

Theological Reflections prompted by Thomas de Wesselow's *The Sign*

By Andrew Willie

Apart from a detailed, sympathetic Review by Ian Wilson in the seventy fifth number of the B.S.T.S. Newsletter, reviews I have seen of Thomas de Wesselow's book have either summarised its contents, but begged every question as to their real worth; or attacked the book quite hysterically for the way it deals with the gospels and basic Christian beliefs. De Wesselow argues eloquently as an art historian for the genuineness of the Shroud but his treatment of the Gospel and related matters reveal him as "post-Christian." Though he believes that the Shroud is that of Jesus, he does not believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. The resultant confusion is the reason for the mixed reviews that he has had. Behind his book is a self-questioning experience he had lying on the grass in his Cambridge garden, early in the summer of 2004 and which he describes as a novelist rather than an academic might. ".....if the shroud is authentic, why do none of the gospels mention its discovery in the empty tomb? And then it struck me: maybe they do. Maybe the Gospels contain descriptions of the Shroud that no-one has recognised as such since the days of the apostles, because it appears in their legendary narratives not as an image but as a supernatural person. Seized by this stunning thought, I leapt from the grass and bounded indoors to check the biblical stories of the empty tomb." [p.192f.]

De Wesselow had had an epiphany not so much of God as of the Holy Shroud. That said, his book inevitably leads the reader to ask God-centred, religious questions. These concern, firstly, the nature and authority of Canonical Scripture and its witness; secondly, the nature of Jesus's resurrection; and, thirdly, as we reflect on the resurrection event, the precise nature of the person to whom it is said to have occurred. Our answers to these questions inform our Christian belief or lack of it and lead to our various opinions of the Shroud and/or its significance. Dismissal of Christian claims on these questions seems to have lain behind Professor Edward Hall's failure to admit that the carbon dating of the Shroud to the Middle Ages posed more questions than it answered. With my background, trained in History and Theology and as a believing Christian and Anglican priest, my views and approach are very different from those of Hall the atheist scientist and different too from those of de Wesselow, the art historian sceptic - on canonical scripture, and our use of it, on the nature of the resurrection and the nature of the Christ. These are the matters which this article explores.

On the Nature and authority of the Canon of Scripture and its Witness

The canon of scripture evolved. It was, however, fixed as far as the Gospels were concerned by the middle of the second century and the Canonical Gospels themselves variously achieved final basic form [with a very little subsequent alteration] between 50 and 100 A.D. Many other gospels and similar works grew up in the next fifty years. Wesselow gives the impression that the early Church was committed to censorship, since it is quite clear that many gospels were lost, sometimes because of their lack of orthodoxy. However, many other

things were lost, which in no way challenged orthodoxy and which would have been of enormous use to modern scholars. Among these are the actual sermons which Peter preached and Mark, as his interpreter, translated to form the basis of his Gospel; “Q”, the sayings source used by Matthew and Luke [though something similar survives in the Gnostic “Gospel of Thomas”]; the different sources known as “M” and “L” which respectively Matthew and Luke used; the original of the wonderful “I am” sermons which John guided by the Holy Spirit, who acted as “Advocate” giving him the words, has Jesus preach in his Gospel; the “Book of Signs” John also uses, which explores Jesus’ key and important miracles; and Tatian’s “Diatessaron” dating from c. 175, a useful conflation and harmonisation of all four Gospels. All these are missing, because the early Church lacked the imagination to see itself as providing an archive for modern scholars, who naturally have had a field day in attempting to reconstruct the missing material! Some of it may indeed never have been written down until its redaction as Gospel, being part of an oral tradition.

De Wesselow, in his attack on a censoring Church, blames the early Christians for burning down the library at Alexandria. However, there were four different acts of arson over many centuries and on four different libraries. Christians were regrettably responsible for one, which also involved Pagan Temples, but not the other three. Therefore, though what De Wesselow writes is true, it lacks balance. Such a lack of balance feeds the hysteria of those who would totally reject his book.

In his festal letter 39, Athanasius, [296-373] Bishop of Alexandria and a strong defender of Orthodoxy, lists the New Testament canon as we know it, together with other books: some of these were from the Old Testament; some were early Christian writings from outside the New Testament, but regarded as edifying for new converts. Athanasius adds,

“And nevertheless, beloved.....there is nowhere listed the secret writings, but they are a device of heretics, who write them when they will, furnishing them with dates and adding them, that bringing them forth as ancient they may thus have an excuse for deceiving the undefiled.....For in truth the Apocrypha are fables... ”
[quoted in Souter and Williams, “The Text and Canon of the New Testament,” p199.]

It can easily be explained why such material additional to the Gospels was lost. At best it was thought irrelevant, at worst, heretical. What is strange is that such material continued to be created and while excluded from the Canonical Gospel, sometimes still found its way into Christian tradition. Thus we have the story of Bernice from a medieval version of the Acts of Pilate which provided the basis for the story of Veronica in the Stations of the Cross.

Apocryphal material is attracting the attention of modern scholars and is being treated as if it were Canonical Scripture, as they look for new and different things to say. However, none of it carries a date as early as the Canonical Gospels themselves and therefore fails to carry the same authority. Not that all scholars see a need to use non-canonical materials. As Craig Evans writes in his Introduction to “Fabricating Jesus,”

“Have you wondered why it is that modern scholars [especially the ones who make it into the popular press] seem so prone to discount the evidence of the Gospels, looking

to other sources for information? In several books scholars argue that it is necessary to rely on second and third century sources, because our first century New Testament Gospels are not reliable. Does this make sense? Others claim there are conspiracies to suppress the evidence. Evidence of what? Why?

“We live in a strange time that indulges, even encourages, some of the strangest thinking. It is a time when truth means almost what you want to make of it. And in these zany quests for ‘truth’, truth becomes elusive. In fact, a book published a few years ago appeared under the title, ‘Truth is stranger than it used to be’. Quite so.”

Having berated the Church for its censorship, de Wesselow freely uses his canonical and also his non-canonical material, especially the Gospel of Peter and writings involving Mary Magdalene, with the abandonment of many a post-Christian Biblical scholar. This is partly because of the modern interpretive method he adopts. Until recently the usual scholastic method was one of “exegesis,” always starting with the text, analysing how it is expressed, explaining its meaning, its background and how it arose and going on to elucidate its universal relevance and application. Often modern scholars are drawn to “eisegesis,” which starts with the application first and then indiscriminately trolls through all available resources to support it. My shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines this approach somewhat unkindly as, “The interpretation of a [scriptural] text in a way that is biased by one’s own ideas.” Many will feel that de Wesselow does use this approach in his dealings with Our Lord’s resurrection appearances.

The Nature of the Resurrection and of the Resurrection Appearances

De Wesselow makes much of the fact that there is no mention in either the Synoptic Gospels or John of the Sindon-Shroud lying in the tomb. It is a point others have made. In the 1980s, Rodney Hoare, who like de Wesselow was a BSTS member, wrote, “A Piece of Cloth, the Turin Shroud Investigated.” Interestingly, like Wesselow, Hoare who could be described as a religious sceptic, uses the lack of a mention of a “Sindon,” among the grave clothes in St John’s Gospel to support his theory, that Jesus was resuscitated and his shroud preserved; de Wesselow sees the Sindon as removed and Jesus’s dead body given a new shroud. Both see the used shroud as taken from the tomb to be employed as a Resurrection icon, of something which in fact never took place. The Shroud becomes the Resurrected Christ.

Ian Wilson, in fact, believes that the Shroud is mentioned by John, seeing it as either part of the “orthonia,” the general grave clothes mentioned by the fourth gospel, or as the “soudarion,” the head cloth rolled up by itself. Both are possible, though I think that Mark Guscini has made a good case for the identification of the latter with the cloth in Oviedo Cathedral. All this, however, begs the question, could there be other reasons why the Shroud would not have been mentioned? Here, there are at least two possibilities. The first is that, because in Jewish terms it would have been thought to be unclean and therefore capable of attracting adverse attention, there was a decision to keep quiet about it. The second, more likely reason, is the reverse, that it was so well known and indeed accepted that the author of

the fourth gospel decided it required no further direct advocacy from him but needed to be recognised as standing on its own with the Word and with the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist in witness to Our Lord's Resurrection.

The reason why this argument might hold water derives from the fact that John's Gospel sometimes explores, in an elliptical way, important matters which it virtually takes for granted. Notably, there is no institution of the Lord's Supper. In the Upper Room the disciples are given instead a command to love and serve one another and Jesus leads the way in washing their feet: and in John Chapter 6, there is a discourse on the Lord's Supper's meaning, a discourse which shows that John knows of it and that it is celebrated in his Church. In John, Chapter 1, the importance of Scripture, even before expression is given to its embodiment in Jesus is brought home in the assertion, "In the beginning was the Word." Jesus's Baptism has to be inferred from John the Baptist's comments on it, also in Chapter 1: and it may therefore be that de Wesselow is right in drawing attention to the Resurrection appearance to Thomas with its reference to Jesus' wounds as one involving the Shroud, on which the passage would then serve as a commentary.

There is certainly one other Resurrection appearance which may involve the Shroud. It is there at the in the creedal statement at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15. [To call it the "First Creed," as Wesselow does, invests it with a formal ecclesial importance it does not really possess] In the creedal statement, Jesus is shown as appearing to five hundred disciples at one time. De Wesselow insists that the appearance must have taken place in Jerusalem, where Luke, whose general competence as a historian he normally doubts, actually puts the resurrection appearances of Our Lord. In fact, Luke is a better historian than de Wesselow credits him as being, managing in the Acts of the Apostles to put his Roman governors in the right place at the right time. He is also a highly schematic historiographer. Thus, in the Gospel, action moves from Galilee to Jerusalem and then in the Acts of the Apostles from Jerusalem to Rome. The fact that Luke doesn't mention resurrection appearances in Galilee therefore does not mean that none took place there as de Wesselow maintains; merely that they do not interest him. Because of an insistence that the appearance to five hundred took place at Jerusalem, de Wesselow puts it in the only location in the city he sees as capable of holding such a number, the Temple. If the Shroud had been shown there, there would have been all sorts of riots, partly because it would have been viewed as human remains, offending against Jewish laws on cleanliness, partly because it constituted a human image, offending against Jewish laws on idolatry. Almost certainly the Jewish authorities would have acted with speed, the Shroud would have been taken and burnt and those responsible for its exposition punished.

If not in Jerusalem, where could the appearance have happened? It could have happened in an open space, for example, on a mountain in Galilee. Such an appearance occurs in the last chapter [28] of Saint Matthew's Gospel, but there is a problem with it, in that it is said to have been only to the eleven disciples, not to "five hundred at one time". And yet a short description of the response to the appearance is perhaps unexpected. "When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted." [vs.16, R.S.V.] If only eleven, one wonders why the Gospel could not be more specific as to who actually believed. And the doubt could make

one think of their being confronted not by the Risen Christ, but by something representing him, perhaps, the Shroud. Like Wilson, in his review, I believe that de Wesselow has made a telling point here.

What follows the mountain verse in Matthew's Gospel is extremely curious, the so-called, "Great Commission": "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.'" [vs.18b-20]

What first makes the passage curious is the reference to Trinitarian Baptism, "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." From the Acts of the Apostles, we know that primitive Christian Baptism was into the "Lord Jesus" or "in the name of the Lord Jesus." Most scholars tend to think that the passage was added to the account of the appearance on the Galilee mountain as an afterthought to justify a new baptismal practice. For me, however it represents a new appearance of Jesus, in the Spirit, to show his disciples a better practice where Baptism is concerned. It is introduced by the words, "and Jesus came and said to them....." And we don't know where it happened!

There are grounds for thinking that, as far as Matthew is concerned, Jesus might have come in the Spirit in these the last two verses of the Gospel. This not only because he says, "Lo I am with you always....," referring to what is obviously a spiritual presence, but also because of Chapter 18, verse 20, in which Jesus says, "When two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The Spirit of Jesus is in every place where those who acknowledge him as their Lord happen to meet, which brings us to a discussion of the Nature of the Man who had been in the in the Shroud. It is almost certainly where I part company with de Wesselow and indeed also with Rodney Hoare.

The Nature of the Man in the Shroud.

Mainstream Christians see Jesus as both God and Man. The concept is difficult to articulate and only fully makes sense if the universe itself is seen as a spiritual entity as well as a material one. Miracles occur not outside the bounds of the natural universe [which many regard as impossible anyway] but when the spiritual dimension breaks through the physical. It is this that helps to explain the miracles of Jesus and the greatest miracle of all, His resurrection. On the basis of this, St Paul works out a complex Theology of the general resurrection in which the resurrection body is described both as a "spiritual" body and as a "glorified body". I find it difficult to accept de Wesselow's premise that this impression was the result of an encounter with the Shroud in a house in Damascus. Paul is quite clear himself that the true encounter was with the Lord himself, an encounter which validated his apostleship; and the story of his conversion told three times in the Acts of the Apostles may be told in Acts 9, as de Wesselow points out, in accordance with literary convention, but that does not make it less based on historic fact. Indeed when de Wesselow writes [p319], "...the idea that Paul fell to the ground before the heavenly apparition is nothing more than a literary

cliché.” One is tempted to ask, “And what, pray, else would St. Paul have done in such circumstances?”

The resurrection saw the Apostles on a great spiritual high, nicely described in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Inevitably such a state carries with it a certain amount of confusion, as people experienced the Risen Christ in different ways and came to terms with an event they could not at first fully comprehend. This does not prevent John Wenham from making in “Easter Enigma” a good case for how different groups with a different selection from the same women may have visited the tomb at different times; thus he harmonises what might at first sight seem contradictory and confused gospel stories. The confusion was enhanced by the fact that where the resurrection was concerned, as St John’s disciple, Papias, tells us the personal testimony of the eyewitness rendered in the oral tradition was considered evidentially superior to the reporter’s account in the written word. It was perhaps more important to speak of the effect of the resurrection on those who experienced it. Inevitably there were individual differences.

However, what really makes me feel that de Wesselow is wrong to see all experience of the resurrection in terms of the Shroud comes from evidence of encounters with the objective presence of Christ in the present day. Two very remarkable people had lives changed to include conversion to Christianity and vocation to the Church, because of an encounter with Jesus. The first was Metropolitan Anthony, former head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain, who met Jesus as a teenager in Paris and while reading St. Mark’s Gospel - reading it with a contemptuous curiosity and only because it was the shortest. The second was Hugh Montefiore, later Bishop of Birmingham, who came from a strong Jewish family, knew virtually nothing of Christianity and unexpectedly encountered Jesus in his boarding school study at Rugby.

I had a similar experience by a death-bed as a hospital chaplain, while giving communion, though I could not be sure whether the encounter was with Jesus or an angel, but I knew it was of God. Two things stand in my memory after over thirty five years. The first is that the dying patient made a quick and unexpected recovery. The second was that I discovered some years later that two ladies who had joined us for communion, had likewise experienced the same encounter as I had. However, in the end, the genuineness of such encounters can only be recognised by its fruits, for example, in the instances I have mentioned, in lives given to the service of the Risen Lord or in terms of curing the sick. Such experiences, when they occur, are often difficult, either to explain and to explain away. But they do happen.

The post-resurrection Church was in a state of heightened confusion and almost certainly to that confusion the Shroud made its contribution. There is therefore a possibility that the appearance to 500 at once involved the Shroud and also that it was involved in the second Upper Room appearance in John’s Gospel, the appearance to Thomas. Indeed, I am very grateful to de Wesselow for pointing out to me traditions involving Thomas and the Edessan Church, which somehow I had unaccountably missed. I also have to state my gratitude for the opening part of the book, in which de Wesselow convincingly sends packing the idea of the Shroud as Medieval forgery.

De Wesselow believes that the body of Jesus was reburied in another shroud. Of what then is the Turin Shroud, as de Wesselow perceives it, the actual Sign; unless of the human capacity to deceive and to be deceived? What Ian Wilson dismisses as “a few theological differences” are important ones, which unfortunately will remain so, until de Wesselow begins to abandon post-Christianity for the real thing.

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