

Images, Calvin and the Early Shroud History

Paul Bishop

One of the reasons promoted by Shroud sceptics as to why it is a mediaeval fake, is that it was neither used or mentioned by the early Christians as a part of their witness and that this silence is therefore proof of its falsehood. This is certainly not a recent proposition as John Calvin wrote much the same thing in 1543 and his thoughts seem to have prevailed ever since. John Calvin said,

I would like to ask why is it that, while the Evangelists carefully related the miracles which took place at the death of Christ, and leave out nothing relevant to the history, this amazing miracle made so little impact that they said nothing about the impression of our Lord's body, stamped on his grave-clothes?

To this is added the amazing miracle which they have made up, that an image of Christ's body is impressed on the linen."

John Calvin essentially believed that since the evangelists recorded all of Jesus' miracles, that an image on a cloth would surely qualify as a miracle and would surely have been recorded if it had actually occurred. His conjecture however isn't quite true. We read at the end of John's gospel,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of [his] disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

All miracles recorded or not, were performed in the presence of his disciples. The actual resurrection had no material witnesses, but it is more than likely that there were other reasons the image wasn't mentioned by the disciples. In some studies it has also been proposed that the image was latent and did not immediately appear on the burial shroud, however it still remains a mystery.



John Calvin

Calvin wrote at the time of the reformation when there were many false religious relics held in different Catholic Churches throughout Europe. His intense dislike and distrust of them reflects the Protestant viewpoint which was indeed in many cases correct.

Unfortunately Calvin, like many others today, was prepared to throw the baby out with the bath water.

This same assertion is made regularly today by modern Shroud sceptics, that had the Shroud been genuine, the early Christians would have been keen to show it off to aid their witness. It is also said that depictions of Jesus as we know them today did not appear until the 6th century but this can be taken either way. Early depictions of Jesus show him as a youthful man usually dressed in Roman attire. It seems more than coincidental that the modern image of Christ we all know today started to appear round about the same time as the Edessa image was re-discovered in 544AD. It is also interesting to read in discussion on Herod the Great, that there were no images or illustrations of him in Judea until hundreds of years after his death. It was noted that the reason was that Jewish law prohibited depictions of living beings. Herod followed this law in order to appease his Jewish subjects, and as a result, there is no indication of any portrait of King Herod in Judea.

In *Searching for portraits of King Herod*, Ralf Krumeich and Achim Lichtenberger attempt to discover what can be known about Herod's appearance from the scant evidence that remains. We know of the furore caused by Pontius Pilate when at the beginning of his office, he brought images of the Emperor into Jerusalem. Roman standards contained images of the emperor and therefore the Jews felt their Holy city had been desecrated by these idolatrous symbols.

After the resurrection, the Jewish story was that the disciples had stolen the body. Any mention of a Shroud image at this time would have obviously have caused it to be hunted down. In John 20:19, the writer shows the disciples hiding behind locked doors in fear of the authorities. This was not a one off, and there was a constant threat and danger to them. After the execution of James by Herod Agrippa, Peter escaped jail and was left knocking at the door due to this fear. Jesus had been crucified by the religious authorities on the charge of blasphemy, for proclaiming himself equal with God. John 8:58 quotes Jesus: "...before Abraham was born, I am". The name of God.

It would be feasible therefore with the disciples and apostles living in fear of their lives that any imagery in connection to Jesus would be kept secret and hidden. Some have pointed to the writing of Paul in Galatians 3 as to the possibility of the Shroud being used by Paul in his ministry. Of course this is speculation but is a distinct possibility and cannot be ruled out: "Before your very eyes **Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.**"

The early history of the burial cloths is very hazy but it was stated by Athanasius, who was Bishop of Alexandria from 328 - 373, that "an image of our Lord and Saviour at full length" was taken from Jerusalem to Syria in the year 68AD. "Two years before the destruction of Jerusalem, all the Christians left it, and betook themselves to the kingdom of Agrippa. At which time, among other things belonging to the Church, this

image was also carried away and ever since remained in Syria". By the year 692 the Byzantine emperor Justinian II was minting the gold Solidus coin, which has been shown to have many points of congruence to the Shroud face image, including the fold by the neck. This also shows that the Shroud's existence in that region was both known and revered.

Calvin said that the legend of Abgar and his possession of the image of Edessa was "a pure fairytale". Here however we do know that there was indeed an image of Edessa which was hidden and rediscovered in the 6th century and which was subsequently transferred to Constantinople in 944 AD. It is recorded that the supposed letter of Jesus regarding the image was kept there with it, however this seemed to vanish after the city was sacked in 1204 by French and Venetian crusaders. (Whilst the letter of Jesus seems unlikely, the image portrayed in paintings with Abgar are genuine and cannot be discounted). The French mainly took all the religious relics and the Venetians mainly anything of material value, hence the large bronze horses in St Mark's Basilica which are still there to this day.

Persecution of the Christians was very widespread throughout the early centuries and came fairly abruptly to an end with the reign of Constantine the Great in the 4th century. He was considered to be the first Christian emperor. The situation didn't change until 313AD with his Edict of Toleration, which ended centuries of intolerance. Eusebius' seemingly overindulgent praise of Constantine can be understood when you read of the terrible persecutions by a host of different emperors up until that point. As far as we know, the only apostle to die of old age was John, although he too experienced persecution and exile on the Island of Patmos. His gospel account was the most meditative and corrective, being put together later than all the others. Indeed in his first chapter he summed up the situation in one sentence: "And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness couldn't put it out". Earlier of course, in his epistles, Paul gave a blow-by-blow eyewitness account of the furies they faced from both the Jews (2 Corinthians 11: 16-33) and Pagans (for example, the storm caused by the silversmiths of the Artemis cult in Ephesus). It is interesting to note that they were most effective in the places they received most opposition and least effective in places like Athens, where there was little opposition. The light did indeed shine more brightly in darker places.

It is more than likely that the image of Edessa, or the Mandylion, did indeed find its way into the possession of King Abgar and was hidden sometime later because of a return to pagan worship. The reason is fairly obvious, in that a Christian King like Abgar would probably hold the only really safe place for the Shroud. There are hints in history to this 'secret treasure' and there have also been allusions to the Shroud being the 'holy grail' and bearing in mind it is a vessel holding the blood, this might indeed be the case. It's also worth noting that there have been various attempts throughout the centuries to destroy the Shroud by fire, the most recent being in 1997 when it was

miraculously saved by a fireman breaking through the bullet proof glass to rescue it. Something else that is never brought into the equation, but must have added to the need for secrecy, was the rise of Islam in the 6th century. It was strictly forbidden to have any image of either the prophet Muhammad, or any other prophet (of which Jesus is accounted by the Islamic religion). Also, there was Iconoclasm within the Byzantine empire from 726 to 842 AD, when images could be destroyed as they were thought to be a form of idolatry. This opposition to imagery can be seen throughout history; you've only got to walk through York Minster to see the damage done to statues by the Puritan forces during the civil war, which were only saved by the commander in charge who prevented much worse destruction.

The third commandment states, "Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image" and you can see the problem in its meaning: 'A graven image is an idol-object or image, such as a statue, that is worshiped as the representation of a deity or god'. This is probably why the Mandylion was specifically described by the ancients as 'not being made by human hands' in 544AD, firstly because that is what they thought it was and also because a graven image is clearly something that was made by human hands. It is easy for us today to bear no consideration to the immense reverence in which the image was kept, particularly in the Byzantine world view, being a society based on Christian reverence. Indeed, in the West today, it is an alien concept to us, the Shroud nowadays being merely an item of curiosity to many.

The whole paradox of the person of Jesus can be seen in the same sort of thinking "the Word made flesh", the whole objection to the creator God becoming a man. A visible image. Blasphemy being the main charge against Jesus at his trial. The apostle John pondered this in his first epistle:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

However it is a paradox, for the virgin birth itself is a reminder that Jesus was not made by human will. Therefore we can say that the Shroud image is in no way contrary to the Christian claim that God became man.

We can also see the conflict of the image and why it was so important that the Shroud and strips should be kept secret. It would seem the only safe place was Constantinople after 944AD under the protection of the Emperor and although the provenance is sketchy, there is still enough evidence to show that this was probable rather than possible. The Hungarian Pray Codex being a prime example, showing features that only appear on the Turin Shroud and can only be accounted as proof in themselves.

It is well known to students of the history of the Turin Shroud that Nicholas Mesarites was the caretaker (*skeuophylax*) of the relics in the imperial treasury in 1201, about the time of the Fourth Crusade. It is also known (and largely accepted) that, although he did not state that he saw an image, his references to Jesus' burial cloth and to the nakedness of the body of Jesus in the same breath, so to speak, seem to be evidence that he was an eyewitness of the Shroud in his keeping in the Pharos Chapel.

My conclusion would be that the Shroud would not be written about in the early days and although it may have been used in ministry its presence would have been kept secret and carefully guarded and protected. After all, Jesus' mother Mary was taken in and protected by John and probably lived out the rest of her life in Ephesus. These were very dangerous times. The Apostles' Jewish contemporaries denied the Resurrection and Incarnation and many of them traduced the reputation of Mary in ways which reflected badly on her Son. Indeed you cannot realistically think about the Shroud in the first few centuries without taking into account the cultural and political climate in which Christianity existed. It is this very situation which would determine its careful protection.

Calvin lived in a period, rife with false icons and relics. His views were valid at the time, however he may never have seen the Shroud in question and obviously had no idea of the scientific evidence available today. It is unfortunate that this view of Calvin's still prevails within the constitutional documents of the Protestant church. Article 6 of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion reads:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary for salvation: so that whatever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of Faith, or thought to be requisite or necessary to salvation.

That said, there still may be hope for the Shroud in many of the houses of Evangelical Christians: inside, they have a plaque which reads, " Jesus Christ is the Master of this House, the unseen guest at every meal, the listener to every conversation." Above this legend there is a portrait of Our Lord, very much like the face on the Holy Shroud

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