

Probing the Shroud for Reasons to Believe

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I have often wondered how non-Christians confront the provocative Shroud of Turin, whose mysterious image science has yet to explain. Recent studies have indeed brought to light a staggering abundance of facts, and more are sure to come, but as this data pile-up races forward, a fundamental question remains: “Does not this cloth make it hard NOT to believe in Jesus’ resurrection?”

The Seahorse and the Dolphin

A seahorse once lived at the bottom of the ocean floor, the only world he ever knew. One day a young dolphin swam by and excitedly told him of a marvelous discovery.

“Did you know that if you swim up and up and up, the water-world we live in eventually comes to an end? I just leaped outside of it and burst into a new world!”

“What?” the seahorse furled his brow in disbelief.

“Really, it is true! In the moment before I flopped back into our world with a splash, I gazed briefly upon a blinding light many leagues above me, and in that breezy pale blue dome swirled strange chirping creatures that flapped long, feathery fins!”

The seahorse turned his back, saying, “Please excuse me. I am afraid I do not have time for games. You understand.”

“But I promise I am telling the truth. Won’t you come have a look for yourself?” But before he could say another word, the seahorse disappeared into the coral reef.

The Surest Path to the Truth

Those of us who have embraced belief in supernatural realities might be inclined to insist hastily that faith in a super-aqueous world is the seahorse’s only reasonable response, but step for a moment into the skin of the non-believer and try to think with his criteria.

What if he were to say the following? “I have no evidence to contradict you, but I honestly do not know if what you say is true. You speak of things so far removed from what I know. I shall have to investigate further into this mystery.”

Initial openness shows courage. Only desire for the truth, wherever it may be found, can form the basis of any profitable dialogue regarding the intersection of faith and reason. Mindful of this need, we return to the Shroud of Turin and the original question:

Does the Shroud Signal the Truth of Jesus’ Resurrection?

“Not if it is not authentic,” one might object. True enough. If science were to prove beyond any shadow of doubt that the Shroud is not the burial cloth of Jesus but instead the stroke of a master hand, it certainly could not claim any instructive value, but an inauthentic shroud would not inflict any harm upon Christianity either. Faith in the resurrection has never depended on it, as if it were an indispensable or sole witness.

I would like to share from the outset my personal opinion, aware that not everyone will agree with me. I think it is fair to call the Shroud an unparalleled witness, and I am infinitely grateful for it. Among the many signs of Christ's historical resurrection (the empty tomb, the initial disbelief of the disciples followed by the sudden conversion of thousands, their subsequent martyrdom in defense of that faith, the steady flourishing of Christian communities despite violent and sustained persecution, the transfer of the day of worship to Sunday, etc.), the Shroud stands out in our empirical age for the unique way in which it substantiates the Gospel.

The best science on the Shroud, as it stands today, points to its authenticity. Forensic experts report precise details about the physical sufferings of a crucified man. Indeed, reason—not faith—brings us beyond the simple affirmation of a burial cloth of any ordinary crucified man.

Who but the controversial “King of the Jews” could have been treated with such cruel and unique tortures—beaten, scourged, crowned with thorns, made to carry his cross, nailed to the wood, pierced in the side with a spear (and we find evidence for these on the Shroud)—and then so tenderly cared for after crucifixion, even wrapped in a pricy linen and positioned respectfully in a tomb? Besides, whose burial cloth but his would be vigilantly preserved and venerated down through the centuries? As one Jewish woman concluded, “Isn't it obvious? The man of the Shroud can only be Jesus.”

But reason carries us further still. Why are there no signs of decomposition on a cloth that clearly covered a cadaver? Why exactly 30 to 36 hours after its initial contact with the Shroud did the blood suddenly stop soaking into the fibrils? If the linen were later peeled off of Jesus' dead body by some natural means, why do the bloodstains show no smearing whatsoever?

The mysteries continue to crescendo. Why does the image appear at all when no other corpse has ever been known to leave a mark remotely similar? Why is the image a “photo-negative” best viewed with technology that would not surface for eighteen centuries? Why is three-dimensional information encoded in the image? Finally, if even the most advanced modern technologies cannot reproduce the same effect, what in the world is the image doing there at all?

To this last question, a potpourri of solutions has been put forward. It is a painting, a rubbing, a scorching...even a photo taken by Leonardo da Vinci! Personally, I would find their theories more convincing if skeptical scientists answered with a unanimous voice.

Scientists who have studied the Shroud first-hand exclude the possibility of each of these alternatives. A more credible course of action would be to admit, like the reasonable seahorse, that we do not know what made the image and then humbly pursue the truth.

I cannot speak for everyone, but scientific studies of the Shroud lead me to affirm that belief in Jesus' resurrection actually offers the most *reasonable* solution to this enigmatic image, which in my opinion, is the natural effect of a supernatural event.

Add to the mix that history passes down an explanation for the missing body: “God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:32). Modern theories claim to provide the “real story,” but the witnesses who lived it in the first person still account for the data most convincingly, and the scientific evidence backs up what these “dolphins” say.

The Relationship between Faith and Reason

Faith is not the consequence of a syllogism or science experiment but a personal choice and a gift from God. Faith is not reason, but it is reasonable: it involves believing not on the basis of proof experienced firsthand but rather on the basis of the credibility of the one revealing. For example, a non-astronomer might believe—quite reasonably—in distant galaxies because a renowned astronomer informed him about their existence. A seahorse might believe a dolphin who is his friend.

In a word, science does not prove faith, for then how would faith be faith? The Shroud, therefore, does not prove that Jesus rose from the dead, but its scientific testimony *is* perfectly compatible with his resurrection. Faith may not be reducible to reason (which is why I must respect my non-Christian friends), but Christian faith *is* reasonable (which is why they must respect me).

In this vein, one of Pascal's insights into Christianity applies neatly to the Shroud: “There is enough light for those only who desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition” (*Pensées* 430). No matter how much impressive data we extract from the Shroud confirming its credibility, if we do not want to see “the light of the resurrection,” we will never see it. God respects our freedom, inviting us to belief without forcing us, but he also “desires all men...to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). In the end, the propriety of divine love explains the grayscale on the Shroud.

Doubting Thomas and the Shroud

An intriguing artistic makeover was given to Caravaggio's “The Incredulity of St. Thomas,” in which the apostle's

finger probes the Shroud of Turin instead of the wounded side of the risen Jesus. This clever collage captures instantaneously the whole drama surrounding Shroud science and Christian faith.

In the Gospel, Thomas rejects the testimony of those who have seen the risen Lord and insists on tactile proof. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Then Christ appears again, this time in the presence of the doubting Thomas, and, without chastising his skepticism, says, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving but believe" (John 20:25-27).

The Shroud engages us in the same way, reenacting this Gospel episode today. Doesn't this cloth condescend to our insistence upon evidence, and not just any evidence, but the very kind we want? The Son of God stoops to the faithful sons of Descartes and indulges our demand for scientific signs. If we abandon our doubt, we might just give ourselves a fair chance to encounter our living Savior.

The Gospel relates a wonderful irony when it places the boldest act of faith in Christ's divinity on the lips of the skeptical Thomas, who eventually retracts his finger and proclaims in humble awe, "My Lord and my God!"

I owe a lot to Thomas. Like a seahorse daring to venture to the surface of the sea, he faced the frontiers of faith and reason. He probed the mystery, looking for inconsistencies, but when he discovered that the real inconsistency would be to remain in unbelief, he helped me see what powerful reasons there are for faith in the risen Lord.