

The Shroud of Turin and some thoughts on the Linen used

By Paul Bishop

There is an interesting quote in Eusebius' *'Church History'* when he refers to the Memoirs of Hergessipus, who in his book five writes about James the Just (stepbrother of our Lord Jesus).

He alone was permitted to enter the sanctuary, for he wore not wool but linen. He used to enter the temple alone and was often found kneeling and imploring forgiveness for the people.

It is interesting because it points to the special place of linen and the forbidding of mixing wool and linen for the Jewish people.

The first biblical reference is in Exodus 28:42 where it specifies that Aaron's robes and undergarments for entering the tent of meeting should be made of fine linen. Leviticus 19:19 says that clothing should not be made of two kinds of material. The observations about James correspond to Ezekiel 44:17-18 *"When they enter the gates of the inner court, they are to wear linen clothes, they must not wear any woollen garment while ministering at the gates of the inner court or inside the temple."*

There are many references to linen in the Old Testament. David for example danced with all of his might before the Lord wearing a linen ephod (2 Sam 6:14). Jeremiah (13:1) is told to wear and then soil a linen sash. The clean sash showing the relationship of the people to their Lord and the dirty and soiled linen sash showing how the people had spoiled that relationship and could no longer be in a close relationship. This spiritual significance is shown in the book of Revelation (15:6) when it speaks of the seven angels *"... they were dressed in clean, shining linen"*.

The Shroud purchased by Joseph of Arimathea was described as a clean linen cloth (Matthew 27:59-60). It would not have been used for any other purpose. Knowing that Joseph was a wealthy man it could be presupposed that the cloth itself was an expensive, quality linen. It seems unlikely that Joseph purchased the cloth that day. Who knows, maybe it had been previously purchased for his own burial or a family member, after all he did have a tomb pre-prepared.

John Robinson writes in his posthumously published work *'The Priority of John'* that Lazarus would have been buried in a normal linen shroud with all the customary respect and the sudarion acted as a jaw band: binding on the hands and feet would have been of thongs or chords probably made of twisted rushes.

This proposition regarding the importance of the linen shroud is re-enforced by both

modern and ancient Jewish burial customs. The burial traditions of the Jewish people are still intimately linked to linen to this very day. Yehuda Shurpin on chabad.org asks the question ‘Why are Jews buried in white linen shrouds?’ He says that the time-honoured Jewish custom is to bury our departed in (inexpensive) linen shrouds and says that this dates back two millennia to the time of Rabban Gamaliel the Elder in the early first century. The Talmud relates that at this time there was such social pressure to procure expensive shrouds that the strain it placed on families was even more painful than the death itself. Things got so bad that families would sometimes abandon the corpse rather than to try and provide the deceased with socially acceptable shrouds. Rabban Gamaliel (the same who appears in Acts 5) asked that he be buried in simple linen (again the implication that expensive 3 over 1 herringbone weaves may have been an alternative). In later generations this example was followed, it even becoming acceptable to bury the dead in plain hemp garments.

Shurpin also writes that ‘it is customary that not only the shroud but even the threads used to sew the pieces together, should be made of white linen. He says that mystics explain that “*there is a great secret*” behind this custom. As the soul embarks on the journey heavenward, being dressed in pure white linen, with nothing else mixed in, it serves as protection against any impurity or evil forces.... when a person passes away and their soul ascends heavenward, he or she is compared to a priest entering Gods sacred abode’.

This connection between instructions given originally to Aaron regarding his linen clothing to enter the tent of meeting, and the burial shroud here become tangible. The dressing of a body in a linen shroud to enter the heavenly sanctuary being a reflection of Aaron’s original clothing required to enter the earthly sanctuary. In Leviticus 16:23 Aaron is told to enter the sanctuary wearing the linen clothes but to take them off, wash himself and wear ordinary clothing to exit the sanctuary, thus showing the significance of appearing before the Lord in the right clothing. This in itself adds much more meaning to the actions of Joseph of Arimathea than just procuring a clean linen shroud for the burial of Jesus.

It is said that the use of flax/ linen dates back over 36,000 years dated from a remnant found in a cave in Georgia, which if true shows just how long this material can endure in the right conditions. A 5,000-year-old linen dress was also discovered in an Egyptian tomb. Linen has been put to many different uses over the centuries as the Latin name, *Linum usitatissimum*, meaning ‘most useful’ suggests. It was first cultivated and used in the Middle East and flourished there, not becoming popular in Europe and the American colonies until later. Historically, the hard work involved in its production resulted in high prices and sometimes it was even used as currency.

It is worth noting that one of the statements produced by those who would say the Turin Shroud is a mediaeval fake was that it is therefore a mediaeval cloth. However, no test samples could be found that matched the herringbone weave from this era to provide a comparison for carbon dating. It is also worth noting that during the mediaeval period, linen was more widely used for everyday items, such as sacks, clothing, fishing nets, ropes, string for bows, bags and purses. Quality cloths such as the Turin Shroud cloth, were not, as far as we know, produced in the mediaeval period.



Herringbone Weave of the Shroud

Whilst none of this is conclusive evidence regarding the Shroud of Turin, it does provide one small piece of the jigsaw or, as Father Dreisbach described it, as a spy clue of which there are many and of which all fit together to form a complete picture of this amazing cloth.

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This edition of the newsletter refers to the Shroud Exhibition which was held during May in Brewood, Staffordshire. Pam Moon, who created, owns and manages this mobile exhibition, is always on the lookout for new venues such as churches, cathedrals or large halls, which may be able to host such events. If you know a suitable venue which could be made available for such an event, please contact Pam Moon by sending an email to:

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