

Using the Shroud to Reach Your World

Russ Breault

When I think about how long my involvement with the Shroud has been, it seems like it can't all be in one lifetime. There are a few of us still around who recall the halcyon days when science came to explore the world's greatest unsolved mystery. I remember the excitement of reading in 1978 that a team of scientists comprising the Shroud of Turin Research Project, Inc. (STURP) was planning to investigate an ancient burial cloth that millions believe wrapped Jesus in the tomb. The thrill and anticipation were akin to Apollo Eleven. What would they find? What would it mean?

Scientists of the STURP team did not disappoint those waiting to hear the results. The Shroud poses a sharp contrast of extreme alternatives as either the actual burial shroud of Jesus or it is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated. Nothing lies in between.

Ten years later, another set of extremes emerged, the infamous 1988 carbon date declaring a date range of 1260 to 1390. "That's it people, the Shroud is a fake. We can all go home." While the skeptics are happy to close the book on the Shroud, it is not that easy. If they are correct, then we have an artifact bearing the faint superficial image of a crucified man which only affects the top 1-2 microfibers of threads where the image is visible—about 1% of the thread's diameter. Other than random particles, they found no artistic substances that could account for the image [1]. This and so many other points of data caused the Shroud Project to conclude it was not the work of an artist [2]. So now we have the carbon labs telling us to look for a 14th century artist who crafted the image without the use of artistic substances, bypassing any known artistic process, using real blood that chemists say is the exudate from actual wounds [3]. While it is not the thrust of this article, it is important to establish the untenable claim of a medieval date and how it only compounds the mystery.

Microscopist Walter McCrone (d. 2002) alleged it was the work of medieval artist, Simone Martini (d. 1343). Art historian, Gary Vikan, believes the likely culprit is Martini's student, Naddo Ceccarelli (d. 1360) [4]. Yet of the many crucifixion scenes painted by both artists, not one remotely compares with the Shroud image.



Crossifissione by Naddo Ceccarelli

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The following are the anatomical aspects of the body and blood that should be congruent with the Shroud for the claims of McCrone and Vikan to carry any weight, yet they are completely divergent:

Martini—Ceccarelli	Turin Shroud
Minimal blood from crown	Very clear blood flows all around the head
No blood on arms—drops straight down	Blood oozes from wrist down to elbows
Nail wound in the palm	Nail wound in the wrist
Side wound spurts like a faucet	Blood oozes from side wound
No scourge marks on front of body	Scourge marks seen on front chest and thighs
Modesty cloth covering groin area	Man is naked
One foot placed on the other	Finally something that matched

One these two artists is supposed to be the ingenious fraudster who abandoned everything he learned over years of study on how to represent Christ in sacred art. He also defied every artistic convention of the time, and created the Shroud image without the use of any artistic substances or any known artistic process. This is what we are supposed to believe and represents the quagmire we now find ourselves in. Skeptics say it is medieval, yet they produce nothing credible to support their claim. On the other hand, new dating methods seem to put the first century back on the table as a possibility. The most recent study published in April 2022 shows how researchers using Wide-Angle X-ray Scattering assessed the amount of natural aging observed in Shroud fibers and found them to be comparable to a first century fabric found at Masada known to date from 55 to 74 AD [5]. Who is right and who is wrong?

The Middle Path

As a lifelong lecturer on the Shroud, I have presented at nearly 80 colleges and universities and over a thousand churches across North America. They have interviewed me countless times for radio, tv, podcasts and documentaries. I have created a dozen different presentations based on various aspects of science, history, and implications for our modern age. However, the bedrock of my interest in the Shroud comes from a deep knowledge of scripture, which allows me to see the spiritual, theological, and prophetic parallels. If they were not completely congruent, I would have no interest. As a parallel concept, the moon reflects the light of the sun; the Shroud reflects the light of the Word. I am in good company with this idea. Pope John Paul II called the Shroud a “mirror of the gospel.”

I was not raised in a Christian home, so when I learned about the Shroud in the late 1970s, I was a recent convert to the faith and became a dedicated student of the Bible. Later, I became a student of the Shroud. Not needing proof to bolster my faith, I saw the Shroud as an evangelistic tool to open the door of faith for others. This has always been my focus. If someone is drawn to consider the Shroud, they must also consider

Christ himself. They are inseparable. In a recent presentation in Pennsylvania, a man came up to me afterwards and said, “I just wanted you to know that I am not a believer. But this gave me a lot to think about.” It immediately reminded me of the parable of the lost sheep, where Jesus left the 99 to hunt down the one that was wandering away. (Luke 15:3-7) Perhaps all the effort on behalf of my sponsor to organize and promote the event along with my two days’ worth of travel by air and rental car was all for him. I hope he gets past the wall of doubt and finds his path to Christ. The Shroud is not a substitute for faith, yet as the old saying goes, “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” In similar fashion, the Shroud can take a person up to the water’s edge, but it will still require a step of faith to enter the sheepfold.



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Objections to the Shroud vary, but in Protestant America, most resistance comes from those who avoid anything considered Catholic. I then tell them how the cloth has been in Italy and France for over 700 years and isn’t likely to be a Baptist relic... not that those two words would ever go together. However, the skepticism over relics is completely legitimate. The modern age demands proof. The Church can claim a particular bone belongs to Saint so and so, but can you prove it? Testability is the distinctive characteristic of the Shroud that sets it apart from any other relic. It is not a vacant cloth, but one etched with the image of a crucified man with a corresponding pattern of bloodstains. We can test the blood and analyze the image. Researchers have spent thousands of hours on both.

One of the most annoying objections I hear is, “I don’t need the Shroud for my faith.” My response is always the same. “That’s great! But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t meant for someone else.” It was Doubting Thomas, who refused to believe despite the testimony of all his best friends who saw Jesus alive in the upper room on Sunday night, the same day as the resurrection. A week later, Jesus appeared again, and this time,

Thomas was there. The first one Jesus spoke to was Thomas and famously quoted his own words back to him, “thrust your hand into my side and place your fingers into my nail wounds and be not faithless but believe.” It was at this point that Thomas, now having seen the resurrected Christ for himself, makes the strongest profession of faith in the entire New Testament, “My Lord and my God!” My Protestant friends will point out how Jesus said, “blessed are those who believe and have not seen.” Very true. Blessed are those who can believe without requiring evidence. I count myself in that category. But Jesus did not condemn Thomas for his unbelief and, therefore, represents a portion of humanity that might need to be pointed in the right direction. I believe the Shroud exists for this purpose. (John 20:19-29)

Immediately following the story of Thomas, beginning in the very next verse, John explains the purpose of his gospel, and fits perfectly with the purpose of the Shroud: Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31 NIV) Remember, John is the first one to believe in the resurrection after entering the tomb based on the sign of the linen cloth lying there.

The ultimate question that arises for those in the church, regardless of denomination, is, “what if it is not authentic?” I contend this is absolutely the wrong question. What if it IS authentic, and we did nothing with it? Which would be the greater mistake? It reminds me of the parable of the talents where Jesus gave five coins to one servant, two to another, and one to yet another. The first servant doubled his master’s wealth and received his reward. The second did the same, but the last servant, out of fear, buried his one coin. What was the verdict? The master cast the servant out and gave the coin to the one who now had ten. There is no blessing for timidity, yet God offers great reward to those who step out in faith. (Matt 25:14-30)

Is there a “middle path” that allows us (the church) to use the Shroud for its phenomenal witness to Christ even though we do not have absolute proof of authenticity? Absolutely! *As you explore the mystery—you encounter the message.* Meditate on this for a minute. The Shroud is the most analyzed artifact in the world yet remains an unsolved mystery. What a grand opportunity to engage the most ardent skeptic! *The mystery* engages the mind while the *message* reaches the heart.

Another common question is, “how do you know it is Jesus?” Forensic analysis is used to identify the man based on the written record and creates an amazing opportunity to explain what happened to Jesus through the ordeal of crucifixion. The most distinctive set of wounds is from the *crown of thorns*, a singular mockery for the man who claimed to be king of the Jews—not everyone received a crown as a routine of execution. He was *severely scourged*. Why? Because Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, didn’t think he was guilty of a crime worthy of capital punishment. He first sent him to King Herod, but Herod sent him back. He then tried to trade Barabbas, but that didn’t work. Lastly, Pilate had him brutally scourged hoping he

wouldn't have to kill him, that the punishment would be enough. That didn't work either. The Jewish authorities still wanted him dead. Towards the end of the day, soldiers would break the legs of those who were still alive to speed death by asphyxia, the inability to breathe. You can't stand up on broken legs. But when they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead and left his legs intact. Instead, a soldier stabbed him in the side to make sure he was dead before they could release him to Joseph of Arimathea for burial in Joseph's yet to be used family tomb. The Shroud shows *legs not broken*, and a *side wound* with the clear separation of blood and serum, which only occurs after death when the blood is no longer circulating. Even the after-death timing of the side wound is consistent with the biblical account. Last, they wrapped him in a *rich man's shroud*, unheard of for someone who died a criminal's death. It is even part of biblical prophecy. Isaiah 53:9 says, "He will make his grave with the wicked and the rich in his death." How was the prophecy fulfilled? Jesus was crucified, a criminal's death, in between two thieves, yet wrapped in a rich man's shroud and placed in a rich man's tomb. As a cloth made of flax linen, textile workers wove it using a complex 3:1 herringbone weave, doable in the first century using loom technology of the period, but time-consuming and therefore expensive. It is curious how scripture makes a point of telling us that Joseph was a rich man and purchased fine linen for the burial. (Matt 27:57) Perhaps it was *fine twisted linen*, suitable for the Jewish High Priest to wear before entering the Holy of Holies to offer the blood sacrifice for the sins of the people. (Exodus 28)

Everything is consistent with the biblical accounts. If the forensic pathologists (Bucklin, Zugibe et al.) are right about it being the image of a real human being who died from the wounds of crucifixion, and if the blood chemists (Adler, Heller et al.) are right about the blood being the exudate from those wounds, then the identity of the man is certain. No one else in recorded history received this identical pattern of violent abuse resulting in death by crucifixion.

The story doesn't end in the tomb. In fact, one story ends, and another begins. There are no stains of decomposition on the Shroud, a clear sign the body did not occupy the Shroud for very long. The bloodstains soak all the way through the cloth and are visible on the reverse side, yet the image is purely superficial and shows a completely different process. Since scientists found no image under the blood, it suggests the blood was on the cloth first, followed by the image [6] and correlates with the biblical order of events.

How profoundly wonderful. The bloodstains prove he was fully human, the Son of Man, one of us, and died in our place. Yet the inexplicable image reveals the victory of resurrection over the power of death and proves he is also the Son of God.

A compelling apologetic argument is found in John 20:1-9. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb on Sunday morning and sees the stone moved away from the entrance. She peeks in, realizes the body is gone and runs to find the Apostles and says, "someone has

taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and I don't know where they have put him." Her first reaction is that someone has stolen or taken the body. Peter and John run back down to the tomb. John gets there first and waits for Peter to arrive. Peter goes straight into the tomb and sees the linen cloth lying there. Then John goes inside and also notices the linen cloth lying there... *and believes*.

Mary didn't go inside the tomb and only saw the body was gone. Peter and John enter the tomb, and both observe the linen cloth lying there, causing John to become the first person to believe in the resurrection based on the evidence of the vacant burial cloth.

Here is the question that goes to the very heart of God's purpose; was the linen cloth found lying in the tomb only for the benefit of Peter and John? Or was it meant for the entire world through all generations? I can't imagine God only intended it for a select few when his intent is, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Pet 3:9 NIV)

It is curious how Acts 1:3 states, "he showed himself to be alive through *many convincing proofs*..." most of which were post-resurrection appearances, yet the *first proof* was the "linen cloth lying there."

The skeptic would rightfully point out, as did John Calvin, how the gospel accounts do not mention the Shroud after the resurrection, nor do they reference the presence of an image. Even without an image, one would think a cloth bearing the blood of the atonement would warrant an acknowledgement. The reason for their silence is understandable. Most scholars believe Mark was the earliest gospel and written about 30 years following the resurrection—after they martyred James and threw Peter in prison to be executed but was miraculously freed by an angelic intervention. The *discipline of the secret* employed by the ancient church as a means of self-preservation could easily explain the silence [7]. To even mention the existence of Christ's bloodstained linen shroud would set off a search and destroy mission by both Romans and Jews.

Yet a few centuries later, after the tumult of Roman persecutions, after Constantine established the edict of toleration, the Mozarabic sect of Christians who migrated from Egypt to Spain, translated John 20:5 as follows for their liturgy of Holy Week: "*Peter and John ran to the tomb and saw the recent imprint of the dead and risen man on the linens*." Why would they choose to interpret the gospel in this manner? The likely explanation is they were aware of the Shroud's existence and incorporated it into their liturgy. It is worth noting that this amazing reference is at least 1200 years old and far older than the alleged 14th century carbon date [8].

To conclude this essay, I encourage Christians to use the Shroud for its phenomenal witness to Christ. Employ the "middle path" that doesn't rely on absolute proof but uses the power of *mystery* to engage the mind and the *message* of divine sacrifice to

reach the heart. Walls of unbelief will crumble, allowing those we love and those we don't even know to enter the sheepfold and hear the voice of the Good Shepherd say, "welcome home."

About the Author

Russ Breault is President of the Shroud of Turin Education Project, Inc. and has been actively lecturing on the Shroud since 1980. He attended the first scientific symposium on the Shroud held at Connecticut College in 1981 when STURP released their preliminary results. Russ has since taken part in numerous international conferences and has observed the Shroud three times in 1998, 2000, and 2010. He hosts www.ShroudEncounter.com and conducts live big screen presentations at colleges, universities, and churches of all denominations.

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