

Gospel of Gamaliel: Early Evidence for the Survival of Jesus' Shroud

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The survival of an imaged burial wrapping of Jesus in early Eastern texts is supported by a pair of texts encompassed under the name "The Gospel of Gamaliel (GG)." This apocryphal gospel has been found in Coptic, Greek, Ethiopic, Garshuni (Syriac transcribed in Arabic script), and Syriac fragments that are closely related to the Gospel of Nicodemus, which is dated anywhere from the 2nd to 6th c.¹ The latest scholarship has concluded that while the GG is not a slavish minion of a Greek prototype, "it is an original Coptic reworking of material already extant in Greek models."² I would emphatically include the NT among these Greek models so freely adapted by this "unauthorised version" of Jesus' Passion and Death. The Coptic fragments have been prioritised because in the most complete version in 15th c. Garshuni, edited and translated by Mingana, Pilate is placed in an honourable role in keeping with the fact that the Roman procurator was transformed into a saint of the Coptic church--and only there.³ The text as it is pieced together today is best dated in the 5th-6th c.⁴

The copyist -- not the author -- of the Garshuni version was one Heryaqos Bishop of Al-Bahnasa (Cyriacus, bishop of Oxyrhynchus). But the text itself refers frequently to "I, Gamaliel," as the author, by whom is meant the "contemporary of Christ, the Rabbi Gamaliel the Elder known from Acts (5:34; 22:3) and also from the Mishnah. The name 'Gospel' was bestowed on this document by Anton Baumstark and Paulin Ladeuze.⁵ Not one editor has commented on the gratuitous but pervasive importance placed in this GG on the "burial wrappings" of Jesus and on Pilate's intimate association with them.

In the first text, still best called the "Lament of the Virgin,"⁶ Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are featured, as are the burial cloths. In the second, the "Martyrdom of Pilate," Gamaliel explicitly names himself as the author, and Pilate again joins the two Good-Friday disciples of Jesus in the retrieval of the burial cloths and in the miracles accomplished by their means. Both parts of the GG seem to pay special attention to the burial cloths which wrapped Jesus' body in the tomb, as did the Gospel of Nicodemus, to which they are thus related. In both texts can be found many nuances that

conjure up a knowledge of the naked image of Jesus on a burial cloth in Constantinople.

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. In the GG is it this same juxtaposition of burial wrappings and nudity that persuades me that the writer, whether the Gamaliel who inserts himself in the first person in the story from time to time or some other anonymous, had a knowledge, ocular or otherwise, of the Turin Shroud.⁷

LAMENT OF THE VIRGIN⁸

Approximately the first half of this section of the GG (Mingana, pp. 182-197) relates and reiterates, always in the tenderest terms, the experiences and the bereaved state of mind of Mary, Virgin Mother of Jesus, on Good Friday. The remainder is devoted to the deeds of Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus during and after the crucifixion. The lament of Mary is poetic and poignantly moving. It must suffice, in pursuit of my theme, to recite the passages which seem to point to a possible awareness of the Shroud by the writer--whoever it really was. He was comparing the sorrows of OT figures to those of the Virgin. Amidst a series of parallels such as "Jacob did not see Joseph bound by his brothers, but the Virgin saw her Son nailed to the wood of the cross". We read "Jacob did not see Joseph when his brothers stripped him of his clothes, but the Virgin saw her Son in a naked state in the middle of the Jews devoid of understanding" (183).

Pilate soon becomes a hero of the piece, for we read (191) "Indeed Pilate and his wife loved (Jesus) like their own soul." The refurbishment of Pilate continues and only increases throughout the remainder of the piece, always accompanied *pari passu* by an explicit anti-Semitism.⁹ Finally (203), after the Resurrection, Pilate reveals to the High Priests and other Jews his vision of Jesus while he lay in his bed the night before. In his

vision, Jesus says to him "Return to Me and I will forgive you. . . . Hasten to my tomb and you will see the wrappings lying in it guarded by angels. Kiss them and worship them. . . . You will witness many miracles today at the sepulchre. . . . O Pilate, you will shine in the light of my resurrection, which the Jews will deny." Pilate has come a long way, thanks to the beliefs of Coptic Christians, in contrast to his fate in other apocryphal documents like *The Death of Pilate* in which his dead body contaminates the Tiber. It is another story.

Meanwhile, Mary, who had been standing weeping by the cross, prepared to leave her dying Son. Again Jesus' nudity is remarked as Mary says, "I salute your nudity, O King, who hangs between two thieves" (191). A bit later (192) we find another gratuitous reference to nakedness. Still grieving bitterly, Mary indulges in another poetic litany: "O Governor, if you had judged with justice according to the law, the Son of the King would not have been killed while hungry and thirsty. . . . O High Priest, if you had judged with justice, Judas would have been worthy of crucifixion instead of my Son. If you had pondered your decision, O Governor, you would not have crucified my Son in His nudity"

The nudity of Jesus on the cross is one of the lessons taught by the Shroud. From the beginning of artistic representations of the crucifixion (6th c.), Jesus was always depicted fully clothed in glory and subsequently in a loincloth or *perizoma*. If the author of this text knew of Jesus naked on the cross, he may well have seen or otherwise been made aware of the naked image on the Shroud.¹⁰

Mingana was able to recreate the fullest text of the GG from two MSS "of my own collection": Mingana Syr. 87 (about 1450 CE) and Mingana Syr. 127 (dated 1683). Syr. 87 is earlier and more complete, and is thus translated in full by Mingana. Syr. 127's variant readings are consigned to his footnotes. It is interesting that Syr. 127 omitted "in his nudity" in the quote on 192. On 195, where Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are introduced, the older Syr. 87 remarks how Joseph asked Pilate for permission to take the body of Christ down from the cross. Pilate was pleased to give it. Then "After they had shrouded Him well in perfume, myrrh, and the new linen wrappings, which had not been used for another man . . . they fastened Him well till the third day." Syr. 127 has omitted this last passage in favour of the words "they placed guards over Him." It has seemed to

me that the "fastening in the shroud" of Syr. 87 continues the interest in the burial wrappings of that MS, while once again the writer of Syr. 127 has not shared the attention attached to this feature of the narrative.

On 196 this attention shifts to Jesus' blood, and the text manifests a certain resonance with the literature of the Shroud. Jesus has been entombed in the absence of His mother. Mary, still lamenting, is made to complain "Even if I could not find your body, O my beloved, I would have grasped your blood, because although Jacob did not find the blood of Joseph, he wept over the blood of another. Woe is me, O my beloved Son, because I have not seen your body and your blood. (Syr. 127 omits the entire sentence.) If I had found your blood, O my Child, I would have purified my garment with it. . . .The blood over which Jacob wept was a foreign blood, but that over which I weep is flowing from the side of my Son. . . . [where] they have pushed the spear-head into your divine side." The side wound on the Shroud is arguably "the" most prominent feature after the face and nudity of the figure on the Shroud. Again on 197 Mary is still yearning to see her Son in His tomb and again her grief is related in a heart-wrenching litany, each part taking the form: "You have been a physician to them, and yet they have struck you...nailed you . . .insulted you.... The line that most directly relates to the present theme goes: "You have been a physician, O my Son, and you cured them from haemorrhage, and in spite of that . . . they pierced you in the side." Can this last passage be an allusion to both the NT *haemorrhissa* sometimes identified with Veronica and less directly to her veil and to the side wound seen on the unfolded Shroud?

After his nocturnal vision and interview with the risen Lord (204), Pilate tested the four men who had been assigned to guard the tomb over the week-end, but who (the text has previously revealed--197) had been bribed by the Jewish leaders to suppress the fact if there should be a resurrection. Kept separate, each of them gave a different account of the disappearance of Jesus' body. Convinced that they were lying, Pilate goes with the high priests to the sepulchre, where "they found the wrappings lying in the tomb without the body." Pilate remembered Jesus' promise in the vision—that he would see miracles at the sepulchre, and he "took the wrappings, that is to say the pieces of linen with which Jesus was shrouded, wept over them and embraced them with joy."

Next follows one of the best known apocryphal stories, that of the centurion who

was blind in one eye and who regained his sight by embracing Jesus' funeral wrappings and believing in Jesus. It was a miracle witnessed by Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and a multitude that had flocked to the tomb because they had heard that Pilate was there to see if Jesus had risen (206).

The Jews are made to go into the stock-behaviour assigned to them in the NT but much exaggerated in the anti-Jewish apocrypha of the Christian Dark Ages: of course, for them, all Jesus' miracles are done through Beel-Zebul, and of course they are pleased to let His blood be on them and their children forever (206-207). Here they insist that a body in a well there in Joseph of Arimathea's garden (site of his family sepulchre) is that of Jesus, and all follow Pilate to the well. "And I Gamaliel was following with the crowd." Finding a "shrouded" dead man in the well, Pilate summoned Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to identify him and also the wrappings from the tomb. The two recent disciples indeed identify the grave-wrappings as those of Jesus but the body, they testify, is that of the robber who was crucified with Jesus. And, just as in the Gospel of Nicodemus, here too the Jews fall upon Joseph and Nicodemus. In the present text, however, the two are saved by Pilate's men, whereas in the Gospel of Nicodemus, Joseph was imprisoned only to be miraculously released by Jesus Himself and his angels. (The latter story has become a fundamental element in the legend of the Holy Grail--but that is outside our scope at present.)

As a climax to this Lament of the Virgin, Pilate asks Joseph and Nicodemus to wrap the thief in Jesus' shroud and place him in the same tomb with the stone rolled into place. This done, Pilate prays aloud that the Lord should make crystal clear his power over death by raising even this "good" thief. It happens as he hoped and prayed. From inside the tomb the voice of this early-day Houdini called out to open the door of the tomb that he might come out. Christ had announced to him yet in the tomb that both he and Pilate would be in Paradise (209).

"At that moment I Gamaliel followed the crowd and my fathers Joseph and Nicodemus, because fear did not allow the Apostles to come to the sepulchre and witness what happened to Him. They were hiding in every place from fear of the Jews. I Gamaliel, walked with the crowds and witnessed all that happened in the tomb of my Lord Jesus, and the great fight that Pilate undertook against the High Priests . . . while

Pilate was holding the wrappings on his arms ... And Pilate said to the centurion: Oh my brother, you saw with your own eyes and heard (with your own ears) the great number of people who believed in Jesus Christ on account of the resplendent miracles witnessed also by the wicked and accursed Jews, who did not believe."

"Let us here end the discourse on the Virgin and her sweet wailing, and on the death and resurrection of her Son from the dead. These words have been written by Gamaliel and Nicodemus, the venerable chiefs, and they placed them in Jerusalem, the holy city, and in all the districts that surround it, by the grace and love of our Lord and God Jesus Christ to whom are due glory, power, and honour for ever and ever. Amen. Here ends this great discourse. May God have mercy upon the scribe, the reader, the attentive hearers, and all the believers."

MARTYRDOM OF PILATE ¹¹

The second segment of the GG reviews the Lament of Mary before going on to develop the situation leading to Pilate's martyrdom and sainthood in the Coptic church. The writer is again explicitly Bishop Cyriacus, who found it in a copy written by Gamaliel and Horus¹² because, with Joseph and Nicodemus, they witnessed the ordeals of Christ. The theme given in the first lines is the resurrection of Christ and the "tribulations undergone by Pontius Pilate in the holy city, at the time of the crucifixion ...and of the persecution suffered by Pilate at the hand of the Jews for the name of Christ . . . and the torments inflicted on him by Herod before he was sent ... to the Metropolis, the great city of Rome, where his head was cut off and his martyrdom completed" (244).

The events of Passion weekend are rehearsed from the NT itself, but one recalls some of the imagined details present in the Lament (245-246). The story moves to Jesus descending to Hell and His dogmatic "Harrowing," i.e., releasing Adam (especially named) and all the others who suffered a long sojourn there prior to the act of salvation of Good Friday. The same topic is given a treatise of its own in connection with the Gospel of Nicodemus (247-248).

The beginning of the end for Pilate came when Herod wrote letters to Emperor Tiberius slandering Pilate. Pilate also sent reports to the emperor relating "all the deeds

of Jesus, His crucifixion, His death, His resurrection from the dead, the quaking of the earth, the eclipse of the sun". Tiberius was immediately converted by Pilate's letter, and he took it out on the Jews who had delivered Herod's lies and were still in Rome. They were killed and strung up around the city gates. Then he summoned Pilate, Joseph, and Nicodemus (253).

Still in Jerusalem, Pilate was interrogated, stripped, flogged by the Jews and, with his wife Procula, was dragged through the streets with permission of the Emperor's messenger/ vizier. All the while he and Procula were jubilant in the hope of joining Christ in Heaven all the sooner. But the vizier restrained the Jews and took Pilate into his custody again (254-255). A similar treatment was imposed upon Nicodemus and Joseph, after which they too were detained in a prison cell with Procula and Pilate. Finally the Jews managed to bribe Tiberius' messenger to permit the death of all four.

Then comes an unanticipated turn of events. The jail keepers come to the Roman and beg to be rid of the four prisoners since, they say, "a spiritual man is constantly with them, whose light is more dazzling than that of the sun. We saw him coming down from Heaven and embracing them" thus melting their shackles. The column to which they were tied bent down to worship this being. The guards continued, "He is a Galilean by appearance, and his hair is beautiful and flowing in curls around him." [Syr. 127 gives "He is Jesus of Nazareth."] The figure advised Pilate that he would be crowned with thorns [like me] and crucified twice, once in Jerusalem (where he would not die) and again in Rome at Tiberius' command (256-259).

In the meantime, Tiberius' only son had died. The emperor and his wife grieved bitterly, until the wife recalled the wonders worked by Jesus, as they had been related in Pilate's letter and others they had received from Jerusalem. Tiberius wrote to Jesus confessing his faith and announcing that he was sending his dead son to be laid in the sepulchre of the Savior, for he had heard of the miracles worked in that place. (The son was exhumed and found to be little more than bones.) (261-262)

When the boy's body arrived, Herod was intent that he not be revived and gave bribes to his handlers to steal the body and hide it. The angel Gabriel, however, revealed the hiding place to Joseph and Nicodemus and they "sent for me. In secret, me Gamaliel." Just then the body was discovered to the discredit of Herod (265). After four days in the

tomb of Jesus, the boy returned to life and the stone moved away from the opening of its own accord (266-267). Then the Roman messenger wrote a letter to Tiberius and the boy, Caesar, added words in his own hand. The news and the boy's return to Rome caused great joy in the royal family and, of course, resulted in their Christianization (268-271).

But Tiberius had other feelings regarding Pilate, now delivered to Rome. "You saw all the miracles and prodigies which Jesus wrought, and I have been informed that at the time of his crucifixion you were sitting and judging his case. Now describe to me His image, His portraiture, His picture, His majesty, and His beauty." Pilate could not do so. "O Emperor, my lord, . . . I did not ascertain His portraiture and His characteristics: once I saw that He was of the colour of fire, and once I saw Him like a bird flying to the heights of Heaven and the angels speaking to Him"¹³. Nevertheless, Pilate was ordered to again be crucified and then beheaded (271-273). "I, Gamaliel, was not able to restrain my tears when I saw the weeping of the blessed Pilate when he began to implore the soldiers to deliver his body to his servants after they had cut off his head" (274).

Back in Jerusalem, Procula and her children had died, the Virgin Mother had been raised to become Queen of Heaven, and Herod had been slain by an arrow from Tiberius' messenger (274-275). Troops sent by Tiberius to find the Virgin were thus disappointed and returned bringing instead the disciple John to the emperor. From this point in the narrative to the end, the alert reader finds a number of reflections of the Shroud. To Tiberius' question "How could the Jews pierce His heart with a spear?" John replied: "The life of us all consists of water and blood, and both of them sprang from His holy side."

Tiberius then makes a strange request: "You will then know how to paint His image for me in the figure which He had on the cross, exactly as He was crucified for us." And he ordered a slab of good stone, and John painted the figure of Jesus. "When it was finished the blessed John bent his head over it in order to kiss it with his mouth, and immediately after the lips of the Saviour turned to the lips of the blessed John, and they kissed each other. The Emperor Tiberius witnessed all this, and he was greatly amazed and bewildered. Then the painting ...cried and said: 'It is enough, O John, that you painted my image and the figure of my crucifixion, as you witnessed it on the day of

crucifixion. It was not fair on your part, you my beloved, to crucify me after my resurrection from the dead; it would have been better if you had painted my figure according to the image you saw of me after my resurrection. The Jews crucified me once at the hand of Herod, why do you crucify me again at the hand of Tiberius? ... Do not allow the inhabitants of Rome also to see my nudity. My side was pierced with a spear on Friday, do not pierce me, O John my beloved, another time after my resurrection ...' " (279) ... And the Emperor took the image and embraced it, then he placed it on a high pedestal at that place, like the image of the Son of God in the country of the Byzantines [or of the Armenians] (280). From this account, the portrait hardly seems an image on stone, but rather resonates with another full body image of Jesus, similarly honored as miraculously created: the famous cloth Image of Edessa. It is possible that the writer of the Martyrdom of Pilate may have seen the latter remarkable image, for he has noticed its nudity.

"And I Gamaliel had learnt the art of writing ... and learnt the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord Christ, and the miracles which He performed, and what happened to the vizier of the Emperor ... and to the Emperor Tiberius, and I put all to writing and composed it as a memorial of the holy resurrection. . . . He who says a bad word shall be met with its equal, but he who finds a mistake and corrects it, the Lord will improve for him this world and the world to come with His peace. Amen."

NOTES

(1) For mss history and bibliography on GG see Anton Baumstark, "Un evangile de Gamaliel," *Revue Biblique*, n.s. 3, (1906) 253-259. See also M.-A. van den Oudenrijn, "The Gospel of Gamaliel" in Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* (Westminster/John Knox Pr, 1991), 558-560). For the best and fullest translation, taken from the Garshuni mss in the library of A. Mingana, see his *Woodbrooke Studies. Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni*. Vol. 2 (Cambridge: W. Heffer 1928) 163-332, esp. 278ff.

(2) See Schneemelcher (n. 1) 559.

(3) Good discussion by Rendel Harris who wrote the Introduction to Mingana (n. 1) 165-177.

(4) M. R. James, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon 1963, rp. of 1924) 147. Schneemelcher 559.

(5) van Oudenrijn (n. 1) 558.

(6) van Oudenrijn 558.

(7) See Daniel Scavone, "The Shroud of Turin in Constantinople: the Documentary Evidence," in Robert F. Sutton, Jr., ed., *Daidalikon: Studies in Memory of Raymond V. Schoder, S.J.* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publ., 1989) 312-329, esp. 320.

(8) Mingana 182-210.

(9) Fragment 1, the opening of the Akhmim Egypt tomb discovery of the lost Gospel of Peter in

1886-87 reads "But of the Jews no man washed his hands, neither did Herod nor any one of his judges; and whereas they would not wash, Pilate rose up." In this document, which was referenced already by Bishop Serapion of Antioch about 200 and thus may be dated about 150, one may find the first distancing of Pilate from the Jews and Herod and the beginning of his Coptic canonization. See the excellent discussion by Rendel Harris in Mingana 168-177. See also that of Wilhelm Schneemelcher and the translation by Christian Maurer in Schneemelcher, vol, 1, 216-227.

(10)Markwardt has drawn attention to what the *Catholic Encyclopedia* tells of the history of the crucifixion in art.

In the artistic treatment of the crucifix there are two periods: the first, which dates from the sixth to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; and the second, dating from that time to our own day. . . . In the first period the Crucified is shown adhering to the cross, not hanging forward from it; He is alive and shows no sign of physical suffering; He is clad in a long, flowing, sleeveless tunic (colobium), which reaches the knees. He head is erect, and surrounded by a nimbus, and bears a royal crown. F. Garrucci, "Storia dell' arte crist.", III, fig. 139 and p. 61.) In a word, it is not Christ suffering, but Christ triumphant and glorious on the Cross. . . . Christian art for a long time objected to stripping Christ of his garments . . .

With the tenth century, realism began to play a part in Christian art, and the colobium becomes a shorter garment, reaching from the waist to the knees (*perizona*). . . From the eleventh century in the East, and from the Gothic period in the West, the head droops onto the breast, the crown of thorns is introduced, the arms are bent back, the body is twisted, the face is wrung with agony, and blood flows from the wounds. . . . The living and triumphant Christ gives place to a Christ dead, in all the humiliation of His Passion.

(11) Mingana 241-282.

(12) Mingana 244, n. 5, surmises that Horus is the Aeneas of the Coptic Gospel of Nicodemus who says he translated texts relating to Jesus from Hebrew into Greek. He did this, he says, in the time of Theodosius (late 4th c. to mid-5th c, depending on which Theodosius is meant).

(13) These lines recall the concepts found in the 2nd-c. Acts of John, the 10th-c. so-called "Oldest Latin Abgar Legend," and an Armenian version of the Abgar legend, in all which Jesus earthly appearance constantly changed so that he could not be fixed by the viewers' senses. For the Acts of John, Zaninotto sent me to the best source: the Greek text found in Eric JUNOD and Jean-Daniel KAESTLI, eds., *Actes de Jean*, vol. II, 191-198, and their commentary, vol. I 487-93 and vol. II 474-493. *Corpus christianorum series apocryphorum*, I, Brepols Turnhout, 1983. For the "Oldest Latin Abgar Legend" and the Armenian Abgar legend see Daniel Scavone, "Joseph of Arimathea, the Holy Grail, and the Edessa Icon" in *ARTHURIANA*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Winter 1999) 3-31.