

WHAT DOES THE SHROUD OF TURIN MEAN?

by

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What is the meaning of the Shroud of Turin? The Shroud is the famous cloth, housed in Turin, Italy, which many believe to be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. It is fourteen feet long by three feet wide and contains faint images of a nude, bloodied, crucified man, lying in a death pose, seen from both the front and the back. The Shroud was largely written off in 1988 when radiocarbon dating concluded it originated in the Middle Ages, not in 30 A.D. In the minds of many, this test was powerful enough to overrule a mountain of previous scientific evidence that supported the Shroud's authenticity. Now, however, the Shroud is being reassessed, in part because the accuracy of the radiocarbon dating is being called into question.

The big question about the Shroud has always been: Is it the authentic burial cloth of Jesus of Nazareth? That question, however, will merely be my starting point. For even when we answer that one (if we ever do), we are still faced with a further, larger question: What is the *meaning* of the Shroud? What is its relevance for our lives? I consider this the largest question because meaning is what moves us. Facts by themselves, stripped of all meaning, have no impact on us. Only once we assign them a meaning do they ignite our emotions and impel our lives.

Therefore, after an initial section on the science of the Shroud, the main thrust of this article will be highly speculative. I don't see how we can avoid such speculation, for meaning is not contained in the facts themselves. It requires a leap beyond the facts, and we all take such leaps. For instance, simply thinking that the Shroud has significance shows that one has gone beyond the facts and assigned it some kind of meaning. I merely wish to move this process of assigning meaning out into the open, into a public forum.

How you respond to the meanings I present will to a large extent be determined by your worldview. Worldviews function as interpretive frameworks that tell us how to handle the facts that come our way. They tell us how to draw lines between facts, how to connect the dots. They tell us which speculative leaps are merely short, justified hops and which are impossible long jumps. If your worldview has two components in particular, then my conjectures might sound like a few short hops. If not, this article will probably strike you as an exercise in leaping out into empty space. Those two components are: 1) You believe that there is something crucial and momentous about Jesus, but that our understanding of him has been imperfect and can be illuminated by historical research. 2) You believe that science is a highly valuable tool in the search for truth, yet you also believe that miracles can happen.

I. EVIDENCE FOR THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE SHROUD

My speculations about the meaning of the Shroud rest entirely on my belief that the Shroud is the actual gravecloth of Jesus of Nazareth. If I am wrong in that belief, all of my

speculations are worthless. Therefore, before proceeding with the main part of my paper, I want to present what I see as the primary areas of evidence that support this belief. I will need to be painfully brief about this vast and fascinating topic. Yet on this topic there is a wealth of information from real experts, whose writings I invite you to consult (for one of the best summaries of the field I have seen, see MEACHAM, William - [The Authentication of the Turin Shroud: An Issue in Archaeological Epistemology](#)). If you are already versed in Shroud research, feel free to skip ahead to Section II, "An Exploration of the Meaning of the Shroud."

The Shroud contained a real human body...

The man pictured on the Shroud not only looks like a real person (as opposed to an artistic creation), he is actually anatomically flawless down to minor details. This has been the unanimous verdict of a century of medical opinion on the Shroud. It is also the verdict of professional art anatomy, according to Isabel Piczek, a world expert in figurative draftsmanship (see PICZEK, Isabel - [Alice In Wonderland and the Shroud of Turin](#)).

which suffered actual wounds and stained the cloth with genuine blood.

Some of the strongest evidence for the Shroud's authenticity comes from the medical convincingness of the man's wounds. The man on the Shroud is literally covered with wounds. He has been pierced in his right side and in both wrists and feet, has puncture wounds around the head, has approximately 120 dumbbell-shaped contusions on his back and front, has a swollen right cheek, a possible broken nose, and many other injuries.

These multiple wounds make it possible for a forensic pathologist to examine the man on the Shroud as he would any other corpse. And from these wounds the pathologist can garner a phenomenal wealth of information. He can also rule out the possibility of fakery. The wounds, the blood flows and bloodstains are just too perfect. They behave exactly like the real thing in every respect, down to the last detail. According to Robert Bucklin, Forensic Pathologist from Las Vegas, Nevada, "Each of the different wounds acted in a characteristic fashion. Each bled in a manner which corresponded to the nature of the injury. The blood followed gravity in every instance."¹ (See the article, BUCKLIN, Robert, M.D., J.D. - [An Autopsy on the Man of the Shroud](#).)

Furthermore, the blood on the Shroud--long a source of controversy--has been proven by multiple scientific tests to be real human blood.

This body was crucified, almost certainly by the Romans...

The man on the Shroud underwent a real crucifixion. From his wounds we can conclude that he was scourged (a practice which usually preceded crucifixion), probably carried a heavy object across his shoulders (most likely a crossbeam), was nailed through the wrists (this defies artistic convention yet is particularly realistic, since nails through the palms would not have supported the body's weight) and through the feet. While his arms were in an upright position (which we know because the blood flowed *down* his arms), he seesawed back and forth (the blood flows on his arms indicate his arms regularly took two different positions) in order to breathe (one cannot exhale while hanging in this way). Finally, he seems to have died by asphyxiation (the usual cause of death in a crucifixion). His body shows clear signs of rigor

mortis.

We can also be reasonably confident that he was crucified by Romans. The dumbbell-shaped contusions correspond exactly to scourge wounds inflicted by the Roman *flagrum*. The size and shape of the side wound matches precisely the blade of the *lancea*, the likely weapon to have been used by Roman soldiers garrisoned in a city.

and was buried in a manner consistent with ancient Jewish burial practices.

The Shroud does *not* conform to a normal Jewish burial in antiquity, but it does conform to how the Jews would have buried someone who died a violent death.² In such a case, the deceased would need to be buried unwashed (so that the body and its blood would be together in anticipation of the day of resurrection), clothed *only* in the garments he was wearing at death, and wrapped in a single all-enveloping white shroud. This is exactly what we find with the Shroud of Turin, given that the man on the Shroud died completely unclothed. Finally, the posture of the Shroud figure has been found in other first-century Jewish burials (particularly in the Dead Sea community at Qumran).

The body was very likely Jewish...

The man on the Shroud can be assigned a specific racial grouping. "He is of a physical type found in modern times among Sephardic Jews and noble Arabs," according to ethnologist Carleton Coon. We can narrow this further, for his beard and hair style were common among ancient Jews, but nowhere else in the Roman Empire. In fact, on the back image of the man we see what looks like an unbound pigtail. This is a very distinctive Jewish feature, for it was a specific fashion among first-century Jews.

and was almost certainly that of Jesus of Nazareth.

The particular pattern of wounds corresponds exactly to the wounds that the Gospels say Jesus received. This particular pattern is almost certainly unique to Jesus, in two respects especially. First, the puncture wounds on the man's head correspond to the Gospel account of Jesus being crowned with thorns. This was not common practice but was apparently a specific mockery of Jesus' purported claim of kingship. Second, the post-mortem lance thrust (doctors have concluded it *was* post-mortem) to the side was also unusual. It was customary instead to hasten a victim's death by breaking his legs (which rendered him unable to exhale since he could no longer relieve the weight on his arms), yet the man on the Shroud's legs are not broken.

The image on the cloth is not composed of material added to the cloth.

What produced the body image? The following is from the official report of STURP, the scientific team that was given direct access to investigate the Shroud in 1978: "No pigments, paints, dyes or stains have been found on the fibrils. X-ray, fluorescence and microchemistry on the fibrils preclude the possibility of paint being used as a method for creating the image." (see [1978 Scientific Examination: A Summary of STURP's Conclusions](#))

Instead, it appears to be a kind of scorch...

The image was not produced by material added to the cloth, but by the yellowing of the

surface of the cloth itself. Again from the STURP report: "The scientific consensus is that the image was produced by something which resulted in oxidation, dehydration and conjugation" of the topmost fibrils of the linen threads. One theory states that this was chemically-induced (sulfuric acid, for instance, can produce a similar effect). The other says that the image is a kind of scorch, caused by light or heat. The scorch theory seems to be the strongest of the two. It accounts for the vast majority of the known physical characteristics of the image. Additionally, scorching is an effect that can be communicated over a distance--you can be scorched by something without it directly touching you. And the Shroud image was not formed solely by direct contact with the body. The image depicts many places on the body that would not have been touching the cloth.

caused apparently by the dead body emitting some form of radiant energy...

One of the most famous--and most unique--aspects of the Shroud image is that it contains three-dimensional information. This means that the image, when fed into a device known as a VP-8 Image Analyzer, comes out looking like a three-dimensional human body. The reason the image contains spatial information is very simple: At any given point, the closer the cloth would have been to the body, the darker is the image at that point. (see [The 1978 Scientific Examination: The VP-8 Image Analyzer](#)) There is, in fact, a mathematical relationship between the darkness of the image and the likely cloth-body distance.

This simple fact is of the utmost importance. It suggests something that strains credulity. It implies that the image was produced by something that emanated from the body. In other words, the closer the cloth was to the body, the more the body scorched it. Apparently, the body itself emitted some form of radiant energy and thereby, in effect, burned its image onto its own burial cloth.

which resulted in a kind of photographic negative.

The *most* famous feature of the Shroud is that it is very much like a photographic negative. Under normal conditions it does not appear life-like at all. But when its light and dark values are reversed, it suddenly looks like a photograph of an actual body.

Strangely, this effect is explained by the fact we just discussed, that the closer the cloth was to the body, the more the body scorched it. In real life, the features on a body that stick out catch the most light. In a photographic negative, this is reversed: those features are the darkest. And this is exactly what we see on the Shroud. The features that protrude are the darkest because they were the closest to the cloth.

Thus, this single idea--that the body emitted some kind of radiant energy which scorched its burial cloth--has great explanatory power. With this one idea we can explain the image's physical properties, the three-dimensional information it encodes, and its photographic nature as well.

The origin of the cloth in time and space

I find the preceding evidence to be extremely impressive. However, there are gaps in the evidence. The biggest gap is that we cannot trace the Shroud with any certainty back to first-century Palestine. It seems to have simply appeared out of the blue in fourteenth-century France.

There is evidence, however, that calls that place and time of origin into serious question. In terms of place, pollen samples taken from the Shroud by Swiss criminologist Max Frei have shown that at some point in its history the Shroud was indeed in Israel. Further, limestone dust from the underside of the Shroud was identified as having an almost identical chemical "signature" to limestone dust from a Jerusalem tomb. This strongly suggests that the man on the Shroud was indeed buried in Jerusalem.

As for its origin in *time*, many factors indicate that the Shroud dates from well before its appearance in the 1350's. Roman crucifixion was practiced only until 315 A.D. There is evidence that the face on the Shroud profoundly influenced Byzantine iconography beginning in the sixth century. And there are tantalizing theories (most notably by Ian Wilson) that make a good case for tracing the Shroud of Turin (under other names) all the way back to first-century Palestine.

The 1988 carbon-dating

Still, the issue of origin is the Shroud's weakest point. And this soft underbelly is precisely where the 1988 carbon-dating struck. It concluded that the Shroud's linen dated to between 1260 and 1390 A.D. With that single finding, the book on the Shroud seemed to be closed. Now, if one listened to the media, the issue seemed to become one of hard science versus soft faith; with those who accepted the concrete verdict of science standing on one side, and those who clung to their emotionally-based faith on the other.

But that was not, and is not, the issue at all. The issue is about a single piece of scientific data contradicting a mountain of other scientific data. It is about whether that one piece is powerful enough to overrule the mountain, especially considering that the mountain is really a smooth-sided pyramid, for its various pieces unite to form a single, harmonious whole. In short, it is about science versus science.

Is carbon-dating so infallible that it can nullify all of the other scientific evidence that has been accumulated? There are several reasons to question this notion (see SPARKS, Rodger & MEACHAM, William - [C-14 Debate from the Shroud Newsgroup: alt.turin-shroud](#)). It has been observed that the dating of textiles is particularly problematic, and that therefore especially careful and stringent protocols should have been used. Actually, better protocols were initially adopted and then later abandoned by the Shroud's custodians, over the objections of the laboratories involved.

Further, since the 1988 testing a bioplastic coating on the Shroud fibers has been discovered by Dr. Leoncio Garza-Valdes. This is a kind of living varnish on the cloth, composed of microorganisms. This coating is not removed by standard pre-treatment procedures. Therefore, what was dated in 1988 was the cloth *and* its coating. This almost certainly yielded a date that was somewhere *in between* the Shroud's actual date and the date of the living bioplastic coating (see GARZA-VALDES, Leoncio A., M.D. - [Scientific Analysis of the Shroud of Turin](#), and BARRETT, Jim - [Science and the Shroud](#)).

This theory was recently tested. The mummy of an Egyptian ibis and its linen wrappings were carbon-dated separately. As predicted, the linen dated significantly younger than did the ibis (550 years). The linen's bioplastic coating apparently caused a date to be obtained that was centuries younger than the linen's actual age.³

All in all, there seem to be good reasons to question the infallibility of the carbon-dating

of the Shroud of Turin.

Why do I believe the Shroud is authentic?

Though I cannot be absolutely certain that the Shroud is genuine, I am, for all intents and purposes, convinced. Why? Very simply, I see no other way to explain the evidence I summarized earlier. None of the many theories for how the Shroud might have been forged comes anywhere near to accounting for all the evidence. To this day we cannot explain how the Shroud could have been forged. And none of the naturalistic theories that suggest that the Shroud contained someone other than Jesus, someone who happened to leave an imprint on his burial cloth, seems remotely convincing to me. The Shroud image is a one-of-a-kind phenomenon. If this kind of image happened naturally, it would have happened to other bodies. All things considered, I find it easier to question the carbon-dating than I do to dismiss the mountain of scientific evidence arguing so persuasively for authenticity. And there now seems to be ample reason to question the carbon-dating simply on its own merits.

The fundamental reason the Shroud seems so convincing to me is that there is an overwhelming realism to it, a realism that appears to be flawless and seamless. This realism seems to go right to the core of it. As one probes the Shroud more and more minutely with the most sophisticated tools of science, rather than its fakery being exposed, its realism simply increases.

The Shroud, therefore, functions in a way that is opposite to that of a human deception. Every human deception, be it a magic trick or a forgery, has two aspects: a carefully constructed *facade*, behind which is concealed the *lie* it really is. Further, by definition, every deception has a particular audience for which it is intended. It is designed *for* this audience, for the express purpose of deceiving them. To do this, the deceiver must know exactly what they can see, and then fashion a convincing facade that is the only thing they see. Consequently, the more closely they investigate--the more they penetrate past the facade--the more they discover the lie behind it.

The Shroud is the opposite of this scenario. If fashioned in the fourteenth century, then the facade it showed its intended audience was pretty unconvincing. Seeing the Shroud with the naked eye is seeing it at its worst. Only five hundred years later, when modern science thoroughly penetrated this facade did the Shroud become really convincing.

As an analogy, imagine a Medieval magician who is performing a magic trick in front of an audience; say, pulling a rabbit out of a hat. The audience is not particularly impressed. Some are even booing him. Now in walks a team of scientists. The magician never intended them to view his trick and indeed didn't know that such people could exist. He designed his trick for a Medieval audience that would sit in front of him and see only what he wanted them to see. These scientists, however, proceed to set up slow-motion cameras that view the situation from every possible angle. They set up heat detectors. They set up every conceivable kind of instrument to minutely examine his act of pulling the rabbit out of the hat. Yet, after carefully quantifying, analyzing and reviewing the data, they are completely astounded. They can detect no signs of trickery. Many become convinced that this was no magic trick at all, but a genuine supernatural feat, a miracle. The entire team becomes vastly more impressed than the very audience the trick

was designed for. Does this scenario make any sense?

If we claim that the Shroud is a forgery, this is the situation we are faced with. Its facade, which should be its most convincing part, is actually its *least* convincing aspect. When you see behind that facade in a way its original audience could never have done, instead of uncovering the lie, you become convinced. The Shroud would thus have been poorly designed to fool the Medieval audience it was made to deceive, but masterfully designed to dupe a far more discerning, scientific audience its forger could never have foreseen.

Such a scenario violates the fundamental nature of human deception. A deception simply does not work this way. On the other hand, this is exactly how the genuine article often works. Many genuine artifacts that seem unimpressive and lackluster to the untrained eye are revealed to be gold mines of information by the trained scientist. That, in essence, is why I believe that the Shroud is authentic.

Conclusions about the Shroud

Here is a summary of my above conclusions about the Shroud of Turin:

The Shroud contained a real human body, which suffered actual wounds and stained the cloth with genuine blood. This body was crucified, almost certainly by the Romans, and was buried in a manner consistent with ancient Jewish burial practices. The body was very likely Jewish and was almost certainly that of Jesus of Nazareth. The image on the cloth is not composed of material added to the cloth. Instead, it appears to be a kind of scorch, caused apparently by the dead body emitting some form of radiant energy, which resulted in a kind of photographic negative.

Though not certain, especially in the face of the puzzling carbon-dating result, the above paragraph seems to me to be the most reasonable conclusion one can draw from the evidence. We can compress this paragraph into two statements: The Shroud is the burial cloth of Jesus of Nazareth. While in the tomb, something extraordinary happened to his body: Some kind of radiation emanated from it and actually scorched its image onto the cloth.

This brings me to my concluding point for this section, for it would be difficult indeed *not* to identify this extraordinary event with another extraordinary event that supposedly happened to the same body in that same tomb: the resurrection. Who could read the above description and not think of the resurrection? For this reason, I view the Shroud as a photographic record of the resurrection. This idea is the basis for my speculations about what the Shroud might mean.

II. AN EXPLORATION OF THE MEANING OF THE SHROUD

Combining Shroud research and modern Jesus scholarship

Now I will turn to the issue of the meaning of the Shroud. To address this issue, I want to combine two fields that never seem to get together: Shroud research and modern Jesus scholarship. Both fields have a remarkable affinity in that both are hard-nosed intellectual

inquiries into the real, historical Jesus. Given this similarity, it is rather odd that neither field generally acknowledges the existence of the other. It seems to me that they naturally go together and have an enormous amount to offer each other. As someone who deeply wants to know who Jesus of Nazareth really was, and who wants some intellectually valid ground to stand on, these two fields have been my place of refuge.

Let's look at the source materials that these two fields use. The source materials that Jesus scholars rely on are primarily the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; also, these days many consider the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas to be an important source material). As evidence for the historical Jesus, the Gospels are invaluable yet far from perfect. Modern scholarship has concluded that they were written down decades after Jesus' death by men who never knew him, but instead inherited previous oral and written traditions, which they modified to suit their individual perspectives and the needs of their churches. The end result is less like straight history and more like an archeological site: a large mound of earth through which one must carefully sift for nuggets of truth. To make things even more difficult, we do not even have the original versions of these books. Our earliest manuscripts are copies of copies of copies.

When we set the Shroud (assuming it is authentic) alongside the Gospels, the result is striking. It, too, is a gospel of sorts; it is a record of events from the life of Jesus, a record of what has traditionally been considered the most important events of his life. We might even call it a Passion gospel. Yet what a different kind of record it is. Rather than being words written on parchment, it apparently is a photograph singed onto cloth. Rather than being written down decades later, it seems to be a photo of an actual event from Jesus' own time--1800 years before photography was invented. Rather than being the words of men who never knew Jesus, it appears to be a photo of Jesus himself. And rather than being a copy of a copy of a copy, here we apparently have an original, an article that actually touched his body and is stained with his blood. Finally, the Shroud records an event which the Gospels cannot show us. However central and climactic they consider this event, they can only report on its shockwaves. For the resurrection (if indeed it occurred) was a private event. It happened in the darkness of a sealed tomb. There were no witnesses; no one was there but Jesus.

All of the above points together make the Shroud, if genuine, our most significant piece of evidence about the life of Jesus. It would be far and away the most direct record we have of him. If you were a juror in a court case, which would you trust: a photograph of the actual event, or a book written decades later by men who stood at the end of a long telephone game? Further, the Shroud seems to be our only witness to what was perhaps the central event of Jesus' life.

It all seems too good to be true. How could such a phenomenally good record have landed in our hands by chance? Considerations such as these naturally drive the mind to wonder if the Shroud was not produced by some intention, *on purpose*. This idea may seem so incredible as to not be worth mentioning. Yet I believe I am simply giving voice to thoughts that countless people have had. How many people, I wonder, who have spent time studying the Shroud have not wondered, at least once, if the Shroud was created for a purpose?

In an attempt to uncover that purpose, let me review some of the things we have just discussed: 1) The Shroud is a kind of gospel. 2) As a historical record, the Shroud is in many ways superior to the written Gospels. 3) The Shroud image was produced by Jesus' own body when no one else was around. These three points push my mind to a single possibility: that the

Shroud was intentionally produced by Jesus as his own record for posterity, *as his own gospel*.

Again, such thoughts may seem outlandish, which is probably why in all my reading about the Shroud I do not recall anything like this stated publicly. Yet I also believe that thoughts like these have been floating around in the minds of many who have studied the Shroud. Why not state them openly and see if they still look respectable in the light of day?

I would like to suggest that such thoughts are not only respectable, but quite natural--*in the context of the Shroud*. We must remember the apparent identity of the man we see on the Shroud. Here was a man remembered as a miracle worker, a man renowned for defying the laws of nature, even raising the dead. Could the creation of the Shroud have been just another one of his miracles? If the Shroud really is a photo of the resurrection, then nothing was a stretch for this man. If he actually succeeded in scorching his image onto his own burial cloth, is it so hard to imagine that he did so for a *reason*?

On the foundation of this conjecture--that the Shroud is Jesus' gospel that he intentionally left behind--I will build my search for the meaning of the Shroud of Turin.

If the Shroud is Jesus' gospel, what does it say?

If the Shroud really is Jesus' gospel, what does this gospel say? What is its message? On a purely informational level, the Shroud communicates an enormous amount. It contains a record of nearly everything that happened to Jesus' body from his trial to his resurrection. It depicts a Semitic, probably Jewish, man who was crowned with what were probably thorns, who was scourged by a Roman *flagrum*, who was beaten about the face, who may have carried a crossbeam, walking barefoot along the way. It shows a man who was crucified, with nails driven through his wrists and feet, who died from asphyxiation after seesawing back and forth in order to breathe. This man was pierced with a lance through the chest after death. He was buried according to Jewish practices in a linen shroud, his body placed quite likely on a limestone slab in a Jerusalem tomb. And then something extraordinary happened to that body that caused it to scorch its own image onto its burial shroud.

If all of this is true, the Shroud is proof that such things really happened to Jesus. And that is how it has generally been taken by those who believe in it: as evidence for the crucifixion and perhaps even the resurrection.

Yet this still only tells us that these events happened. The larger question remains: What did these events *mean*?

Rather than just plugging in whatever our particular tradition has taught us, let's take a different approach. Let's look at the events themselves and see what themes we can discern in them. Let's assume that the crucifixion and resurrection really did happen, yet let's also clear our mind of all past interpretations of those events. Let's approach them as freshly as we possibly can and try to draw out their own voice.

When I step back from the events of the crucifixion and resurrection and try to discern their overall theme, the theme that stands out to me is that of a dramatic and miraculous *reversal*. To begin with, we see the most hideous, tragic kind of ending this world can dish out. Death is the most final, irreversible thing in this world. Yet here we see not only death, but an almost inconceivably *horrible* death. The man on the Shroud was publicly beaten, so savagely that the scourging alone might have been enough to cause death. He was apparently mocked, which is

what the crown of thorns must have been for. He was then forced to undergo the most excruciating and publicly humiliating form of execution: crucifixion.

What a horrible end, and how completely and utterly final. Yet, of course, in this story it is not the end. Something unheard of happens to his body. It burns its image onto its own burial cloth. It is resurrected.

What we see, then, is a breathtaking reversal, in which the most horrible death is replaced by a glorious rebirth. The most tragic misfortune is replaced by untold blessing. The depths of earthly horror give way to a wonder that transcends earthly laws. An irrevocable end becomes a miraculous beginning.

We see this theme of reversal not only in the events communicated by the Shroud, but also in the Shroud itself. As a burial cloth, the Shroud is the very symbol of the finality of death. A body wrapped in a shroud is symbolically enveloped by death. How symbolic, then, that on this very cloth the light of the resurrection has apparently emblazoned its imprint. The image of rebirth has imprinted itself onto the very symbol of death. What better way to symbolize life triumphing over death?

Looking to the teachings of Jesus

The idea of miraculous reversal, however, does not tell us enough. The theme is too vague. Nor does it tell us anything new. The crucifixion and resurrection have always been viewed as miraculous life replacing gruesome death. The question is: What is the specific meaning of this reversal?

Better yet, the real question is: What meaning did *Jesus himself* see in this reversal? That is what we really want to know. To answer this question there is only one place for us to look. We must look to Jesus' teachings. If he was trying to say something with the miraculous reversal recorded on the Shroud, we would expect it to be consistent with what he said during his life. Can we realistically imagine that he spent his ministry trying to convey a certain message, and then with his grand finale tried to convey something else?

However, we cannot take his teachings as recorded in the Gospels at face value. Here is where we must bring in the findings of modern Jesus scholarship. Over the last two centuries this scholarship has conclusively shown that only a portion of the teachings in the Gospels can be realistically traced back to Jesus himself. The rest come from the Judaism that preceded him, from the church that followed him, from common lore, or from other sources. If we interpret Jesus' grand finale in light of teachings he didn't teach, we are sure to miss the meaning he actually intended.

How can we tell which teachings come from Jesus himself? Just as we need the help of trained scientists to sift the true from the false in the Shroud, so we need the help of trained scholars to sift the authentic from the inauthentic in Jesus' teachings. In both realms, we must avail ourselves of the accumulated knowledge of decades of expert intellectual investigation.

Therefore, I will draw upon only those teachings that have been judged by scholars to be authentically from Jesus. For this, I will use the findings of the Jesus Seminar, made famous by the media for voting with colored beads on the sayings of Jesus. Drawing upon a group of scholars that was able (because of their voting) to speak with a group voice seems preferable to me to relying upon a single scholar, or upon my own subjective sense of what scholars in general

think. The Jesus Seminar released the results of their voting a few years back in *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). In this book, they color-code each saying. Red means that in their assessment "Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it." Pink means "Jesus probably said something like this"; while down on the other end, black means "Jesus did not say this." In *The Five Gospels* they also put out their own translation of the Gospels, which they call the Scholar's Version. This is the version I will be quoting from.

My plan is to take sayings judged authentic (red or pink) by the Jesus Seminar and see if we can find anything that might throw light on the meaning of the events recorded on the Shroud.⁴ We will look for any sayings that remind us of the events of the crucifixion and resurrection, especially for any that echo the theme of miraculous reversal.

As we search the ninety-one sayings judged authentic by the Jesus Seminar, one thing immediately strikes us. None of these sayings speak about the atoning power of Jesus' death. There is a very important reason for this. For many decades now, the consensus of mainstream biblical scholarship has been that Jesus did *not* teach that he was going to die as a ransom for mankind's sins (as, for instance, he seems to in Mark 10:45 and Matthew 20:28). The few sayings that spoke of this have long been considered to be the creation of the primitive Christian church. Now it may be that Jesus' death really was payment for the sins of the world. It may be that Jesus himself secretly thought this. But the weight of modern scholarship has concluded that he never said so.

Even though none of the authentic sayings of Jesus speak of Jesus' death as an atonement for sin, we are not at a loss. There are many sayings that are strikingly reminiscent of the events of the crucifixion and resurrection. It is to them we turn now. They will be our guide in understanding what Jesus was perhaps trying to say with his final events and with his burial shroud.

Turning the other cheek

Our first group of sayings is from the Sermon on the Mount:

Don't react violently against the one who is evil:

When someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well.

When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your coat along with it.

Further, when anyone conscripts you for one mile, go an extra mile. (Matt 5:39-41)

This trio of sayings about not resisting evil received the highest votes from the Jesus Seminar of any cluster of sayings. This trio contains the first, second, and fourth highest-rated sayings among all the sayings of Jesus. These words, then, are perhaps the most certain teachings we have from Jesus.

Let's look first at the meaning of these sayings, especially given their cultural context. Being struck on the right cheek implies that you were hit with the back of the hand. In Jesus' culture, this was considered twice as insulting as being slapped with the palm. Yet, in the face of

this apparent humiliation, you do not strike back or even defend yourself. You offer your attacker the other cheek as well. You give him the opportunity to hit you again.

When someone wants to take your shirt, you not only let him take it, you offer him your coat, too. The radical nature of this saying, which tends to be lost on modern ears, would have been immediately recognized by Jesus' hearers. Since they lived in a two-garment society, following this saying would have left them naked.

Conscripting you for one mile refers to a Roman soldier's right to impress local citizens into service. You can imagine how such an act would have activated all of a Jew's anger about Roman oppression of his people. Yet Jesus counselled his fellow Jews not only to go along with it, but to give twice as much as was asked.

In all three cases, someone is carrying out some kind of aggression against you, something that will hurt or deprive you. The normal response would be to protect yourself somehow, to resist this rude incursion. Yet, following Jesus' teaching, you see the situation from an entirely different perspective. You display an amazing freedom from the need to protect yourself. Rather than seeing yourself being forcibly attacked and taken from, you see yourself faced with an opportunity to give. Rather than accepting the role of victim, you assume the role of giver. So wholeheartedly do you assume this role that you freely give the other what he wanted to take, and then "go the extra mile" and give him *twice* as much.

In other words, even in the midst of being attacked, your concern is for your attacker, not for yourself. This idea is extremely similar to another saying voted red by the Jesus Seminar:

Love your enemies (Luke 6:27).

These sayings have disturbed and puzzled us for centuries. They are just too extreme. Though they inspire us, they also deeply trouble us. We have a knee-jerk reaction of wanting to distance ourselves from them, to consign them to some dusty roster of lofty ideas that are never acted out. For this reason, there has been a long history of attempts to water these sayings down or limit their application. We find them so frightening because we see exactly where they are taking us. If we carry them out we may well find ourselves beaten up, naked, and taken advantage of by soldiers.

Well, of course, this is precisely what happened to Jesus. He was beaten up, stripped naked, and mistreated by soldiers. If the Gospels are correct and he walked into this experience willingly and without offering resistance, then he actually lived out his own radical teachings.

The lilies of the field

Let's move on to another group of sayings:

That's why I tell you: Don't fret about your life--what you're going to eat and drink--or about your body--what you're going to wear. There is more to living than food and clothing, isn't there? Take a look at the birds of the sky: they don't plant or harvest, or gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You're worth more than they, aren't you? Can any of you add one hour to life by fretting about it? Why worry about clothes? Notice how the wild lilies grow: they

don't slave and they never spin. Yet let me tell you, even Solomon at the height of his glory was never decked out like one of them. If God dresses up the grass in the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into an oven, won't God care for you even more, you who don't take anything for granted? (Matt 6:25-30)

This whole complex was voted pink by the Jesus Seminar, which means "Jesus probably said something like this." The message of this complex is simple: Don't worry about taking care of your bodily needs, your need for food, drink, and clothing. God will take care of you just as He does the birds and the flowers. You can be as carefree as they are, resting on His care.

Notice how similar the sentiment is to our first cluster of sayings. There we were told to not protect ourselves from injury, nakedness, and servitude. Here we are asked to not protect ourselves from hunger and, once again, nakedness. In both there is a note of remarkable freedom from our normal obsession with self-preservation. Now, however, we are told *why* we can let go this obsession and still be safe. We don't need to make sure our needs get taken care of because our Father will take care of them for us.

Like the earlier teachings about going the extra mile, these teachings have usually been taken as a wonderful sentiment yet too hard to actually live--and understandably so. They call for a revolution in how we approach life. Is not each of our days an exercise in taking care of our personal needs, and the needs of those we are responsible for? If we stop caring for our needs, what will happen? Will our heavenly Father *really* step in and care for us? This notion may be wonderful, but is it workable?

Again, however, the spirit of these teachings appears to be strikingly reflected in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. If the Gospels are right and Jesus walked through the crucifixion defenselessly, then here we have a dramatic example of someone refusing to protect his body--from nakedness, injury, and death. Jesus did exactly what he taught: He didn't fret about his life or about his body. And just as he taught, God cared for him even more than for the lilies of the field and the birds of the sky. If we believe the Gospels and the apparent testimony of the Shroud, God raised him to a new life, one that transcended normal limitations.

It is not difficult to see these events as a bold acting out of his own advice. Here again we see his teachings mirrored in the final events of his life.

Blessed are the poor

The following complex of sayings is drawn from the famous beatitudes. In the Scholar's Version, however, the traditional "blessed are" has been replaced by a word that more closely captures the original sense of the Greek: "congratulations."

Congratulations, you poor!
God's domain belongs to you.
Congratulations, you hungry!
You will have a feast.
Congratulations, you who weep now!
You will laugh. (Luke 6:20-21)

Luke's version of these beatitudes garnered a red vote from the Jesus Seminar. Matthew, on the other hand, has made significant changes, which caused the Seminar to rate his version less highly. Matthew has changed "the poor" to "the poor in spirit," and the "hungry" to "those who hunger and thirst for justice." A small difference in words, but a great difference in meaning. Matthew has changed what were originally social and economic conditions to religious virtues. People who were just plain old poor and hungry are now poor *in spirit* and hungering *for righteousness*.

This change takes the radical edge off of what scholars believe to be Jesus' original teaching. Jesus was congratulating the poor, the hungry, and the weeping. What an odd thing! To congratulate people is to express pleasure over their good fortune. How, then, can you congratulate them for their *bad* fortune? This very reversal of conventional values is a mark of the authentic Jesus, but what on earth did he mean?

To get the meaning of these beatitudes, imagine they are being said to you directly. Imagine that you are poor (this may not take much imagination), and someone says to you, "Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you." Now imagine that you are skin and bones from hunger, and someone says, "Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast." Finally, imagine a time that you were depressed or grieving, and hear someone telling you, "Congratulations, you who weep now! You will laugh."

If you actually did this thought experiment, I assume you felt the tremendous comfort and upliftment that lies in these words. Normally, bad fortune comes with a corresponding sense of shame and degradation. These beatitudes have the effect of wiping that away. You feel like someone is seeing you as totally dignified and deserving, regardless of the miserable hand you have been dealt. And because you are dignified and deserving, this someone is going to make sure that your circumstances are reversed, that you are given something more befitting of your true worth. This "someone," of course, is God. He is the implied agent in these beatitudes. He is the one who has granted His kingdom to the poor, who has prepared a feast for the hungry and laughter for the weeping. There is no implication that He has done this because they have lived up to some religious virtue or passed some spiritual test. It sounds like He simply cherishes His children and wants to alleviate their suffering.

Here we see some of the same themes as in our previous sayings. As in the "turn the other cheek" cluster, there is a low value placed on making sure you are treated right by the world. So you get smacked around? So you are poverty-stricken? That's all right. And the reason it's all right is the same as in the "lilies of the field" cluster: God will take care of you. It's all right if the world stomps on you; God will lift you up and give you His treasure.

Here is where these beatitudes intersect so well with the events recorded on the Shroud. These sayings contain the same theme of miraculous reversal that we saw in the crucifixion and resurrection, the same theme we were hoping to find in the teachings of Jesus. In this light, we might even invent a new beatitude, one that shows how perfectly the spirit of the beatitudes are reflected in the crucifixion and resurrection:

Congratulations, you who are crucified!
God will raise you to new life.

So again we see a teaching which looks unrealistically extreme reflected in the events of the crucifixion and resurrection. If these events really happened as the Gospels report and as the Shroud suggests, then Jesus demonstrated that his teachings do in fact work on the stage of real life.

Forfeiting life to preserve it

One final saying:

Whoever tries to hang on to life will forfeit it, but whoever forfeits life will preserve it. (Luke 17:33)

The Jesus Seminar voted this one pink, which again means "Jesus probably said something like this." I actually like another translation of this saying even better. This one comes from a reconstruction of the Sayings Gospel Q, a hypothetical collection of sayings that scholars believe was drawn upon by both Matthew and Luke. Here, the editors of *The Lost Gospel Q* (Marcus Borg, consulting editor. Berkeley, California: Ulysses Press, 1996) attempt to capture the saying in Q that was the common source behind Luke 17:33 and Matthew 10:39:

Those who grasp and clutch at self will lose it. Those who let go of self and follow me will find it. (Q58)

Hanging on to life, grasping and clutching at self--haven't these themes run through all the sayings we have examined? "Don't try to hang on to your life" sounds like "don't worry about taking care of your body" and "don't defend yourself from attack." Jesus seems to be repeatedly taking aim at our pervasive obsession with our self. Our whole lives are devoted to managing our world so that this self is safe and fed and clothed, is treated with honor and respect, and is smiled upon by the winds of fortune. Jesus is consistently critical of this preoccupation, implying that it disregards the love of God and precludes loving our fellow humans.

The above saying goes even further. It says that this mode of being defeats its own goals. The very effort to preserve our life means that we somehow become dead. The very act of clutching after our self means that we in some sense lose identity. Only by letting go of this life, this self, only by passing into a wider embrace that includes God and all humanity can we know true life, true selfhood.

Of all the sayings we have examined, this one is the easiest to see reflected in the crucifixion and resurrection. The saying almost seems made to describe those events. Or perhaps it is the other way around: Perhaps the events were arranged to demonstrate the saying.

A photo of a teaching demonstration

Now we can weave our various threads into a conclusion. We have looked at various sayings from the Gospels. These sayings not only have a strong claim to tracing back to the historical Jesus, they constitute a great deal of the core of his authentic teachings. Among our sayings were the Jesus Seminar's five highest-rated sayings, and seven of their top eleven. There is little question that in contemplating these sayings we are standing right before the historical

Jesus.

These sayings truly bear the stamp of Jesus. Every one of them is so radical as to be disturbing. They are sayings we haven't known what to do with since the day they were uttered. They ask so much of us that we hesitate to take them literally.

Yet all of these sayings we found strikingly reflected in the crucifixion and resurrection. The fit was simply uncanny, which makes one wonder if the fit was intentional. Is it possible that in these events Jesus was intentionally staging a demonstration of his own teachings?

Jesus was teaching a radical message. He must have known that his hearers would tend to avoid its radical thrust. He must have known that they would do their best to wriggle out of its extreme challenge. How could he get his message to really penetrate their minds and hearts? One way is that he could tell stories, since truths put in story-form tend to go in more deeply. And that, of course, is what he did. One of the most certain things we know about Jesus is that he was a teller of parables. He placed his message in stories that often contained a shocking reversal, one that turned normal expectations upside-down.

We also know that he went beyond *telling* parables. Scholars tell us that many of his actions were intended as acted-out parables--what I have heard called *parabolic actions*. They were actions that were also teachings. One might also call such actions *teaching demonstrations*. If telling a truth-filled story was more effective than just stating a concept, then living out such a story would be more effective still.

What better plan, then, than for him to apply all this on a dramatic and unforgettable scale. My hypothesis is that Jesus took his most radical teachings and made the end of his own earthly life a demonstration of them, on a very public stage in the most extreme form one could imagine. Into this real-life parable he wove some of the most potent elements of the human drama: betrayal, abandonment, humiliation, injustice, apparent failure of mission, torture, death--all presented in a public theater filled with an angry mob. And just like his spoken parables, this story ended with a shocking reversal that overturned our usual expectations.

Seen aright, this teaching demonstration proved that his radical teachings really could be lived out. It showed that they actually worked on the stage of real life, no matter how extreme the situation, no matter how high the stakes. Now they would be much harder to squirm out of. Now we could no longer say that he taught lofty ideals that simply wouldn't work in real life. Now we would really have to consider the truth of what he taught.

Here is where the Shroud comes in. If a story is better than a mere idea, and a *true* story even better, then wouldn't a *photograph* of that true story be the perfect thing? If you were Jesus and were going to stage a final demonstration which proved that your teaching really works, wouldn't you ideally want photographic proof which showed that that demonstration really *occurred*? And wouldn't that photograph be the ideal gospel to leave behind you, the perfect way to convey everything you stood for?

That is my hypothesis of what the Shroud of Turin means. I see it as Jesus' own gospel, his way of communicating to posterity the same message he taught during his life. Of course, this hypothesis can never be proven. It rests on a great many unprovable conjectures. Yet so do all of our portraits of this particular figure. All we have are scattered pieces of evidence about who Jesus was, like fragments of an ancient scroll. No matter how we put those fragments together, doing so requires a great deal of conjecture in order to fill in the gaps. As a result, we must

evaluate different portraits of Jesus based not on how provable they are--for none of them are--but based on our sense of how sound the whole picture is. Does this picture seem to assemble all the pieces so that they really fit together? Does it draw all of the fragments into a satisfying unity? And does that unity ring some bell of truth within us? Much of this, of course, will be determined by our worldview. We will inevitably ask ourselves: Does this picture make sense within my worldview?

Does the Shroud work as a gospel?

There is a kind of test we can perform to evaluate this hypothesis: Does the Shroud function well as this kind of gospel? Is it an effective communicator of Jesus' teachings? If it is, that would provide some tentative support for this hypothesis. If it isn't, that would weigh heavily against this hypothesis.

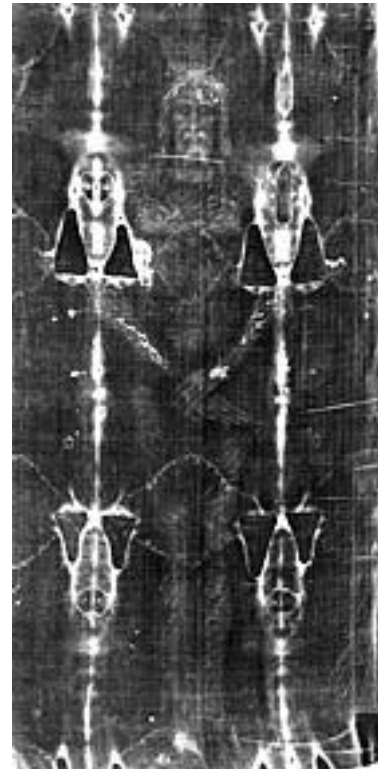
Look at the picture of the Shroud that accompanies this article. It is a photographic negative of the front view of the man on the Shroud. First we must understand what we are looking at. Since this photo is a negative of the Shroud itself, the dark background on it is actually the light-colored linen of the Shroud. The figure in the middle is, in real life, composed of subtle tones of brown. The white blotches found on the figure--for instance on the forearms and hair--are bloodstains. And the white columns that stand on either side of the figure are burn marks from a 1532 fire.

Now, as you look at it, try to see the elements of what I earlier called "miraculous reversal." See first the elements of death. Being a burial shroud, the cloth itself symbolizes death. So do the various wounds and bloodstains. Notice the apparently broken nose and the scourge marks that pepper the legs and torso. Notice also the blood flowing from the wrists and along the forearms, the blood on the right foot, the blood on the hair and forehead, and a large blood flow under the right pectoral muscle. All of these elements together add up to one thing: You are looking at a picture of death.

Yet, as I have claimed, you are also looking at a picture of rebirth, of resurrection. Try to see that element there now. To aid this process, I would like to quote Ian Wilson, one of the best-known writers on the Shroud:

In the darkness of the Jerusalem tomb the dead body of Jesus lay, unwashed, covered in blood, on a stone slab. Suddenly there is a burst of mysterious power from it. In that instant the...image...of the body becomes indelibly fused onto the cloth, preserving for posterity a literal "snapshot" of the Resurrection.⁵

Therefore, as you look on the almost glowing image of the man on the Shroud, try to see



it as a snapshot of this "burst of mysterious power." In fact, in this negative photo of the Shroud, we might have something fairly close to how the event actually looked. If the Shroud itself is a negative, then a negative of it would yield a *positive*. Realize, then, that this body you see glowing with light in the darkness is perhaps roughly how the scene looked when the Shroud image was made. You might even imagine, as you look on the Shroud, that you are inside the darkened tomb at the moment of the resurrection, seeing the body of Jesus shining through the fabric of his burial shroud.

Now, while looking at the Shroud and seeing it as a picture of miraculous reversal from death to rebirth, read the teachings I have included below. The first four clusters are based on the sayings we examined, adapted so as to more obviously fit the crucifixion and resurrection. The last one is my attempt to weave all four into a unified message. My suggestion is that you read one line and then look at the Shroud, trying to see the meaning of that line *on* the Shroud. Then repeat this procedure with the next line, and so on.

Don't respond in kind when you are attacked.

When someone slaps you on the face, go ahead, let him.

(Notice the swollen right cheek, as well as swollen nose, on the man on the Shroud.)

When someone strips you naked, what do you care?

(Notice that the figure is indeed nude.)

When soldiers make you walk to your own death, do it willingly.

You are not the victim being forcibly taken from.

You are in a position to graciously give, to love your enemies.

Don't fret about your life and your body, even under the most extreme threats.

You can be as carefree as the lilies of the field and the birds of the sky.

Just as God cares for them, so will He care for you even more.

(See the sign of God's care in the light shining from this body.)

Congratulations, you who are crucified!

God will raise you to new life.

Therefore, don't try to hang on to your life.

If you do, you will lose life in the true sense.

Instead, give up your life as you know it

And it will be preserved for you in God.

You will know true life.

You can let go of your preoccupation with yourself.

You can be free of your obsession with protecting yourself and preserving your little life.

Even while being attacked, your concern can be for your attackers, not yourself.

You can be extravagant in your love for them because God is extravagant in His love for you.

He will take care of you, so you can be blithely unconcerned with how the world treats you.

Even from the depths of worldly misfortune, He will raise you into new and miraculous life.

I hope your experience of this exercise was similar to mine. For me, the Shroud does function extremely well as this kind of gospel; it *is* an effective communicator of these truths. In fact, I find this exercise to be so moving and so edifying that, even though I can't be sure the Shroud was intended to mean this, I choose to let it mean this to me.

Implications for who Jesus was

This interpretation of the Shroud, even if correct, raises many questions. If he was showing that this radical message really could be lived out, what does that mean for us? *He* may have lived this message, but how do *we*? Do we have to go out and get ourselves killed? And even if we don't take it that far, if we just embody this message in smaller ways, will we actually *experience* God's abiding care? Or will we just feel stomped on by the world? For me perhaps the most insistent question is: How do we achieve the state of mind that Jesus was in? I doubt that following him is simply a matter of imitating the behaviors that he spoke of and performed. Or else we *will* feel stomped on, and probably abandoned by God as well. One could only perform such behaviors *and truly mean* them in a state of great love. How do we reach that state? How do we let the mind that was in Jesus be in us?

Yet even though this interpretation of the Shroud raises some difficult questions, it may solve some other, equally difficult ones. For, as you may have noticed, it implies a whole portrait of Jesus. Traditionally, there has been a rather uncomfortable tension between two different Jesuses. There was the great teacher who walked the earth and taught in sayings and parables. And there was the supernatural Son of God who died for our sins and rose on the third day. In our traditional view of Jesus, one has eclipsed the other. The supernatural savior has overshadowed and nearly blotted out the radical teacher, without resolving the tension between the two. The teacher is still there, dangling off to the side by himself, unable to be harmonized with the supernatural savior that looms in the foreground.

This view of the Shroud reverses that picture. It raises the teacher to preeminence *and* resolves the tension between the two figures. It says that at the end of his life Jesus did not suddenly switch modes from teacher to supernatural savior. Rather, he was the teacher right until the end. That end, in fact, was the teacher at his zenith, at his most challenging and most impactful. This view, however, *does* contain elements of the supernatural savior image. It affirms that Jesus' death was arranged for a very important purpose and was followed by a miraculous resurrection. But it places those events under the umbrella of his teaching function. Rather than seeing them as a ritual transaction with God in which our sins were paid for, it claims that they were a final performance of his message, a lived-out parable designed to instill his teachings as deeply as possible into our minds and hearts.

Maybe this is who Jesus really was, a teacher of the most powerful kind, whose vision challenges us to our very core. Maybe he staged his exit from this world as a physical demonstration of his extreme, apparently unrealistic teachings. And maybe, just maybe, the Shroud of Turin is the gospel he left us, as photographic proof that everything he said was absolutely true.

1. Bucklin, Robert. 1961. "The Medical Aspects of the Crucifixion of Christ." *Sindon*, December, p. 5.
2. Ian Wilson, *The Blood and the Shroud*, New York: The Free Press, 1998, p. 54-55.
3. Ian Wilson, *The Blood and the Shroud*, New York: The Free Press, 1998, pp. 229-231.
4. I should mention that the Jesus Seminar itself has voted that the events recorded on the Shroud by and large did not happen (see Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1998). Though they believe that Jesus was crucified, they concluded that detailed information about the crucifixion (such as the crowning with thorns and the piercing in the side) is the result of early Christians filling out the bare fact of his crucifixion with Old Testament prophecies. They also conclude that the resurrection did not occur. Though I still highly value their work, their negative findings in this area are one of the reasons that I believe that Jesus scholarship could greatly benefit from Shroud research. If I don't agree with their findings on the death and resurrection of Jesus, why would I use their findings on the teachings of Jesus? First, I tend to see biases in their work that I believe come *less* into play in relation to Jesus' teachings. Second, since they are on the skeptical side, if they say that something in the Gospels really *was* said by Jesus, they are probably right.
5. Ian Wilson, *The Shroud of Turin*. New York: Doubleday, 1978, p. 211.