

# JOHN CALVIN'S TREATISE ON THE SHROUD OF TURIN

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## INTRODUCTION

It might come as a surprise to many that 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformer John Calvin was aware of the Shroud of Turin and that he wrote about it in 1543 in his book entitled *Le traité des reliques* (A Treatise on Relics).<sup>1</sup> He also wrote about it in his commentary on John's Gospel found in his 12-volume set of New Testament Commentaries and written in 1553.<sup>2</sup>

His book was especially timely because relics were very popular at that time. Calvin spoke of "the absurdity of the relics..."<sup>3</sup> which to him was a deception organized by the Roman Catholic church. Some of these relics included the crown of thorns, the nails, pieces of the cross, the seamless robe of Jesus, Jesus' sandals, the sponge, Judas' coins, the spear, jugs from Cana and more. Such an abundance of "genuine" relics was simply impossible and, in his words, absurd. In addition, alleged relics of saints were being sold in the marketplace to the gullible and the desperate.

Accordingly, he spoke with great passion against all relics. In short, Calvin did not believe that the Shroud of Turin was the actual burial cloth of Jesus Christ, not only because it was just one more relic, but simply because the Bible is apparently silent on the subject. In his opinion, the Shroud also seemed to be in direct contradiction with the gospels, especially John's.

This paper will demonstrate that John Calvin was not correct in his assessment of the Shroud, especially in view of what is now known about this artifact. He may have also been un-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.info-bible.org/histoire/reforme/traite-des-reliques-jean-calvin.htm> accessed 30 June 2019

<sup>2</sup> <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/john/20.htm> accessed 2 July 2019

<sup>3</sup> J. CALVIN, *A Treatise on Relics (with Commentary by Count Valerian Krasiński)*, Wilder Publications, Floyd, 1854 Reprint ed. 2018, 5.

fairly biased against Roman Catholics whom he referred to with the derogatory term of “papists”. This prejudice may then have blinded him to the possibility that the Shroud of Turin could be the authentic burial cloth of Christ.

## BACKGROUND

Since the author of this paper reads and writes French fluently, Calvin’s original French text has been used for this research. Contrary to the English language, the French language has changed little over the past 450 years and can be easily understood by a modern reader. Two English translations were also considered. The first one, from Henry Beveridge, was published in 1844<sup>4</sup> and the second one, from Count Valerian Krasinski, was published in 1854<sup>5</sup>. Krasinski’s translation is not entirely reliable because in several areas, he summarizes rather than translates Calvin’s work. His translation was part of a dissertation into which he brought his own opinions and commentaries. There also appears to be a debate among some scholars as to whether Krasinski’s translations correctly represented Calvin’s thoughts on the Shroud. For example, some scholars believe that in this translation Calvin never claimed that he was aware of the existence of more than one shroud in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Beveridge’s translation more accurately represented Calvin’s treatise, although some scholars believe that he, too, tended to avoid using the “more-than-one-of” argument against the Shroud. This is intriguing as it appears that in both the original version and in the English translations Calvin in fact clearly conveyed his belief that there were many shrouds exhibited throughout Europe whose owners claimed were the true burial cloth of Jesus Christ. This will be examined further in this paper.

In the original text, Calvin uses the word “suaire”, translated as “shroud”, to mean both a napkin and a full cloth: that is, he speaks of a shroud which covers the entire body and a shroud which covers part of the body only, such as veil or a napkin covering a face. This nuance is not readily obvious in the English translations. For example, Calvin referred to the Veil of Veronica, which he simply called “the Veronica” (or true icon), as one of the many supposedly authentic

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<sup>4</sup> J. CALVIN, *Tracts and Letters (edited and translated by Henry Beveridge 1844)*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Reprint ed 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Private correspondence with Dr. Gary Chiang, Professor Emeritus of Biology at Redeemer College University, Ancaster, Ontario, 8 March 2019.

shrouds of the time. Historically, the existence of a mysterious image on a piece of cloth, known and venerated as the Veil of Veronica and displayed in Rome in the middle ages, is well documented. However, the history of that cloth is somewhat problematic, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine it.

This paper will therefore also demonstrate that Calvin's original text made it clear that he was aware that several cities claimed that they only, possessed the original Shroud. Calvin believed that the existence of more than one supposedly true shroud was strong evidence against the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin as the true burial cloth of Christ and that it was therefore a medieval forgery.

Some of Calvin's arguments will now be considered.

## DISCUSSION

“It is now time to consider the shroud, about which relic they have openly betrayed their impudence and stupidity. [...] There are, at least, six cities which boast of having the real burial cloth in their possession, the one in Nice which was brought in from Chambéry, also those of Aachen in Germany, Maastricht, Besançon, Vindon in Limoges and also a little town in Lorraine near Alsace...”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the Veronica, Calvin wrote about several supposedly genuine burial cloths of Jesus Christ in existence throughout Europe. While he does not mention the Shroud of Turin by its current name, he referred to a shroud which had been moved temporarily to Nice (France) from Chambéry. Historians confirm that during Calvin's lifetime, the Shroud of Turin was indeed located in Chambéry and had been moved temporarily from Chambéry to Nice between 1537 – 1540: at the time when Calvin wrote his Treatise. The Shroud was relocated to its current location in Turin in 1578 where it has been known since then as the Shroud of Turin. It is therefore perfectly clear that John Calvin referred to the Shroud known today as the Shroud of Turin by acknowledging that the Shroud located in Nice during his writings had moved from Chambéry.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.info-bible.org/histoire/reforme/traite-des-reliques-jean-calvin.htm#Le%20saint%20suaire> accessed 30 June 2019 (*my own translation into English*)

Nice is located on the French Mediterranean Coast about 300 kilometres from Geneva where Calvin lived. Considering the means of transport at that time, it is not clear whether he actually travelled to such a great distance to that location to see the Shroud in person.

Calvin also wrote:

“In all the places where they pretend to have the grave-clothes, they show a large piece of linen... with an image of an entire body.”<sup>8</sup>

Since Calvin did not clearly specify “front and back image”, some researchers believe that Calvin was referring in his writings to the Shroud of Besançon and not to the Shroud of Turin because of the words “of an entire body”.

Although there is some historical evidence that the Shroud of Turin may have been located in Besançon for some time between its disappearance from Constantinople in 1204 and its appearance in Lirey, France in 1353,<sup>9</sup> it is clear that the shroud displayed in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century in Besançon was a forgery, or a poor copy of the original Shroud. Although this shroud was destroyed during the French Revolution in 1794, paintings of this cloth are still in existence today. This particular shroud was clearly very different from the Shroud of Turin since it only revealed, for example, a frontal image of a crucified man but no dorsal image. The nail wounds were in the center of the hands and no marks of scourging appeared anywhere on the body. The body of Christ looked like a stick-figure, straight up and down, with the neck, pelvic area, and knees all of one width with the result that the image on the shroud showed no true lifelikeness.

Besançon is located a little over 100 kilometres from Calvin’s home in Geneva. While it is not clear at all whether he travelled to that location to see the shroud for himself, taking into account that the shroud was located at a relatively short distance from his home, the possibility certainly exists.

Whether he saw the Shroud of Besançon, the Shroud of Turin or any shroud at all is simply not known.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> D.C. SCAVONE, *The Shroud of Turin*, Greenhaven Press, Inc, San Diego, California 1989, 97.

There is certainly some evidence in Calvin's writings that he may have seen the Shroud of Besançon or one of the shrouds other than that of the Turin Shroud because of his statement "it is easy to see that those shrouds were hand-painted".<sup>10</sup> It must be acknowledged that the Shroud of Turin does not look like a classical medieval painting, even before the 1978 scientific examination demonstrated that point.

While it has been established that John Calvin was clearly aware of the existence of the Shroud of Turin located in Nice, the arguments in his Treatise were perhaps based on his personal knowledge of the Shroud of Besançon or some other shrouds which were clearly forgeries. From there he may have extrapolated his findings to include that all shrouds, including the Shroud of Turin, were forgeries.

He also wrote...

"For whoever believes that this shroud exists in one particular place, brings a charge of falsehood against all the others which boast to possess it. For example, he who believes that the cloth which was in Chambéry is the genuine shroud condemns those of Besançon, of Aachen, of Vindon [...] as guilty of falsehood and of wickedness."<sup>11</sup>

In this statement, Calvin used the same logical fallacy that many use against Christianity, namely that all religions contradict each other by claiming theirs is the only true religion and that all others are false, therefore all religions are false. The truth is that one of those religions can be true, and all the rest false, which is Christianity's claim. It follows, then, that the Shroud of Turin can be the authentic, the very burial sheet of Jesus, while all the other relics listed by Calvin are false.

Then Calvin offered the following arguments based on his interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, referring to the synoptic gospels and especially that of the Gospel according to St. John:

"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

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.info-bible.org/histoire/reforme/traite-des-reliques-jean-calvin.htm#Le%20saint%20suaire> accessed 30 June 2019 (*my own translation into English*)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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?"<sup>12</sup>

His commentary on John's Gospel found in his 12-volume set of New Testament Commentaries also reflect this interpretation.

"To this is added the amazing miracle which they have made up, that an image of Christ's body is impressed on the linen."<sup>13</sup>

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.

This is an example of an argument from silence, namely, "the Shroud must be false because the New Testament writers do not mention it." However, it is well known that the Gospels did not mention everything about Jesus as evidenced by the following words of St. John in his writing: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book." (John 20: 30) Jesus did many other things as well. So, when Calvin wrote that the evangelists recorded all miracles, he is simply mistaken.

Moreover, it must be pointed out that the New Testament in fact speaks about the Shroud because it is part of the Easter story. All four Gospel accounts tell how Joseph of Arimathea bought a fine new linen burial cloth to wrap Jesus' body after he was taken down from the cross.<sup>14</sup> The Gospel of John also mentions the burial cloth once more where it is recorded that St John and St Peter ran to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning and saw the empty burial cloths.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, contrary to John Calvin's assertion, the Catholic Church certainly did not make up any amazing miracle that an image of Christ's body was impressed on the linen cloth. Calvin would in all likelihood have been unaware that historically the Shroud can be traced back reliably to Edessa (modern day Urfa in Turkey) to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century where it was later known as the *Mandylion*, a mysterious cloth bearing the image of a crucified man. That cloth was transferred to Constantinople in 944, disappeared during the 4<sup>th</sup> Crusade in 1204 and reappeared in Lirey, France

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/john/20.htm> accessed 2 July 2019

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 27:59, Mark 15:46, Luke 23:53 and John 19: 38 – 40.

<sup>15</sup> John 20: 6 – 7.

in 1353.<sup>16</sup> In fact, to this day the Vatican's position is to make “no pronouncements claiming whether it is Jesus' burial shroud, or if it is a forgery”.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, Calvin also referred in an earlier section of his treatise to King Abgar of Edessa receiving a cloth on which a miraculous image of the face of Jesus had been imprinted and which he classified as a “pure fairy tale”.<sup>18</sup> Calvin never explicitly linked the image of Edessa with the Shroud of Turin but described it as simply one more fraudulent relic and as further evidence that all shrouds were forgeries.

There is now overwhelming evidence that the Shroud of Turin is the actual burial cloth of Jesus Christ and not a “made up miracle”. However, since Calvin lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, well before the scientific, historical and artistic evidence that has confirmed the Shroud of Turin's authenticity, it can be argued, in his defence, that he acted in ignorance and unbelief.

In his commentary, Calvin wrote:

“St John, in his Gospel, relates even how St Peter, having entered the tomb, saw the linen clothes lying on one side, and the napkin that was about his head on the other; but he does not say that there was a miraculous impression of our Lord's figure upon these clothes.”<sup>19</sup>

John Calvin made an important argument which cannot easily be dismissed. However, there may be several reasons why the Gospels did not mention an image. One such possibility is that the disciples simply did not see the image in the darkness of the tomb inside the folded linen cloth, especially when they were overwhelmed by the fact that Jesus' body was missing. Another possibility is that it may be that the image was not yet visible on the cloth as some Shroud researchers have suggested. Logically, if an image could not be seen on Easter morning, then the Gospel writers could not mention one.

He also wrote in his Treatise:

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<sup>16</sup> Cf I. WILSON, *The Shroud – The 2000-Year-Old Mystery Solved*, Bantam Press, London 2010, 176.

<sup>17</sup> M. BUNSON, *OSV's encyclopedia of Catholic history*, revised edition, Our Sunday Visitor, 2004, p. 912.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.info-bible.org/histoire/reforme/traite-des-reliques-jean-calvin.htm#Le%20saint%20suaire> (my own translation into English)

<sup>19</sup> <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/john/20.htm> accessed 2 July 2019.

“[...] and it is not to be imagined that he would have left out such a work of God if there had been any thing of this kind.”<sup>20</sup>

Contrary to Calvin’s statement, it would not be difficult to imagine why such an image was not mentioned in Scriptures. It must be remembered that Christianity was from the very beginning, and for several centuries after that, a persecuted minority religion. It can be deduced therefore that if the New Testament writers were to publicly announce that they had in their possession Jesus’ burial shroud, complete with the imprint of His crucified (and resurrected) body, it would lead the Romans and the Jews to demand, with threats of pain, torture and death, that they surrender it. It is easy to imagine that they would confiscate and destroy the Shroud if they knew it still existed. The Shroud would in all likelihood be kept hidden, and the Gospel writers would have remained silent about its removal from the tomb.

Calvin also wrote:

“Another point to be observed is, that the evangelists do not mention that either of the disciples or the faithful women who came to the tomb had removed the clothes in question, but, on the contrary, their account seems to imply that they were left there.”<sup>21</sup>

Calvin is once again guilty of the argument from silence since the gospels do not clarify whether the disciples recovered Jesus’ burial cloths from the tomb or whether they left them. Neither does the Bible say how long Peter and John were present at the tomb, nor what happened while they were there. It is conceivable that Peter and John (or some other disciples), took Jesus’ burial clothes away rather than just leaving them there in the tomb because they could serve as a concrete reminder of His earthly life among them, as well as evidence to the other disciples that Jesus had been resurrected. The Bible is simply silent on this point.

Calvin strongly asserted the following:

“But this gross falsehood is intolerable, for it openly contradicts the Gospel history.”<sup>22</sup>

With all due respect to John Calvin and to his rich contribution to the Church, it must be said that he is grossly mistaken here. Calvin does not explain why the disciples’ keeping Jesus’

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.info-bible.org/histoire/reforme/traite-des-reliques-jean-calvin.htm#Le%20saint%20suaire>  
(my own translation into English)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



burial Shroud would be a gross falsehood and how it would openly contradict the Gospel history. It would be in direct contradiction with the Holy Scriptures only if they stated that Jesus' burial cloths were not recovered from Jesus' tomb or were destroyed. This was not the case.

As already stated, Jesus' linen burial cloths were mentioned in all four gospels before Jesus' resurrection, and in one gospel after it. Nothing is said, one way or the other about what happened to them after the resurrection. There are clearly no contradictions.

Commenting on the use of "strips of linen" from the Gospel according to St. John (John 20:6), Calvin wrote in his commentaries:

"...who pretend that the whole body was sewn up in one linen cloth..."

This is a misrepresentation of the facts since Scriptures make it clear that Jesus Christ was wrapped in a linen cloth and not "sewn up". However, John's Gospel speaks of burial cloths, *othonia*, in the plural and this was a valid point of contention for Calvin. Conversely, this gospel would also appear to be in direct contradiction with the synoptic gospels, namely that Joseph of Arimathea had purchased a clean linen cloth, in the singular, and wrapped Jesus in it (i.e., Matthew 27: 59). In his Gospel, John's use of *othonia* has led to a popular belief that Jesus was wrapped like an Egyptian mummy. This procedure however does not follow what is known of normal first-century Jewish burial ritual.<sup>23</sup> It is widely accepted among Shroud researchers that *othonia* in John should be understood to mean that Jesus' dead body was enveloped from head to feet in one burial cloth, and that separate strips of linen were used to bind the hands and feet as well as the jaw.<sup>24</sup>

One last word from Calvin:

"In short, either St John is a liar, or all those who boast of having the holy shroud in their possession are convicted of falsehood and deceit."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> C.f. ADA GROSSI. "Jewish Shrouds and Funerary Customs: A Comparison with the Shroud of Turin." *Academia.edu*. (Accessed 20 May 2019). [https://www.academia.edu/2427474/Jewish\\_Shrouds\\_and\\_Funerary\\_Customs\\_a\\_Comparison\\_with\\_the\\_Shroud\\_of\\_Turin\\_in\\_1st\\_International\\_Congress\\_on\\_the\\_Holy\\_Shroud\\_in\\_Spain\\_Valencia\\_April\\_28-30\\_2012\\_ed.\\_Centro\\_Espa%C3%B1ol\\_de\\_Sindonologia\\_CES\\_.](https://www.academia.edu/2427474/Jewish_Shrouds_and_Funerary_Customs_a_Comparison_with_the_Shroud_of_Turin_in_1st_International_Congress_on_the_Holy_Shroud_in_Spain_Valencia_April_28-30_2012_ed._Centro_Espa%C3%B1ol_de_Sindonologia_CES_.) 1.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. K.E. STEVENSON AND G.R. HABERMAS, *The Shroud and the Controversy*, Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville 1990, 150.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

This is yet another fallacious argument by Calvin, this time the fallacy of false dilemma, claiming there are only two possible alternatives. Clearly a third alternative exists, namely that one of the shrouds – the Shroud of Turin – the one that he listed at “Nice” in his Treatise on Relics, is the true original burial cloth of Jesus Christ and all the others are forgeries. In view of the current knowledge on the Shroud, this would appear to be the case.

## CONCLUSION

Calvin's Treatise on Relics was timely and relevant because in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century the Roman Catholic church's fixation with relics was huge and misplaced. It is not surprising that John Calvin reacted to such abuse and deserves to be applauded. Unfortunately, since few, if any, of the true relics could be distinguished from the fraudulent, John Calvin rejected all of them.

It is also clear from his treatise on relics that John Calvin was aware that several cities claimed to have the true shroud of Christ. He was also aware of the existence of the Veronica and of the cloth of Edessa which he put in the same category as all the other shrouds. He knew of the existence of the Shroud of Turin which was at that time in Nice but dismissed it as not being authentic.

Today, there is overwhelming scientific, historical and artistic evidence that the Shroud of Turin is truly the actual burial cloth of Jesus Christ purchased by Joseph of Arimathea as recorded in all four Gospels. Calvin was, of course, unaware of evidence produced by research done over the past 120 years of Shroud studies. Because of the "absurdity of relics" which could not possibly be real and the "deception by the Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century"<sup>26</sup> and his interpretation of Holy Scriptures, he concluded that all relics must be false. As a result, Calvin did not consider for a moment that one of the shrouds, namely the one at that time in Nice, could have been the authentic burial shroud of Christ. Though Calvin was right in many of his writings, his strong bias against the organized church at the time blinded him to that possibility.

Finally, Christian believers need to remember that the core of the Christian faith is that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ – flesh and blood. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to this earth and lived among His people. It should be no surprise to find a material, physical evidence of his passage.

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<sup>26</sup> J. CALVIN, *A Treatise on Relics...*, 5.