

Thoughts on the ICST-2017

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The International Conference on the Shroud of Turin was held from July 19-22, 2017 at the TRAC Center in Pasco, Washington. Barrie Schwartz was not able to attend the conference, and suggested that I provide a summary of my thoughts on the meeting. Barrie was photographer for the Shroud of Turin Research Project (STURP), a team of highly respected scientists with well-established reputations in their field who analyzed the Turin Shroud in 1978. Barrie wanted my viewpoint because I am a genetics researcher and on the faculty at the University of Illinois. During my scientific career I have published 70 peer-reviewed papers and presented talks or posters at dozens of national and international venues. I was in Washington for research-related travel unrelated to the conference, so I attended and agreed to this review.

This review will not critique individual presentations, and is not meant to detract from the very efficient way in which the meeting was run. The organizers impressively kept the presentations on time, managed to keep technical glitches to a minimum, and regularly provided gourmet meals to participants, while keeping the costs of the conference quite low for attendees. The organizers are to be commended for this.

Unfortunately, there were a number of ways in which the Conference strayed from what would be considered acceptable in a scientific or academic conference, and that is the topic of this review. The deviation from academic norms was perhaps not completely unexpected, given that the Shroud is an object of religious veneration for many Christians, many of whom are convinced that the Shroud was the actual burial cloth that wrapped Jesus of Nazareth after his death by crucifixion, and that this group comprised the majority of attendees and, more importantly, the majority of presenters.

The Shroud of Turin does bear the faint image of a crucified man, and a number of characteristics present in the image conform to the details provided in gospel narrative accounts that describe the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus it is undeniable that the image in its details cannot be meant to represent anything other than an image of the crucified Jesus. This statement is not meant to imply anything about the origins or age of the image, areas in which I have no expertise. Nor is it meant to comment on whether the Shroud was the actual burial cloth. The only carbon-14 testing performed on the Shroud assigned a medieval date range to the sample tested. There have been attempts to show that this dating of the Shroud of Turin was inaccurate, for example by claims that the sample was not representative of the Shroud, or that some process affected the dating. Additionally, drawings of Jesus within a shroud have been found that match certain details of the Shroud image (such as burn holes) and that can be established as having been drawn long before the carbon-14 date assigned to the Turin Shroud. However, to the knowledge

of this writer the dating results have never been convincingly overturned, and of course images that predate the Shroud and match its characteristics do not necessarily mean that the Shroud existed at the time the images were made, but could be due to incorporation into a medieval Shroud of earlier motifs. In my view, the medieval manufacture of the Shroud must be taken as a “null hypothesis.” Until novel radiocarbon dating is conducted, studies that claim an earlier origin for the Shroud have the burden of falsifying this null hypothesis. (I should note that any attempts to question the credibility of the scientists involved in the dating are almost impossible to take seriously. Scientific fraud in Western science has involved not more than one or two individuals in one lab, and has never involved several labs each with well established reputations.)

Given the medieval results of the carbon-14 dating, there was surprisingly little dispute among participants during the presentations or discussions about the potential authenticity of the Shroud. Instead the presenters were convinced that the Shroud is the authentic burial cloth of Jesus of Nazareth, to the degree that few of them took the carbon-14 dating seriously enough to attempt to refute it. The lack of alternative viewpoints, such as those considering a potential medieval origin for the Shroud, may in turn have enabled the departure of the presentations from what is typically considered normative at academic conferences.

I was told by one of the speakers that academics, including skeptics of the Shroud’s authenticity, were allowed to attend the conference, but chose not to attend. There was a limited amount of hostility expressed towards academics or skeptics on a number of occasions, though I think this sentiment was too subdued to have kept away critics or skeptics of the Shroud’s authenticity. Rather, it is likely that a number of major violations of academic norms by the conference would have turned away almost any academic who became aware of them.

Ways in which the ICST-2017 departed from academic norms

(1) Faith does not mix well with the methods of science or history.

Supernatural explanations are beyond the scope of science. Yet many of the presentations were based on the assumption of a supernatural origin for the Shroud image. The odd part was that some participants denied that their presentations were based on non-scientific explanations, when the Resurrection of Jesus was an implicit assumption of their talks. Under the “supernatural” heading belongs any explanation that involved the dead body of Jesus in the Shroud being subject to outcomes not typical of dead bodies. For example, postulating that energy released by the body within the Shroud caused the image or affected subsequent carbon-14 dating would fall under the rubric of a supernatural explanation if this attributed to the body in the Shroud any unique properties that are not typical of corpses. The same would be true of claims that the Shroud may play some special role in Christian soteriology or eschatology, or that it may play some special role in future cosmology.

(2) Many of the presentations were conducted by experts outside the field discussed

Much of the work was by individuals without professional training in the fields appropriate to their presentations. Some of these were non-academics, while others were academics conducting research outside their field of training. Some of these talks were interesting; for example, surveys of the depictions of Jesus in Christian iconography across history. However, such results when presented are more difficult to accept at face value, since it is especially difficult to judge the competence of a person making presentations outside their areas of training. I have known of many cases where well-trained academics within their field have published items that were quite misguided in their assumptions or conclusions. When a presenter has received no formal training in the topic presented, or indeed may have no academic training whatsoever, the probability of introducing errors into the analyses and conclusions is likely to be greatly increased.

(3) Highly speculative statements were referred to as hypotheses or theories.

Speculations for which there is little or no evidence are not generally called hypotheses, and hypotheses do not constitute theories. Although usage admittedly varies, many scientists would reserve the term “theory” for explanations that are fairly well established (such as relativity, or evolution), while “hypothesis” is used for explanations based on limited evidence that nonetheless provide a starting point for further investigation. Neither word is appropriately used for suppositions based on religious belief or speculation unsupported by any actual evidence. For example “theories” about the image on the Shroud having an origin in a release of energy which are in turn prefaced on beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth based on religious accounts do not constitute either theories or hypotheses. Rather, they are extremely dicey speculations based largely on the Christian faith of the presenter.

(4) Unprofessional behavior was exhibited by several of the participants

In presentations of academic research, it is always extremely unprofessional and never appropriate to make any statement of religious faith. Yet at least three of the speakers, apparently speaking in their professional capacity, made statements regarding their religious faith. In some cases, they even led the audience in religious proclamations or faith-based gestures. This is never acceptable in an academic presentation. Some academics are religious, yet even academics who are very religious would balk at hiring someone who made a statement of faith during a job talk, since such a statement is considered extremely unprofessional.

(5) The conference organizers actively promoted junk science.

Conference organizers cannot always be held responsible for the words or actions of presenters, even though they did allow a number of at best highly speculative talks to be presented without any indication of their nature. Much worse, the organizers

actively promoted a table featuring books by a creationist publisher. This action more than any other served to mark the conference as one that did not seek to be taken seriously by anyone in science or academia, as creationism does not have any shred of credibility or respectability among scientists.

Professionalizing the conference on the Shroud

Should the organizers wish to have the conference conform more closely to accepted academic norms in the futures, there are a number of steps that could be taken, such as discouraging academic speakers from public professions of faith during their official presentations, and, especially, excluding creationist nonsense from being promoted. In addition, there are a number of additional steps that could be taken:

(1) Reserve a session for scientific or historical experts working within their fields

There were a number of presentations by academics working in their professional capacity, presenting scientific or historical studies. These formed a small minority of the presentations. A session dedicated to these academic talks, involving studies that would be considered acceptable for submission to legitimate peer-reviewed journals, would help to delineate the academically valued research from the merely speculative or from devotional presentations. The conference should go out of its way to involve shroud skeptics and detractors and not only “true believers”. In order to do this, it must clearly identify reputable research that would be likely to survive peer review. Given the number of talks that would not meet these criteria, it may even be necessary to arrange for a “conference within a conference” in which the professional presentations by experts in their field, with talks chosen by an academic panel of experts, would constitute a distinct event clearly distinguished from the rest of the conference.

(2) Find a way of clearly delineating talks of a devotional or religious nature

Part of the conference consisted of presentations that were religious or devotional in nature. This was perhaps not surprising given that the Shroud is an object of religious devotion for many of the attendees, and that almost all attendees were committed Christians. A way should be found to clearly delineate presentations with a devotional or religious intent, to distinguish them from academic or other non-devotional or non-religious presentations. Should the organizers continue to include presentations of a religious or devotional nature, such presentations should be clearly delineated, to make it clear that they do not constitute scientific or historical studies.

(3) Label speculation as speculation, and note religious presuppositions

As noted above, many of the presentations were extremely speculative. For example, quite a number of presentations examined whether the image on the Shroud could

be simulated by in various ways scorching or burning linen cloth (because the Shroud of Turin is made of linen). Among these presentations, there was only one speaker who qualified his remarks, saying "if... if... if..." and making clear the series of assumptions which would have to be true for the results of the experiment to be relevant to the Shroud. Each of the qualifiers was a historical or religious assumption that would be required for certain conclusions to be reached. Many of these qualifiers were rather dubious, but at least they were explicitly stated. Unfortunately, such a set of very clear statements regarding the limitations and assumptions of a study was only made by one of the presenters, even though it applied to a majority of the presentations made on the origins of the Shroud image.

Conclusion

Finally, it is important to return to the facts that the Shroud of Turin has been carbon-14 dated to the (medieval) time in which it makes its first widely accepted appearance in the historical record. The same is true for the Sudarium of Oviedo, a face cloth reputed to have been placed over the head of Jesus while he was taken down from the cross, and which has also been carbon-14 dated to the century in which of its first undisputed appearance in the historical record, which was long after the death of Jesus. In the case of the Shroud, a bishop at the time of its first appearance claimed to have found the forger. Of course, one could argue that the historical account of the bishop could be inaccurate for any number of reasons, and the carbon-14 dating of one or both items may eventually be established as inaccurate. However, proponents of the authenticity of these cloths as having covered the body of Jesus must realize that, outside of special pleading, there is a hurdle of evidence that needs to be overcome in order to establish the authenticity of one or both as authentic. Should there be a possibility of authenticity, it will be scientists and other academic experts, working in their respective fields, who would need to play a central role in examining this possibility.