

TWO TV PROGRAMS ON THE SHROUD—A REVIEW

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On Monday, March 29, 2010 the National Geographic Channel presented a one-hour program, “Touched By Jesus” (*TOUCHED*)—a substantial part of which dealt with *the* Shroud. This was followed up the next evening by a two-hour History Channel program, “The Real Face of Jesus?” (*FACE*)--devoted exclusively to *the* Shroud.

Whereas the *TOUCHED* show (term deliberately chosen) seemed aimed at non-analytical curiosity seekers, the *FACE* program maintained a serious, scientific appeal throughout. For example, one might have surmised what was in store in the *TOUCHED* show as it opened with the strange scene of a “Faith Healer” pushing something called “Miracle Water” onto his faithful adherents. It pretty much went downhill after that opening scene. In contrast, *FACE* introduced us immediately to Fr. Jonathan Morris, a Fox News analyst; to Ray Downing, head of *Studio Macbeth*, an award winning team of 3-D animators; to John Jackson, head of the 1978 STURP team that went to Turin; and to our own Barrie Schwartz, official photographer for that same 1978 team. There were a few other personages with eminent credentials also introduced, including Russell Breault, Dan Porter and Maria Downing.

The *TOUCHED* show relied heavily on the testimonies of noted skeptics Joe Nickell and Steven Schafersman. Nickell, you may recall, first became a notorious critic against the Shroud by using powders and chemicals to reproduce a very poor imitation of the Shroud Face that was repeatedly shown on national tv programs about the Shroud. But what the programs that used Nickell never pointed out was that no trace of those same powders and chemicals could ever be found on the Shroud fibers by the STURP scientists; this scientific fact never discouraged Nickell from repeating his fraudulent claims (to be able to produce the Shroud image) on several later tv programs.

When Schafersman was first introduced on *TOUCHED*, he blurted out the astounding claim that “every” responsible scientist that’s looked at the Shroud claims that it is obviously a painting; so much for his objectivity. In reality, to my knowledge, not one of the two dozen or so STURP team members who went to Turin in 1978 and subsequently spent thousands of lab hours analyzing their findings (including some 30,000 photos of the Shroud) came back from Turin claiming that the Shroud was indeed a painting.

TOUCHED, as one might have anticipated, fit in the late Walter McCrone, who did not go on the Turin expedition, and who erroneously claimed that “millions” of red ochre particles (i.e. paint) are to be found on the Shroud linen, thereby accounting for the painted image. For an absolute (and somewhat satirical) rebuttal of this preposterous claim, one has only to read John Heller’s excellent *Report of the Shroud of Turin* (1984)—a detailed refutation of McCrone by John Heller and Alan Adler explaining that not even 1% of the Shroud image could be attributed to the relatively few red ochre particles found on the Shroud. For whatever reasons, McCrone, a well-known scientist, had adopted a position on the Shroud without any reasonable scientific basis. Heller’s

fine book also clearly, and in detail, refutes Joe Nickell's absurd statement in the *TOUCHED* show that "they couldn't find blood" on the Shroud. I think Nickell needs to read a lot more from the bibliography offered on *Shroud.com*.

Another weird statement early on *TOUCHED* concerned the 4 Gospels which, we're solemnly told, were the most detailed accounts of Jesus's life but were not even written by (real) historians. I laughed audibly when I first heard this—who were these real, professional historians in the early first century Galilee area supposed to be? We might as well have been told that neither CNN nor the Associated Press gave any reports on Jesus's career. Do you detect a rather pathetic straw man/false assumption fallacy here?

Whereas the *TOUCHED* show covered several disparate items, *FACE* focused almost exclusively on the details and history of the Shroud. *TOUCHED* apparently thought it was being democratic to include not only the aforementioned Faith Healer, but also an analysis of Padre Pio, several other alleged stigmatics, Joe Nickell and other religious skeptics, Leonardo Da Vinci as the possible artist behind the Shroud, a discussion of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, Walter McCrone once again revived, along with a narrator whose tone increasingly turned into a sly, pandering one better suited to a program like *Magic Tricks Revealed for the First Time*. Personally, I was disappointed that National Geographic failed to include anything about Big Foot and the Abominable Snowman!

The best single statement coming out of such hodgepodge came from Barrie Schwartz: Some of the skeptics had speculated as to whether Leonardo Da Vinci might have been the artist behind the Shroud image; Barrie pointed out that we had definitive historical evidence that the Shroud had been around at least 100 years before Leonardo was born; he then offered (with a generous smile) that we knew "Leonardo was a good artist but he wasn't that good." Touche!

Although the nature of *FACE* was necessarily speculative (i.e. attempting to reconstruct the true face of Christ from the Shroud), the comments and details presented were of the highest objective quality. For example, that the 2-dimensional image on the cloth actually contains 3-dimensional information which can be extracted by using the latest computer technology. Much is made of the famous VP-8 analyzer, the tool John Jackson used back in 1978 that revealed the 3-dimensional elements encoded in the Shroud. Jackson himself, having spent over 30 years of serious study on the Shroud and heading a Shroud Center in Colorado, lent a great deal of gravity and believability to the entire program. And Ray Downing, who was at the head of the *FACE* project, exhibited solid expertise; he had spent "6 months of non-stop work" on it, calling it "the most difficult project I've ever worked on."

I did find it odd that the program, in its last few minutes revealing the final recreated face of Jesus, had a light shining on only one side of the Face; this caused a dark shadow on the other side. Although it seemed at best a recreation, one would not have expected such an odd way of revealing the climactic picture in the 2-hour program.

Whereas *TOUCHED* did its best to make the authenticity of the Shroud seem in doubt, and to make the 1988 carbon-14 seem definitive, the *FACE* program offered many specific facts and details to indicate the opposite. For example, *FACE* included good discussion of the cloth of Oviedo (the Sudarium), or face cloth of Jesus mentioned in *John*, and traceable to the 7th century. The blood stains on the Sudarium apparently line up with those of the Shroud and both cloths contain pollens from the Jerusalem area. Also *FACE* showed photos of the “Hungarian Pray Codex,” a medieval manuscript dating to the early 1190’s, which clearly shows a number of details that match point-for-point those found on the Shroud. Therefore, the Pray MS predates by about 70 years the earliest date of the Shroud allowed by the dubious carbon-14 dating of 1988. This is a quite significant finding.

Many of the details of *FACE* tended to support what the program referred to as convincing “courtroom evidence” for the Shroud’s authenticity. And the tone of *FACE* was far more rational and objective than that of *TOUCHED*.

Curiously, for myself, the mystery of what Jesus’s Face would eventually look like at program’s end was less captivating than the abundance of fascinating facts offered. That means I found the program’s ultimate aim (to create an accurate Face of Jesus) somewhat ambitious.

Perhaps I haven’t given the Studio Macbeth team its proper due.