



The Skeptics SA guide to The Shroud of Turin

The shroud of Turin is a woven cloth about 4.3 m long and 1.1 m wide which has an image of a man on it. The image is believed by many to be the image of Jesus of Nazareth and the shroud is believed to be his burial shroud. The image is believed not to be a painting, but a negative image of a crucified Christ. The shroud is kept in the cathedral of St John the Baptist in Turin, Italy.

Apparently, the first historical mention of the shroud as the 'shroud of Turin' is in the late 16th century when the shroud was brought to the cathedral in that city, though it allegedly was discovered in Turkey during one of the so-called Holy Crusades in the Middle Ages. The shroud also allegedly was in a fire during the early part of the 16th century. This fact, according to believers in the shroud's authenticity, accounts for the carbon dating of the shroud as being no more than 750 years old. (In 1988 the Vatican allowed the shroud to be dated by three independent sources — Oxford University, the University of Arizona, and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology — and each of them dated the cloth as originating in medieval times.)

It may interest sceptics to know that many people of faith believe that there is scientific evidence which supports their belief in the

shroud's authenticity. Of course, the evidence is limited almost exclusively to pointing out facts that would be true if the shroud were authentic. For example, it is claimed to be the negative image of a crucifixion victim. It is claimed to be the image of a man brutally beaten in a way which corresponds to the way Jesus is depicted as having been treated in the Bible. It is also claimed that the image is not a painting. Since dead bodies do not typically impress their fleshly images on burial shrouds it is assumed the image was transposed miraculously. It is claimed that the cloth has some pollen on it that is found in the Dead Sea region of Israel. It is claimed that there is type AB blood on the shroud. The weave of the cloth is said to be typical of the weave wealthy Jews would have had in the time of Jesus. The size of the cloth fits with what one would expect given Biblical measures. The size and weave of the cloth have convinced one believing researcher that the cloth may have been used as a tablecloth for the Last Supper.

These bits of 'scientific' data are of little interest to the sceptic, however. Not only is consistency with the authenticity claim merely a necessary and not a sufficient condition for the claim to authenticity being true, the authenticity of the shroud is of no interest to the sceptic.

What difference does it make if the shroud is the one Jesus was wrapped in? Who cares? It makes about as much difference in the world as whether or not statues of Mary, the mother of Jesus, cry real tears. Of course, the believer thinks it does matter because such events would be miraculous signs that what they believe in is really true.

Yet the shroud and crying statues are very different kinds of things. For, even if the shroud is authentic, it would do nothing to support the notion that Jesus was God or that he resurrected from the dead. It would only support the notion that he was killed and wrapped. One would still need infinite faith to believe the rest of the Christian drama. Whereas crying statues, if authentic, would be miraculous. With the statues, one needs infinite faith to believe any of them really cry. With the shroud, one needs infinite faith not to believe it is authentic, but to believe that it supports the notion of the Resurrection. For, there is nothing miraculous about being crucified or buried.

I won't be so cynical as to suggest that the shroud of Turin is just another religious relic invented to beef up the pilgrimage business. It is probably a forgery or a misinterpretation. Using scientific means to date the cloth

is of no interest. Whether it is 500 years old, a thousand years old or dates from the time of Jesus matters not to its status as a miraculous relic. Whether the image is that of Jesus or not is of no interest. Nevertheless, there are a few things that should be pointed out to the believers. When carbon dating put the age of the shroud as perhaps medieval, to claim that what was really being measured was a medieval fire the shroud was in seems disingenuous and a bit of an ad hoc hypothesis.

The fact that pollens found near the Dead Sea were in the shroud means little. The Dead Sea isn't exactly where Jesus was buried and those pollens could have been carried to the shroud. The AB blood could be the blood of anyone who handled the shroud, but it would be interesting to know that God has type AB blood. The weave of the wealthy Jew doesn't seem consistent with the kind of people Jesus supposedly hung out with. (However, as one reader, Hal Nelson, pointed out, "The linen cloth was supplied by Joseph of Arimathea, described in Matthew 27 as a 'rich man' as well as a disciple.")

But the main problem with the shroud is that it is probably a forgery. The case for the forged shroud is made by Joe Nickell in his *Inquest On The Shroud Of Turin* which was written in collaboration with a panel of scientific and technical experts. The author claims that historical, iconographic, pathological, physical, and chemical evidence points to inauthenticity.

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The latest scholar to declare the Shroud a fake is Walter McCrone, a microchemist, in his *Judgment Day for the Turin Shroud*, published in March 1997. His thesis is that 'a male model was daubed with paint and wrapped in the sheet to create the shadowy figure of Christ.' The model was covered in red ochre, 'a pigment found in earth and widely used in Italy during the Middle Ages, and pressed his forehead, cheekbones and other parts of his head and body on to the linen to create the image that exists today.

'Vermilion paint, made from mercuric sulphide, was then splashed on to the image's wrists, feet and body to represent blood.'

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