

A Brief Review of the Recent CNN Documentary and Further Comments on the Medieval Photograph Theory

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I personally hate to write reviews of television programs and usually leave them for others to do, but after weeks of media hype and the controversy created after this program aired, I felt compelled to write a brief review of CNN's latest "docudrama" on the Shroud of Turin, which premiered Sunday, March 1, 2015, as the first episode in their six part "Finding Jesus" series. For the sake of transparency, I should first disclose that STERA, Inc. was paid a modest licensing fee by the producers for the use of thirteen of our photographs in the program. However, we had absolutely no involvement in the content itself.

I felt compelled to write this review because of the avalanche of e-mails and phone calls I received starting before the program even ended and which continued until today! But most importantly, because once again the so-called proto-photography theory was pulled out and dusted off to confuse the issue of the Shroud even further, and that topic happens to be well within my own area of expertise. But more about that later. First, let's start with the program itself.

My first impression was that the program's content was more superficial than the image on the Shroud! Considerable screen time was spent showing us historical reenactments of scenes of the Passion (and even those were not necessarily accurate). I am sure this was done for dramatic effect, but it took far more time than was necessary and consequently, left little time to answer the more important questions about the Shroud. The program would have undoubtedly been much better if the producers had included less drama and more documentary. There were also a number of errors in the discussion of the historical, scientific, medical and forensic evidence, but that was not really a surprise to me. See my comments on the general lack of accuracy in Shroud documentaries, which I posted on the [Late Breaking Website News](#) page and in the comments on our [Facebook](#) page *before* the program aired.

It was also interesting to see who the producers considered to be Shroud "experts." It was good to see a few familiar faces, like Dr. John Jackson and Mark Guscini, who both appear in the program and who are well known as credible Shroud scholars. (Although Russ Breault was originally interviewed for the program, his comments were not included in the final edited version). However, most of the other "experts" were unfamiliar to me and I could find no evidence that any of them ever actually studied the Shroud themselves. Unfortunately, that happens frequently in Shroud documentaries.

Even more frustrating, when discussing the radiocarbon dating, absolutely no mention was made by *anyone* of the credible scientific data that exists indicating the single sample chosen for dating was anomalous and not necessarily representative of the entire Shroud. Although that theory is controversial and not accepted by everyone, it was in fact the first research to challenge the radiocarbon dating in the peer-reviewed scientific literature. Simply ignoring it does a great disservice to those who dedicated themselves to doing credible scientific research on the Shroud and it certainly makes it more difficult for those who are not as well versed to understand what we truly know. Based on all the e-mails and calls I received, its absence was certainly obvious to most of the viewers of this website, since that was the question they asked me the most.

But the most frustrating part of the program for me was the considerable time spent resurrecting the long ago discarded proto-photography theory presented by South African art historian Nicholas Allen, who claims the Shroud is a medieval photograph. In 2000, I presented a paper at the Sindone 2000 Shroud Conference in Orvieto, Italy, titled, "[Is The Shroud of Turin a Medieval Photograph? A Critical Examination of the Theory](#)" that addressed Allen's conclusions directly and presented a side-by-side comparison of his results to the image on the Shroud (something Allen never did). I then pointed out the dramatic differences between the two images and you can see them for yourself at the above link.

In the new CNN program, Allen used his medieval techniques to create a negative photographic image on a sheet of linen and claimed his results had exactly the same properties as the Shroud. He apparently does not understand that when you claim you have duplicated the Shroud image, you are obligated to match ALL of the chemical and physical properties of the Shroud. Not just one or two.

Allen applied light sensitive silver salts to a linen sheet (in liquid form so they soaked into the cloth) and exposed this "film" using a camera obscura and a medieval lens. Each exposure took 3 or 4 days so he used a statue as his model. He never addressed the issue of decomposition that a body would undergo while hanging in front of his camera obscura for days on end in the bright sun. He then applied an interesting choice of chemicals to "fix" the image and make it permanent on the cloth: his own urine! (The shroud of urine)? And he claimed that this treatment removed ALL of the silver on the cloth.

I agree that the uric acid and ammonia in urine could remove some of the unused silver, but significant silver would remain in all the image areas since the silver is what creates a photographic image in the first place! And without doubt, there would also be some silver trapped deep within the weave of the cloth that could never be removed. When STURP performed their spectral analysis on the Shroud in 1978, silver was one of the elements they were looking for. Yet absolutely no silver was found anywhere on the Shroud. That should have been the end of it, but it wasn't.

Allen never really addressed the bloodstains on the Shroud and simply dismissed them as painted onto the cloth after the image was produced. He completely ignores the fact that the medical and forensic experts that have studied the Shroud directly state the bloodstains are *not* painted on and soaked into the cloth in a natural manner. They concluded that the bloodstains are forensically accurate and the result of direct contact with a human body. Finally, STURP observed that no image appears under the bloodstains on the Shroud, implying that they were on the cloth before the image was formed and possibly inhibited image formation. So our imaginary medieval photographer would have to put forensically accurate bloodstains onto his cloth *before* creating the image!

After devoting a good portion of screen time to demonstrating Allen's theory, there followed a very brief rebuttal by a gentleman who suggested that if photography were truly a medieval invention, where are all the other medieval photographs? There would be lots of them. That is a correct and fair statement, but still a rather weak rebuttal to the lengthy and detailed on-camera demonstration afforded Allen. In the end, the producers probably included this theory because it is highly visual in its own right so it makes for interesting television. It apparently didn't matter to them that there is strong scientific evidence against it and that virtually none of that evidence was presented in the program.

Unfortunately, what could have been a truly informative program became just another “show,” heavy on the dramatics and very light on content. Frankly, it doesn’t give me much confidence in the five remaining upcoming programs in the series. Yet in spite of all these shortcomings, the program still garnered a very large audience and the highest ratings of any network in its time slot. That translates to a lot of people that received inaccurate information about the Shroud of Turin!

Finally, I once again feel obliged to remind everyone that television documentaries about the Shroud of Turin are rarely satisfying to those who know anything about it and highly misleading to those who don’t. They should be regarded first as entertainment, not science, and are certainly not the best place to obtain accurate information about the Shroud. Consider your sources carefully and do some homework before drawing your own conclusions.