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THE SHROUD OF TURIN

The author of this informative article is a missionary working in Italy. He surveys the present state of the evidence concerning the famous Shroud of Turin.

Considering Dr. John A.T. Robinson's reputation for scepticism over basic Christian doctrines, his readiness to give credibility to the tradition of the Turin burial shroud is remarkable¹. But Dr. Robinson is not alone. An increasing number of Protestants, as well as Roman Catholics, are taking the shroud tradition seriously. It is time to ask whether the tradition is well founded and why it is attracting so much interest.

Can the shroud tradition be trusted?

The *Gospel of John* gives enough details about Jesus' burial clothes to make it clear that the Lord was buried according to Jewish custom. His body was bound in linen cloths (Greek *othonia*, plural, indicating 'linen bandages') with the spices (*John 19: 40*). We are further informed that on the morning of the resurrection Peter saw the linen bandages lying and the napkin which had been on Christ's head rolled up near by (*20: 5-7*). No suggestion is made by John of there having been a shroud held close to Christ's body by the linen bandages and the napkin. As against this, the word used by the three Synoptists (except in the perhaps spurious *Luke 24: 12*) is *sindōn*, which could denote a garment or shroud (*Mat. 27: 59; Mk. 15: 46; Luke 23: 53* - and see *Mk. 14: 51, 52*).

Perhaps the tradition of the shroud is linked with a legendary story which appears in the so-called *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, an apocryphal work known to Origen (c.200 AD) and later writers. According to this book, which contains much obviously spurious material, Jesus, as He rose from the dead, took a *sindon* with Him and gave it to the servant of the High Priest.

Emperor Constantine's decision to show deference to the Christians' God, following his victory over Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 AD, led to the beginning of a new era for Christianity. After centuries of living as a persecuted minority, Christians now enjoyed full citizen rights and religious liberty. Within less than a century Christianity would

be the only legal religion in the Roman Empire. This sudden change in Christianity's fortunes bore all kinds of fruit. For example more secure times made it possible for the church to devote time to less important matters like collecting relics and mapping out the so-called 'holy places' of the faith. An increasing importance attributed to such things in subsequent centuries witnessed to the fact that the 'christianizing' of the Empire had in reality only produced a facade of Christian belief and a redirection of popular pagan ideas and practices.

About 333 AD a visitor to Palestine listed a number of objects considered to be Christian relics². If we accept the tradition that the Turin shroud was located in Palestine for the first thousand years of the Christian era, the complete lack of mention of it in this list is to say the least surprising, especially if one considers that the anonymous compiler of the relics list claimed to have even identified such things as a palm tree from which children took leafy branches to spread before Christ as He entered Jerusalem at the beginning of Passion week.

In the fifth century pilgrims claimed to have found the Cross of Calvary near the Basilica of Golgotha built in the time of Constantine. Some wood, said to be of the Cross, was carefully preserved in a silver casket and venerated by pilgrims. Many other objects and places associated with Christ's ministry, especially concerning the events of Passion week, began to be mysteriously located and marked off by church buildings. Such places became the 'mecca' of pilgrims. However the records still do not make any mention of the shroud.

The number of 'holy places' in Palestine continued to increase and became the basis of highly developed forms of 'christian' superstition. One of these superstitious customs appears to bear on the subsequent development of the shroud tradition. On the night of the Greek feast of Theophany (6th January) many people, among whom were Alexandrian seafarers, would gather on the banks of the Jordan river and wait for the Bishop to consecrate the water in memory of the baptism of Jesus. Before the baptismal re-enactment ceremony, the seamen collected quantities of the water which had been blessed by the Bishop to sprinkle it on their ships before they commenced voyages. After the baptismal liturgy was over all present would descend into the river to receive a blessing, wearing (and this is the point which particularly interests us) *sindones* or shrouds and other garments which they intended using at their burial³. The reason for this practice is not clear; however it is most significant that the event of this superstitious interest in burial cloths (c. 600 AD) was followed shortly after by the first recorded popular interest in Christ's burial garments.

Could the shroud have been purposely hidden?

Those who believe the Turin shroud enwrapped Christ's body during His burial sometimes suppose that it remained hidden at Edessa, a city which figures highly in Egeria's famous pilgrimage to the holy places during 414-416 AD. Needless to say, Egeria made no mention of any such relic. It is true that there is a tradition linked with this city which has sometimes been linked with the shroud. However this tradition, which incidentally appears in very different forms in a number of ancient documents⁴, does not concern a shroud at all but rather an icon which it is said Jesus had brought to king Abgar in answer to his request for healing, about 31 AD. Furthermore there is no recorded mention even of this icon before 540 AD. What does appear to be certain from a number of chronicles is that the walls of Edessa were broken down repeatedly by severe floods (in the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th centuries). It would appear then a most unlikely choice of a place in which to hide relics of any sort, not to mention stained linen cloth.

Evidence and a possible explanation of the shroud's origin

Photographic reversal of the lights and shadows of the stains on the Turin burial shroud reveals a lifesize front and back figure of a man who was crucified, scourged, lanced and bloodily crowned. Most Roman Catholics and an increasing number of Protestants believe that the person who left this stain was none other than Jesus Christ. Such people are usually unaware of the serious gap in the records concerning the shroud, neither have they seriously considered the possibility that the man who was wrapped in the shroud may have been someone else crucified in a less remote period of history. It is to this second possibility that we now turn our attention.

Nestorian History records that Persian astrologers had many Christian bishops crucified during the reign of Cosroe I (479-531 AD)⁵. This form of punishment was not generally used under this Persian king; therefore it would seem that the crucifixion of the bishops was a conscious attempt to teach Christ's followers they could expect to be treated as He was. Similar treatment of Christian leaders and of converts to the Christian faith occurred also during the seventh century.⁶

There is also evidence for Jews having been crucified in this period (540-640 AD), sometimes at the hands of Persians and at other times at the hands of 'Christians'. The latter dubbed the Jews 'the children of the crucifiers'. In this case as well there was a conscious effort to model this form of punishment on the treatment which Christ suffered. The crucifixion of Christians

was intended as mockery, while that of the Jews as revenge. Palestine was the centre of these terrible happenings, partly because the mutual hatred of Jews and Christians was particularly pronounced there, and partly as a result of the sack of Jerusalem, a Christian cultic centre, by the Persians in 614 AD.

The period just described is the same as that already referred to in which such interest was being shown in burial garments.

We have already noted that the Turin burial shroud appears to have contained a man whose experience of crucifixion shows strong resemblances to the crucifixion of Christ as it is described in the Gospels. It would also seem highly probable that the traces of pollen contained in the shroud originate from a plant which grows in Palestine. But that does not mean necessarily that the man whose figures on the shroud is to be identified with Jesus Christ. Pier Angelo Gramaglia, after assessing the kind of evidence which we have adduced in this article and much more besides, suggests that the crucifixion witnessed to by the shroud could be one of the many which occurred in Palestine between 540 and 640 AD, in conscious imitation of the crucifixion of Christ.

Rival Shrouds

All this time we have been speaking of the Turin burial shroud as though it were unique. There have in fact been a number of rival shrouds. Knowledge of most of them is now largely suppressed so as to avoid confusion and scandal. However during the sixteenth century things were very different. Writing in his tract on relics, John Calvin observed: "He who believes that the Chambery sheet (now at Turin) is the true shroud, condemns as false those kept at Besancon, Aix, Cadoin, Treviri and Rome, which must then be considered to wickedly seduce people, making them commit idolatry"⁸.

Why is so much interest being shown in the shroud?

When I saw the Turin burial shroud in 1970, this relic which had lain encased in the Cathedral since 1578 did not draw great crowds. When the same relic was exhibited in September 1978, the crowds wishing to see it and in many cases venerate it filled the square in front of the Cathedral day after day. What accounts for this sudden interest in a relic which even the Roman Catholic hierarchy has not definitely declared authentic? What has happened in Christendom to make even Protestants change their attitude towards such things?

Here within Italy there has been a noticeable recovery of popular religious practices. Prof. Alfonso di Nola of the Oriental Institute at Naples has documented this phenomenon. He

quotes one Roman Catholic feast held at Valle Pietra in the Lazio region in which only 80,000-100,000 pilgrims participated in 1960, as currently attracting 1,200,000 people. He notes a similar return to purely pagan religious practices.⁹

During the same period Protestants have begun to attribute more importance to Church tradition than formerly. The entrance of the Orthodox churches into the World Council of Churches in 1961 is no doubt partly responsible for this. At the same time seeds of doubt concerning the final authority of God's written Word have continued to undermine the doctrinal foundations of many Protestants. If our faith is not in the living God who continues to act through the risen Christ and who makes known His will through the inspired Scriptures, then we will inevitably seek some alternative security. We may even find comfort in such weak and uncertain evidence of Christian foundations as the shroud is thought to provide.

While the recent veneration of the Turin shroud was at its height, I preached the Gospel of God's grace to a group of men at Calamonaci in Sicily. After I had spoken a medical Doctor made reference to the shroud. He believed it could make an important contribution to bolstering the faith of many in an epoch widely characterized by atheism. However when I asked him whether he felt the shroud would lead those who viewed it to a personal faith in the living Christ, he was doubtful.

If, as the Bible teaches, there is continuity and identity between the Jesus of the Gospels and the risen, exalted Christ witnessed to in *Acts* and the New Testament Epistles, the foundations of our faith will not be influenced for good or ill by the identification of objects or places which call to mind significant moments in Christ's earthly ministry. Those who believe, on the other hand, that Christ continues to live only in the memory of his followers or who believe that divine grace is made available through sacred objects and sacramental actions, are bound to attach great importance to the Turin burial shroud.

NOTES

- 1 Dr. J.A.T. Robinson has been quoted as saying "Whereas I began by thinking that it (the Turin shroud) was bogus until proved otherwise, I now think it must be considered genuine until it is proved otherwise."
- 2 This list is known as the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*.

- 3 I am indebted for this and for some other information relative to the shroud, to Pier Angelo Gramaglia, Professor of Patristic studies at the Inter-regional Theological Faculty, Turin. His series of scholarly articles on the shroud, first published in the magazine *Il Foglio* (n. 61-66) during 1978, was later published by *Claudiana*, Turin (Nov. 1978) under the title: *L'uomo della Sindone non è Gesù Cristo* (The man of the shroud is not Jesus Christ). P.A. Gramaglia's assessment is based on thorough research and a number of largely neglected historical documents.
- 4 For an attempted harmonization of the tradition, see *Narratio de imagine edessena*, 950 AD.
- 5 In *Patologia Orientalis*, Paris, 7.2, p.160.
- 6 op.cit. pp. 539, 556.
- 7 In *L'uomo della Sindone non è Gesù Cristo*, pp. 75, 76.
- 8 J. Calvin, *Traité des reliques*, Geneva, 1563, p.39.
- 9 *Credere e Comprendere* Spinetta, n.18 July 79, p.24.

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