

BOOK REVIEW

Face to Face – Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity by Robin Margaret Jensen, Luce Chancellor's Professor of the History of Christian Worship and Art at the Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

Published by Fortress Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Mark Guscini

An excellent book about how early Christians envisioned the divine, how God and Christ were portrayed in early Christian art. Robin Margaret Jensen takes on the subject and all its consequences – the relationship between art and theology, conflicts over idolatry and iconography and how the Christological controversies affected the portrayals of Christ.

The book takes us through a general introduction about visual art, portraits and idolatry, on to a study about the image and portraits on Roman culture and religion and the thorny question of the invisible God and the visible image. The whole question of the legitimacy of portraying God and Christ is taken on in sections about Augustine and the problem of the invisible God and the anthropomorphic controversy. The study ends with a useful section on early portraits of the saints and the question of likeness.

Quite naturally, the section of the book anyone interested in the Shroud will jump to is entitled Portraits of the Incarnate One. After a brief summary of the Abgar legend, Jensen gives a description of Jesus as portrayed on the various copies of the Image of Edessa or Mandylion – “His nose is long and narrow, with a small mouth beneath a rather drooping moustache and above a beard that comes to two points. The hair of his head is parted at the centre and hangs to his shoulders”. After stating that the original Mandylion is lost, the author then compares the likeness of Christ to the more western Veronica. She goes on to say that “these two traditional images have much in common with another ‘miraculous image’, the Shroud of Turin, as well as bearing significant resemblance to the

earliest (sixth-century) Byzantine panel paintings of Christ, like ... from the monastery of Saint Catherine on Sinai”.

And there she leaves it. And we are left wondering how the relationship between the Shroud and the Mandylion can be established and then not taken any further. And no matter what it is or is not, surely the Shroud image is worthy of a longer mention in a book about portrayals of Christ. However, accepting that this laguna might only be noticed by people with a specific interest in the Shroud, the book is highly recommended as a study of the earliest Christian iconography and all its inherent problems.

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William Meacham, *The Rape of the Turin Shroud: How Christianity's Most Precious Relic was Wrongly Condemned and Violated*

Self-published 2005, English text, soft-cover, ISBN: 1-4116-5769-1.

(Available through www.lulu.com and Amazon.com).

Reviewed by Joanna Emery

The terms ‘rape’ and ‘violation’ aren’t exactly words often found in sentences about the Shroud. William Meacham, an American archaeologist based in Hong Kong, seems to have changed that with this boldly titled book.

At just under 300 pages, the book consists of four parts. It begins with an overview of Shroud studies in the early 1980’s (‘The Pinnacle’, which includes some of Meacham’s published work on the Shroud) followed by the events surrounding its carbon-dating (‘The Fall’). The third part of the book (‘The Desecration’) deals with the relic’s 2002 restoration. The last section (‘What Next for the Turin Shroud?’) tackles its current and future issues.

I briefly met the author at the AMSTAR Dallas conference in September, 2005. He struck me as interesting, highly qualified in his field, and greatly passionate about his opinions on the Shroud. I had many questions but time was short and I remember him saying in his Southern accent, “It’ll all be in my book.”

‘It’ certainly was.

If there ever was a ‘shock ‘n awe’ publication regarding the Shroud this book ranks up there. Using terms such as vandalism, disaster, disgrace and incompetence, Meacham doesn’t mince words. No diplomatic rhetoric here but that was never Meacham’s aim. He ‘tells it like it is’ and, as he writes, it is ‘a terribly depressing story’. While reading this book, I reminded myself that there are usually two sides to every story but Meacham does create a convincing case for what he calls the ‘serious errors that have plagued the Shroud’s study & conservation’.

In retrospect, it would have been interesting to have read this work before the Dallas conference. Meacham held off publication until after the event but includes his opinions of what transpired in Dallas in the book’s epilogue.

As someone intrigued by the Shroud for years, I found this book disturbing, yet absorbing. Perhaps the most telling comment came from my husband, a chemical engineering. I asked him to read the book and let me know what he thought.

“Honey,” he said matter-of-factly, “I’m not a textile expert but even I would have told them not to do the stuff to the Shroud that they did.”

Point taken—and one hopes that history doesn’t repeat.

(Editor’s Note: Also included here was “Unraveling the Shroud of Turín,” a History Channel documentary reviewed by Barrie Schwartz (with some additional comments by Sean Heckman, the associate producer of the program. You can read it on this website at <http://www.shroud.com/late06.htm#review>).