

ARTICLES (1)

BIBLICAL EXEGESIS ON THE WORD 'SHROUD'

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A sentence from Luke's Gospel has been the springboard for Christians for over 2,000 years to search in the Old Testament for things concerning Jesus Christ. In Luke Chapter 24, two named disciples are on the road to Emmaus after Jesus' resurrection from the dead when Jesus joins them though they do not recognise him at that moment in time. Their conversation is described followed by this statement: 'and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself' (Luke 24:27).

The New Testament writers, following the example of Christ himself, deliberately linked events in Christ's life to textual words, passages and events in the Old Testament. Following this ancient type of biblical exegesis¹ it is interesting to trace the Greek word for shroud used by Matthew, Mark and Luke, 'sindon', back to the (closest) Hebrew word in the Old Testament, 'ses' or 'shesh',² to see what this reveals about the shroud, firstly as a biblical concept and possibly also as an historical artefact.

For Catholic Christians, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) states as Catholic belief that, 'Through all the words of Scripture, God speaks only one single Word, his one utterance in whom he expresses himself completely'³ (CCC102), that is Jesus, the Word of God, the Son of God. Following this, everything in the Old Testament as well as the New can be read as being about Christ and the 'things concerning him' such as the shroud in which he was wrapped a his death. This is still the case whether the gospel writers intended all or any of the allusions that this exercise manifests.

'Sindon' and 'Shesh'

There are two main Hebrew words for linen and two main Greek words. There are others, which are not unimportant, but which would make this article too long.

Let us distinguish first the Greek words: Orthonion is used in John's Gospel indicating bandages or strips of linen used for wrapping the dead. Luke also uses this word on one occasion. Matthew, Mark and Luke all use the word 'sindon' which relates instead to a large white linen cloth of 'fine' or tight, densely woven linen.

The word 'sindon' is used in only one other place in the New Testament and that is in the Garden of Gethsemane where one man was seized by his tunic 'sindon', and ran away naked.⁴ This gives us a sense of the use of the word as a garment at the time of Christ, that could be worn wrapped around the body in a manner easy to remove.

In the Book of Exodus

There are several words for linen in the Old Testament, one for linen in general, one for linen mixed with wool and another translated as 'fine twined linen' which is the closest in meaning to sindon. It is also the most frequently used in the Old Testament (37 times) and used in three books, once in the book of Genesis, three times in Ezekiel and thirty three times in the book of Exodus.

Beginning with the book of Exodus, 'fine twined linen' is mentioned most frequently as part of a refrain, 'blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen' which appears over 20 times in the Chapters 25-40 dedicated almost entirely to the building of the tabernacle or sanctuary in the desert. These chapters of the book of Exodus follow approximately the literary order of many Ancient Near East temple-building texts but the Hebrew account is distinctive in some important ways.⁵ It is clear from these parallel texts that it is similar to them as having been drawn from, or made up of, ritual texts or hymns⁶ learnt by the priests, as a way of recounting and remembering the event of the

'temple-building' such was its great significance. There are several vital differences however, especially:

- the Hebrew God is transcendent (not in, or represented by, a statue but using the ark of the covenant 'as his footstool')
- the Hebrew God speaks through his prophet to his people (rather than the prophet/priest speaking on behalf of the people to their god)
- the Hebrew 'temple' at this point is a 'tent of meeting' made up of wooden poles and most significantly for our purposes, linen cloth curtains, so that it is moveable (rather than a permanent building).

Apart from the outer coverings of the sanctuary that were made from goats' hair, all the curtains of the entire sanctuary, veil, door-screen, all the curtains of the Holy of Holies, the tent of meeting and the court were made of 'blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen.' These hung on the wood of the cross poles⁷ from clasps of gold. The whole sanctuary, which in the letter to the Hebrews is identified as Christ himself⁸, is covered in cloth of fine twined linen, sindon.

It is generally held that the blue and purple and scarlet stuff were threads of dyed wool and that the fine twined linen was left uncoloured. 'Twined linen' was a kind of thread that the Egyptians had developed⁹, spun from many fibres, and which the Hebrew women¹⁰ would have learnt to produce during their recent years in Egypt.

The clothes for the priests, Aaron and his sons, when doing priestly duties in the sanctuary were also to be of fine twined linen cloth, sindon, that is, the tunic, ephod, head gear, 'breast-piece of judgment' and girdle. Only the breeches for Aaron's sons were said to have been made of 'bad' a general coarser linen¹¹. For Aaron in particular, in the role of High Priest, the garment was to be made not only of fine linen 'sindon', but woven with a special kind of complex weave described as 'checker work',¹² but the word for 'checkerwork' is a 'Hapax legomenon', appearing only once in the bible so the precise meaning cannot be ascertained. The shroud of Turin also has a complex weave which we now

describe as 'herringbone' but which could be precisely the weave to which the Exodus text refers.

All the priestly garments were sprinkled with blood and thus made 'holy': 'You shall take part of the blood that is on the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it upon Aaron and his garments, and upon his sons and his sons' garments with him, and he and his garments shall be holy'. Ex 29:21. In the letter to the Hebrews, again, Christ is repeatedly called 'High Priest'¹³ who uses his own blood rather than the blood of animals for the sacrifice.

In the Books of Ezekiel and Genesis

We now turn to the three places where the word *sin*don is used in the book of Ezekiel. There are two occurrences in chapter 16 and one in chapter 27. Both chapters refer to visions of Israel in order to 'make known to Jerusalem her abominations'. The first is of Israel as an abandoned and helpless baby girl cared for by God who grows up beautiful and the second compares Israel to the beauty of the city of Tyre.

In chapter 16 when the girl grows up God says, 'Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I clothed you with embroidered cloth and shod you with leather, I swathed you in fine linen ...' (Ez 16:10, 13). Jesus is the one who becomes a member of the people of Israel himself by being born of Mary, and he takes their sins and abominations upon himself.

In chapter 27:7, 'O Tyre you have said I am perfect in beauty ... of fine embroidered linen from Egypt was your sail, serving as your ensign'. 'embroidered' here is translated in the New English Translation (NET) as 'woven with patterns'. A fine cloth, woven with patterns will be the sign of the perfect, the beautiful one.

Finally, in Genesis 41:42, Joseph is clothed in fine linen by Pharaoh. Joseph has interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and Pharaoh says, 'Can we find such a man as this in whom is the Spirit of God?' (Gen. 41:37) And Pharaoh gave Joseph the governance of the whole land. Joseph is a 'type' of Christ

here as has been explained by Peter Leitch in his article 'Why a Shroud?' in the June 2014 issue of the BSTS Newsletter. Jesus is the man 'in whom is the Spirit of God' truly¹⁴, who gave up his spirit on the cross.¹⁵

To conclude, each usage of sindon in the Old Testament points to Jesus Christ, to himself as the holy of holies, the sanctuary and the high priest, to the shedding of his blood on the cross, to the one who has the true governance upon his shoulders, and the true Spirit of God, to the beautiful one who takes on the sins and abominations of the world on the cross. In each case, the linen shroud used at his death is both the actual link, and the ensign.

¹ I am particularly indebted to two articles:

1) A.A.M van der Hoeven, *The seam and missing corners of the Turin Shroud as characteristics of John Mark's temple garment*, 2011, <http://www.jesuskinfo/The%20seam%20and%20corners.pdf>. I do not think there is enough evidence to substantiate all her claims but that the shroud could be the cloth for a priestly garment is supported by the typological biblical exegesis of my article.

2) Peter Leitch, *Why a Shroud?*, 2014, BSTS Newsletter 79,

² I am mainly using: Robert Young, *Analytical Concordance to the Holy Bible*, 8th Edition, United Society for Christian Literature, Lutterworth Press, London, 1952. Also, www.biblehub.com for other comparative commentaries.

³ See also, Heb. 1:1 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.'

⁴ Mk 14:51-52.

⁵ For these details see Boda, Mark J. and Novotny, J. (Eds), *From the Foundations to the Crenellations. Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible*, 2010, Ugarit-Verlag Münster. See especially 'Temple Building and Exodus 25-40', Pekka Pitkänen, Cheltenham, pp255-280 and *Appendix 1: Selected Aramaic, Akkadian, Hittite, Phoenician, Persian, Sumerian and Ugaritic Sources*.

⁶ 1 Chronicles 16:4; Nehemiah 12:27, Psalm 100:4

⁷ Ex 26:15 'And you shall make upright frames for the tabernacle of acacia wood.' Ex 26:26 'And you shall make bars of acacia wood ...' Ex 26:31-32 'And you shall make a veil ... and you shall hang it upon four pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold ... and you shall hang the veil from the clasps and bring the ark of the testimony in thither within the veil.'

⁸ Heb. 10:19 'Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, through the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh.'

⁹ Adrie v d Hoeven quotes Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 19, 2, where he describes the exceptional quality of the linen cloth of Egypt.

¹⁰ Ex 35:25 'And all women with ability ...'

¹¹ Ex 28: 41, 42.

¹² Ex 28:4 and Ex 28:39 use different words each occurring only once but both from the same root 'shabats'. Both are translated 'checkerwork.' The Hebrew suggests strongly that the pattern is *in the weave* rather than on top of it as embroidery would be. See <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/7660.htm>

¹³ Heb. 3:1; 4:14; 5:5; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1.

¹⁴ John 15:26.

¹⁵ John 19: 30.