



THE SHROUD: NOT A PAINTING, NOT A SCORCH, NOT A PHOTOGRAPH



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By JIM GRAVES

“One of my favorite testimonials as to the authenticity of the Shroud,” says Barrie Schwartz, an expert on the Shroud of Turin, “actually came from my Jewish mother.”

This June, Pope Francis will be making a pilgrimage to Turin, Italy, home of the famous Shroud of Turin, which many believe is the 2,000-year-old burial cloth of Jesus Christ. The pope’s June 21-22 visit will include time venerating the Shroud at the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist. Francis will then visit the tomb of Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati, buried in a nearby altar. The trip will also include a commemoration of St. John Bosco, founder of the Salesians and patron saint of youth who worked in Turin; this year marks the 200th anniversary of his birth. The papal visit will take advantage of April 19-June 24 exposition of the Shroud, which was last displayed in public in 2010.

The Shroud, which is a 14.5' by 3.5' linen cloth bearing the image of the front and back of a man who has been scourged and crucified, has been kept in Turin since 1578. Barrie Schwartz is one of the world’s leading experts on the Shroud. In 1978, Schwartz, a technical photographer, was invited to participate in the first ever in-depth scientific examination of the cloth, known as the Shroud of Turin Research Project (STRUP). A non-practicing Jew at the time, he reluctantly agreed to be part of STRUP, fully expecting the team to prove that the Shroud was a painted image from the Middle Ages. But after many years of study and reflection he came to believe in its authenticity.

Troubled by frequent inaccurate media reports on the subject, in 1996 Schwartz launched a website [www.shroud.com] to share the true story of the Shroud and scientific research that had been performed on it. Two decades later he still makes Shroud presentations in the media and to a variety of groups, including seminarians in Rome.

Schwartz recently spoke with CWR [Catholic World Report].

CWR: What are some of the most compelling arguments that the Shroud is authentic?

Barrie Schwartz: Thirty-seven years ago, when I went to Italy with STRUP to examine the Shroud, I assumed it was a fake, some sort of medieval painting. But after 10 minutes studying it, I knew it was not [a painting]. As a professional photographer, I was looking for brush strokes. But there was no paint and no brush strokes.

For 17 years I refused to accept that the Shroud was authentic. The last argument holding me back was related to the blood. The blood on the Shroud is reddish, but blood on a cloth, even after just a few hours, should turn brown or black. I had a conversation with Alan Adler, a blood chemist, on the phone and I shared my reservation. He got upset and asked, “Didn’t you read my paper?”

He had found a high content of bilirubin on the Shroud, which explains why the blood on the Shroud is red. When a man is beaten and has had no water, he can go into shock and the liver starts pumping out bilirubin. It makes the blood stay red forever. It was the last piece of the puzzle for me. I had nothing left to complain about. Sometimes I wonder why I hadn’t asked Alan Adler that question 17 years before, but I guess I wasn’t ready for the answer back then.

Although this was the final evidence that convinced me, it is no one particular piece of evidence that proves the Shroud is authentic. The entirety of evidence indicates that it is.

One of my favorite testimonials as to the authenticity of the Shroud actually came from my Jewish mother. She was originally from Poland, and had only a high school education. She heard one of my lectures, and afterwards we were driving home. She was quiet for a long time—you have to worry when a Jewish mother is quiet—so I asked her, “Mom, what did you think?” She said, “Barrie, of course it’s authentic. They wouldn’t have kept it for 2,000 years if it wasn’t.”

Now that was an excellent point. According to Jewish law, a blood-soaked shroud would have had to have been kept in the grave. To remove it, in fact, you would have been putting yourself at risk because you were violating the law.

The most plausible explanation to me for the Shroud, both because of the science and my own personal background as a Jew, is that it was the cloth that was used to wrap Jesus’ body.

CWR: What are some of the common falsehoods about the Shroud?

Schwartz: It would take hours to compose such a list. There seems to be a constant cacophony of nonsense being put out about the Shroud. [...]

The Shroud is a complex object, and a six-page article or 44-minute documentary—which must be entertaining—can’t do it justice. That’s why I created www.shroud.com so that people can review all the data and come to their own conclusion based on the facts.

CWR: What does the Shroud tell us about the physical sufferings of Christ?

Schwartz: It is literally a document of the Passion and the torture Jesus suffered. His face was severely beaten, and was particularly swollen around the eyes. I’m a fan of professional boxing; the facial image on the Shroud reminds me of a boxer who’s just lost a match.

The man has been severely scourged. Not only do we observe the wounds on the back, but the thongs wrapped around the body and hit the front as well. Forensically speaking, the image on the Shroud is more accurate than common depictions we see in art.

He has a spear wound on his side. His legs are not broken, as was typically the case with men who are crucified. His head and scalp are covered in wounds. Again, in art, we often see the Crown of Thorns depicted as a small circle resembling laurel leaves around Christ’s head. But that is not realistic. The soldiers actually took a thorn bush and smashed it down on his head.

We see the back of one hand, which indicates that the nails were driven not through the center of the palm, but an inch closer to the wrist. For a Roman soldier crucifying 20 or more people at a time, that makes sense. It’s the perfect place to drive a nail that will hold, and then you can move on to your next victim.

Regarding the feet, it’s impossible for us to judge if a single nail held both feet, or if nails were driven in each one. We have the actual remains of two crucifixion victims, and two nails were used in their feet.

CWR: Was he stretched out on the cross so that his arms were dislocated? And, had part of his beard been plucked out?

Schwartz: The forensic evidence tells us that he could have been stretched so that his arms were dislocated. And, we do observe a V-notch in his beard, indicating that it could have been plucked.

In the end, the forensic evidence indicates that the Gospel account is an accurate depiction of what happened during the Passion of Christ.

CWR: Some people have seen many other things in the Shroud, such as Roman coins covering Christ's eyes.

Schwartz: Oh, yes. People see coins, flowers, and all kinds of other things that may or may not be there. Regarding the coins, on our STRUP team we had a NASA imaging scientist—a good Catholic, in fact—who indicated that the weave of the linen was too coarse to pick up the inscription of a coin. What we're certain of is that we see an image of a man, and isn't that what is important?

CWR: From your study of the Shroud, what kind of physical description of Christ can you offer us?

Schwartz: He was a well-built man; what we might describe as buff today. He had a strong upper body, a deep chest and good-sized shoulders. This makes sense, as he was a carpenter. At that time you'd have to go out and fell a tree, cut it up and carve it, all things which would require a lot of physical strength.

Regarding his height, it's hard to tell. There is no defined edge of the image. It just fades out. The cloth, too, can be affected by humidity and stretched. That said, our best guess is 5'10" or 5'11". So, he'd be a taller man for the time, but not so tall that the Gospel writers made note of it. In fact, we have the remains of Jewish men from the era that were over six feet.

CWR: Did he have a ponytail?

Schwartz: It certainly looks like it. Orthodox Jews of the period wore their hair long.

CWR: What can you tell us of the cloth itself?

Schwartz: It was a high-quality cloth that a man of high stature would have owned. It was probably made in Syria, and brought to Jerusalem on the back of a camel. Since it was imported, it would have been expensive. This is consistent with the Gospel account, which indicated that Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man. He probably owned it and had been planning to use it for himself.

Before my own Jewish father died he planned out his entire funeral. It's reasonable to believe that Joseph of Arimathea did the same. When Christ died he gave him his own shroud, planning to buy another one for himself at some later date.

CWR: Your website just celebrated its 19th anniversary.

Schwartz: Yes. In 1995, I was talking to a friend, and he said, "You know that Shroud thing you've been studying? It was a painting by Leonardo da Vinci." I asked him where he got that information. He said, "My wife and I were at the grocery store, and we saw it in a tabloid at the check-out."

Now Leonardo da Vinci was a pretty good artist, but we have documentation about the Shroud dating back 100 years before he was born. No one is that good! I remember writing myself a note: "Consider building a website." I did, and I've been overseeing and adding to it ever since.

I realized long ago what a great privilege it was to be in that room in Italy with STRUP in 1978. But with that privilege came a responsibility. As I tell my audiences, I wasn't in that room for me, but for you. I don't know why God picked me to be there, but what better witness than a skeptic? I had no emotional attachment to or interest in the subject at the time.

CWR: What was involved in your time with STRUP in 1978?

Schwartz: We arrived a week early with 80 crates of equipment, which was seized for five days by Italian customs. We had a limited time to implement a 67-page test plan, and as we had lost five days of preparation, we weren't certain we could run all of our tests.

The Catholic Church itself had very little involvement. The Church, in fact, didn't own the Shroud at the time. King Umberto, Duke of Savoy (the former ruling family of Italy), whose family had owned the Shroud for six centuries, gave permission for us to study it. The Church in Turin was merely the custodian of the artifact.

We initially asked for 96 hours to study it, but we were allowed to see it about 120 hours. We were there to collect data, not draw conclusions. We were there to answer one simple question: how was the image formed? In the three years following we produced papers that were submitted to peer-reviewed journals. In the end, we could only tell how it did *not* get there. It was not a painting, it was not a scorch, and it was not a photograph.

Our team was composed of experts of a variety of faiths, from Catholics to total skeptics. We had Mormons, Evangelical Christians, and Jews. Our religious belief was not a criterion for being on the team. In fact, as a Jew, I felt uncomfortable being on the team and I tried to quit twice. One of my friends on the STRUP team, Don Lynn, worked for JPL and was a good Catholic. When I told him I wanted to quit because I was Jewish, he asked, "Have you forgotten that Jesus was a Jew?"

I told him I didn't know much about Jesus, but I did know he was a Jew. He asked, "Don't you think he'd want one of the Chosen People on our team?" He told me to go to Turin and do the best job I could, and not worry about being a Jew.

CWR: Are there any other objects in the world that compare to the Shroud?

Schwartz: There is nothing like it.

CWR: What effect have you seen the Shroud have on people?

Schwartz: I've observed a broad range of responses. Some have no reaction, but for many others it revives their faltering faith. But, in the end, faith is not based on a piece of cloth, but is a gift of God stirred in the hearts of those who look upon it.

Catholic Education Resource Center: Jim Graves. "The Shroud: Not a Painting, Not a Scorch, Not a Photograph." Catholic World Report (March 27, 2015). www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/other-topics/the-shroud-not-a-painting-not-a-scorch-not-a-photograph.html.