

WAS THE SHROUD THE TABLECLOTH OF THE LAST SUPPER?

U.S. physicist Dr. John Jackson (well-remembered, with Dr. Eric Jumper, for his researches on the Shroud's 3D properties), has recently remarried, his new wife Rebecca being a Jewish-born convert both to Roman Catholicism and to his belief in the Shroud's authenticity. As Rebecca Jackson's own contribution to Shroud studies, she has recently hit headlines in the USA arguing that prior to Jesus's crucifixion the Shroud may have been used as the tablecloth of the Last Supper.

In Rebecca Jackson's own words: 'Orthodox Jews usually get a new tablecloth for Passover. Cloths containing leaven or crumbs cannot be used, and they would not serve the meal on a bare table. Jesus was an important guest. If the archbishop were coming to dinner, I would buy a new cloth.' Jesus had to be buried before the Sabbath, and 'it's unlikely that Joseph of Arimathea would have been able to seek an audience with Pilate and buy a suitable cloth for burial in the scant hours between Jesus's death and burial. They would have had to use what was available to them. Why wouldn't they use the tablecloth? Joseph probably said 'What about the tablecloth?'

Rebecca Jackson's views are not, however, shared by the highly respected Jewish scholar Rabbi Samson H. Levey, Emeritus Professor of Rabbinics and Jewish Religious Thought at the Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles. In a letter to Isabel Piczek on April 14, Levey wrote:

I. To get a clear picture of Jewish life and practice during the first two centuries C.E. we must rely on the primary Tannaitic sources, namely the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the other Tannaitic passages dispersed throughout the Talmudim of Babylon (Bavli) and of the Land of Israel (Yerushalmi).

During this period, a table was used for meals ... We find no evidence that the Jewish people used different tables for the Sabbath and festivals, including Passover, than they ordinarily used; although they probably subjected it to a thorough cleaning, same as the rest of the house, to clear away the leaven immediately before (Mishnah, Pesachim, Ch. I et passim).

What did the table look like? It had a square top (sometimes also a square bottom), usually made of wood, (Mishnah Kelim 16:1), pottery (Mishnah Kelim 2:3); overlaid with marble (ibid 22:1). It usually had three legs (ibid 22:2), and could accommodate three or four people. For larger groups, such as weddings, long boards were used (called *dahavanot* (Tosefta Kelim, Baba Metzia, 5:3).

II. Table Cover: Food was ordinarily eaten off the bare table top (Bavli, Baba Batra 57b), and only the intellectual elite seem to have used a cloth to cover part of the small table for use as napkins to wipe their lips after eating (ibid). According to Maimonides, the Mishnah refers to a leather table covering (*skortia*), probably designed to protect the table from the elements (Mishnah Kelim 16:4). The only explicit reference to 'a cover for tables' (Mishnah Makshirin 5:8) is explained as a sheet spread over the food (not the bare table) to protect it from flies and other insects. (M. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, vol. II, p.1396, col. 1, bot. sub *Kesiyah*. Cf. P. Blackman, *Mishnah VI*, 682).

III. A sheet of any cloth, including a mixture of materials (*shatnez*), may be used as a shroud (Mishnah Kilayim 9:4). It is unlikely that one would be buried in an unclean sheet. The Tannaitic principle is expressed by Rabbi Meir (second century), that at the Resurrection the dead will arise wearing the same garments in which they were interred, and unclean raiment would be a disgrace (Bavli Sanhedrin 90b). Rabban Gamaliel (first century) instituted the use of a plain linen shroud for everyone (Bavli Moed Katan 27b. Cf. Matthew 27:59).