitherto imagined or invented on the subject. But the fruitful germ soon developed. Eusebius, in a later place, had related to us a still more remarkable story in connection with the town of Cæsarea-Philippi, which in its Syrian nomenclature was called Paneas. That was traditionally believed to have been the native place of the woman whom our Lord healed of the issue of blood (Mark v. 25); and, according to the legend, her house was pointed out there, distinguished by a remarkable bas-relief cast in brass (or bronze), exhibiting an afflicted woman kneeling and stretching out her arms to a male figure, in a standing position, who extends his hand to her. This antique heathen work was soon claimed as representing the afflicted woman stretching out her hands to Christ. The Emperor Maximin (or, as others say, Julian) destroyed this monument, the fragments of which were put together again by the faithful, and placed in the church of Paneas. But Eusebius is ignorant of the name of the healed woman, which first occurs in the Acts of Pilate, then in the Chronicle of Malala, and afterwards in the letter of Bernice to Herod Antipas. And this name is none other than Bernice, or Beronice, which in the ancient Latin version assumes the form of Veronica. Now, it is remarkable that in the Clementine Homilies (iii., 73 and iv. 1, 4, 6) this name is assigned not to the woman whose restoration is described in Mark v. 25, but to the Canaanitish or Syrophenician woman whose residence is described to be Tyre; while at a later period the name was transferred to the "woman with the issue of blood," a change which was effected by the influence of the Valentinian gnostics, as Réville and v. Scholten have established. These writers have shown that when the old Clementine tradition died out, the name "Beronike" or Veronica was conferred, in a manner upon the latter subject, in whom the gnostics discovered a mystical representation of the æon *Προβυκος*.<sup>1</sup>

We have here the first appearance of the name "Veronica" in connection with an actual person, and have now to trace the origin and history of the handkerchief which has been combined with it in the latest form of the legend. Here we fall back upon the Abgarus myth as it is presented to us in the Acts of Thaddæus, which are given in the Greek original by Tischendorf in his "Collection of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles." Here we find the legend amplified by the introduction of an element altogether unknown to its earlier narrator, Abgarus, being extremely desirous to see the face of Christ, importunes him for a representation of it. This is produced

---

<sup>1</sup> Lipsius, "Pilatus-Acten," p. 85.

by means of a napkin on which the features of the Saviour are impressed, and which is sent to the favoured convert. The first indication of this enlargement of the Abgarus tradition appears in the "Doctrina Addaei," which was published from the Syriac by Cureton. It is curious that this document in the Syriac form makes the Apostle to spring from Paneas, while the Greek form connects him with Edessa, an indication that the latest form of the legend, the Veronica Handkerchief myth, is a combination of the local tradition of Edessa with that of the bas-relief of Paneas. Akin to these traditions is the legend of Plautilla, who (according to the pseudo-Linus) lent St. Paul her handkerchief to bind his eyes before his execution. In some of the MSS. of the Acts of Peter and Paul, where the same incident is mentioned, the woman is called Perpetua, a name which reminds us significantly of the Montanist martyr, St. Perpetua, whose acts have come down to us not without the severe strictures of the Roman Catholic Valesius, and of the equally learned Protestant Ittigius. The Veronica of the later legend, as she appears in the "Stations of the Cross," is identified in all points with the "woman with the issue of blood," and the legend itself appears to have originated in the west, probably in Aquitaine.<sup>1</sup>

The most learned of the writers of the Roman Church, who have undertaken the examination of the legend, ignore altogether the personality of Veronica, and apply the name to the napkin itself. They derive it from a barbarous conjunction of a Latin and a Greek term, making it *vera-icon* or *iconia* contracted, as Mabillon and Du Fresne allege, into the single word Veronica. Papebroche also doubts the very existence of such a woman as Veronica.<sup>2</sup>

The mediæval writers were not, however, satisfied with a mere lifeless handkerchief, but boldly vindicated the existence of its original possessor. They even undertook to show to the pious inquirers the very house in which she lived, which is described to have been "in the street leading to Calvary, and on the left side of it. It had a little gate, and before it in the street two projecting steps by which it was entered."<sup>3</sup>

"We have seen," writes Cyprian, "the woman and her house. Now let us inspect the handkerchief rather more closely." On the material of this precious relic (though many places claim its possession) our experts are in sad disagreement. Aldrichomius affirms that it was of linen. Quaresmius, that it was of silk. "'Tis a wonder," exclaims our author, "that

<sup>1</sup> "Pilatus-Acten," p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* "E. S. Cyprian, de Sudariis Christi, Diss. Eccl.," pp. 34, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Quaresmius, *Elucid. Terræ Sanctæ*.

they did not examine it and give ocular demonstration of its material, seeing that they claim the possession of it." A still more important question arises out of the manner in which it was folded—for so many claims are made for its possession that the reconciliation of them would put an end to many controversies. A *modus vivendi* was established between the claimants by the Jesuit Salmeron, who affirmed (on what authority does not appear) that the handkerchief was "long and in three folds, so that the image divinely impressed on it was also threefold. One of the folds is that at Rome, another is in the city of Jaen in Spain, and the third at Jerusalem." Quaresmius even ventures the statement that it is marked with the fingers of the soldiers by whom our Lord was scourged.

All this ecclesiastical romancing would be harmless and even amusing if it led to no more serious result. But no relic either real or imaginary has ever escaped the danger of becoming an object of direct worship to those who have attached to it a meretricious value and elevated it into a corresponding position of dignity. Everything connected with the incidents of the Passion, down to the very lance of the soldier which pierced the side of the Saviour, and the nails by which He was fastened to the cross, became the object of a direct worship in the Roman Church;<sup>1</sup> and not least of all the famous Veronica Handkerchief, said to have been offered Him by a pious matron while He was labouring under the weight of the cross.

Many readers of these lines will remember the large picture in the Royal Gallery of Munich representing a napkin drawn up at the four corners and covering the picture, in the centre of which is the face of our Lord bearing the crown of thorns. Few, we may conceive, have not seen the pictured group in the "Stations of the Cross," in which the pious act of the imaginary Veronica has so sensational a representation. The learned Roman Catholics, Du Fresne, Mabillon, and many others, as we have already observed, deny the existence of the fabled saint, and contend that the name Veronica belongs to the handkerchief itself, and is merely a variety of *vera icon*, a barbarous combination of languages which, if the theory is true, would go far to demonstrate the late origin of the legend. But the view of more recent critics, which connects the name with the earlier traditions of the two suppliants in the Gospel, and which rests on the Clementine Homilies as its earliest record, and on the apocryphal Thaddæus as its later development, presents the readiest solution of the many difficulties which beset the whole subject. The translation of the name

---

<sup>1</sup> See the Bull of Innocent VI. (1353), instituting the "Festival of the Lance and Nails."—("Würdtwein, Subs. Diplom.," tom. IV., p. 369.)

"Beronike" in the Latin versions in the form of Veronica, and the admitted western origin of the legend in its mediæval form lead inevitably to this conclusion.

Pope Benedict XIV. is very angry with the Protestant Reiske for "furiously," as he alleges, impugning the whole story, though he admits that "there are not wanting those who affirm the name to be moulded (*conflatum*) from the words *vera* and *icon*." Probably he would have found equal fault with Elijah or Jehu for their zeal against an earlier idolatry. For when under the shadow of papal indulgences largely bestowed by Pope Calixtus III. and others it formed the object of a very gross idolatry, it became the duty of those who appreciated the danger to expose the absolute groundlessness of the entire legend, and to dispel the illusions which mediæval ignorance had raised up around it.

A specimen of the devotions which were popular in the fifteenth century, taken from a MS. "On Indulgences," written in 1460, is given us in the following lines:

"Salve sancta facies nostri redemptoris,  
In quâ nitet species divini splendoris,  
Dataque Veronicæ signum ob amoris.  
Salve decus sæculi speculum sanctorum  
Quod videre cupiunt spiritus cœlorum,  
Nos ab omni maculâ purga vitiorum  
Atque nos consortio junge beatorum  
Salve mundi gloria in hæc vitâ durâ  
Labili et fragili, citò transitura  
Nos perduc ad propria o! felix figura  
Ad videndam faciem, quæ est Christi pura.  
Esto nobis quaesumus tutum adjuvamen,  
Dulce refrigerium atque consolamen,  
Ut nobis non noceat hostile gravamen,  
Sed fruamur requie—Omnes dicant: Amen."<sup>1</sup>

At what period indulgences were first granted to those who engage in this worship, we do not clearly know. Matthew Paris places the date at 1216. He writes:

"While the die of fortune was thus agitating England with disturbances, Pope Innocent, urged by his anxiety for the state of the Church, carried in procession the picture of the face of our Lord, which is called Veronica, as is the custom, from the Church of St. Peter to the Hospital of the Holy Spirit. When he had done this the picture, when it was put in its place, turned itself round, reversing itself, so that the forehead was in the lower place and the beard in the upper. When the Pope saw this he was horrified, believing that it was a presage of some great calamity, and taking counsel with his brethren, that God might be reconciled, he composed an elegant hymn in honour of the picture called Veronica, to which he added a psalm with versicles, and for those who recited it he granted an indulgence of ten days, so that as often as it was repeated so often the indulgence might be obtained."

<sup>1</sup> E. S. Cyprian, "Dissert.," p. 42.

But (as our author observes) this parsimonious grant was not adhered to by his successors, as John XXII. gave a hundred days' indulgence to any who recited the prayer, while the book on the Roman Stations, printed at Rome in 1475, and again at Nuremberg in 1491, does not scruple to declare that, "When the Veronica is shown in the Church of St. Peter in the Vatican, then the Romans have 3,000 years of indulgence, the Italians 6,000, the more distant countries 12,000."

I do not imagine that those who endeavoured to reintroduce the "Stations of the Cross" into our own Church were aware of the great blessings attached to the Veronica worship, or considered the temptation which it gave to indulge in it. Nor, perhaps, were the bishops and Courts which prohibited the stations "sufficiently acquainted with the privileges they were so sadly withholding from the faithful. In any case, Christians who follow the teaching of the Church in its better days will rejoice that this "image of jealousy" has been removed, with all its apocryphal accompaniments, including the falls of our Lord under the cross, and the sensational and romantic treatment of the passage of the suffering Saviour to His final and glorious triumph. Superficial observers may see no danger in the revival of such apocryphal illustrations; but we might do well to remember that the dipping of handkerchiefs in the blood of martyrs, or claimants to martyrdom, survived till within comparatively recent years, and that the objects themselves were regarded with a religious, or rather superstitious, reverence by devotees of every persuasion. The legend of the Veronica, its illegitimate origin, and morbid development may well caution us against suffering any such poisonous parasites to grow up around the narratives of the Evangelists, to the great injury and corruption of the "faith once delivered," and to the inevitable corruption of history by its contact with legend and myth.

ROBERT C. JENKINS.



### ART. III.—THE ENGLISH CHURCH UNION AND THE BIRMINGHAM CHURCH CONGRESS.

THE President of the English Church Union possesses many charming qualities, which are alike the admiration of those who differ from him and of those who agree with him upon religious questions. He is a pleasant companion, and his private life is exemplary. As the head of a great religious organization, it is impossible that he should escape criticism. By his conduct and utterances he necessarily courts it. The