

THE SHROUD OF TURIN AND APOLOGETICS: A RESPONSE TO GARY HABERMAS

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In a recent discussion of the Shroud of Turin in this *Journal*, Gary Habermas makes four claims: (1) The shroud probably originated in Israel in the first century A.D., and the image on it is not a fake. (2) There is no inconsistency between the NT account of Jesus' death and burial and the type of burial depicted in the shroud. (3) There are strong reasons to believe that the man wrapped in the shroud was Jesus. (4) The shroud furnishes strong scientific evidence for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.¹

We are neither scientists, historians nor Biblical scholars, so we do not wish to challenge (1) and (2). But we, like Habermas, are interested in "the philosophical questions surrounding the shroud and any possible evidence for the resurrection of Jesus in particular,"² and it seems to us that his arguments for both (3) and (4) are subject to criticism on philosophical grounds.

We shall first discuss (4). According to Habermas, three pieces of scientific evidence provide "some exciting new evidence for [Jesus'] resurrection":³ (5) The body had not begun to decompose, so the individual wrapped in the shroud could only have been covered for a few days. (6) The body was not unwrapped; it was separated from the cloth in some other manner. (7) The image was caused by a burst of light/heat (radiation).⁴

One of the difficulties in evaluating Habermas' argument at this point is determining exactly what he is arguing. At one point in the argument he concludes: "In fact the evidence from the shroud is strong enough that if Jesus was not buried in this garment, then we might have a problem, for it would seem that someone else would have appeared to have risen from the dead."⁵ Habermas is clearly implying that the shroud is evidence for a resurrection from the dead—i.e., evidence for the fact that the man in the shroud (whoever he was) was resurrected. When this is added to the claim (established earlier in his article and assumed here) that Jesus was in fact the man in the shroud, Habermas' overall argument takes the following form: (8) The man in the shroud (whoever he was) was resurrected (established by the scientific evidence—i.e., premises 5-7). (9) Jesus was

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¹G. R. Habermas, "The Shroud of Turin and Its Significance for Biblical Studies," *JETS* 24 (March 1981) 47-54.

²*Ibid.*, p. 47.

³*Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.* p. 54.

the man in the shroud (established earlier in article). (10) Therefore Jesus was resurrected.

Granting premise (9) at present, what is the logical connection between the scientific evidence (premises 5-7) and the claim that the man in the shroud was resurrected (premise 8)? Unfortunately the connection is not nearly so strong as Habermas seems to assume. If premises 5-7 are established scientific facts, this does indeed make the shroud an unusual object worthy of future consideration. However, these facts offer us no direct evidence for the claim that the body in question came back to life (was resurrected). None of the scientific items Habermas lists is a necessary condition for a bodily resurrection, even by Biblical standards. Lazarus, for example, was raised from the dead, but his body had begun to decompose and had to be unwrapped. Moreover there is no evidence that any "burst" of radiation was involved. Nor do we have any reason to believe that the scientific evidence from the shroud provides sufficient conditions for a resurrection. In fact our experience with the effects of radiation on the human body would tend to support the opposite conclusion: that the body tissue in question was destroyed.

In short, what follows from the scientific evidence directly is not that if the body in the shroud was not that of Jesus "someone else would have appeared to have risen from the dead." What directly follows is only that some dead body "disappeared" in a very strange manner.

Thus even if we assume that the man in the shroud was in fact Jesus, it is not evident exactly how the shroud alone provides "some exciting new evidence" for Jesus' resurrection.⁶ The most that can be inferred from the shroud alone is that a resurrection theory is consistent with the shroud evidence. But of course there are other theories that are also consistent with the shroud evidence. How the shroud is evidence in a more positive sense for a resurrection in general or the resurrection in particular is not at all clear.

But perhaps we have misread Habermas. Just after telling us that the "shroud provided some new and exciting evidence for the resurrection of Jesus" and just before concluding that such evidence is strong enough to establish that someone has been resurrected, he tells us that the shroud evidence "complements the extremely strong historical evidence for [Jesus' resurrection] as well."⁷

Perhaps, in other words, Habermas' real argument is that the shroud is strong evidence for Jesus' resurrection because the shroud data is consistent with the extremely strong historical evidence for this event that we already possess. However, to read the argument in this manner obviously robs the shroud of any strong apologetical value. For if it is necessary to have extremely strong, independent historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus before the shroud evidence can function as strong evidence for this event, it is not clear in what sense or to what degree it can be said that the shroud itself provides "new and very strong arguments for the historicity of [the resurrection]."⁸

In short, Habermas appears to be caught in a dilemma. If the shroud is to fur-

⁶Ibid., p. 53.

⁷Ibid., p. 54. Cf. also: "To say the least, a burst of radiation from a dead body that appears to be that of Jesus is very intriguing evidence for this resurrection, *especially in light of the historical evidence for this event*" (p. 53; italics ours).

⁸Ibid., p. 53.

nish new, very strong arguments for Jesus' resurrection, it must obviously do so independently of other established forms of evidence for this event. But it is not clear that, apart from being considered in relation to such evidence, the shroud can be considered good evidence for any type of resurrection at all.

Let us now turn to Habermas' reasons for believing that if the shroud is an authentic first-century object the man buried therein was probably Jesus. "The similarities between the gospel account of Jesus' passion and the wounds of the man buried in the shroud," we are told, "are certainly apparent." Both, for example, were cut throughout the scalp by a number of sharp objects. Both were whipped and then forced to carry a heavy object across their shoulders after their beatings. But more important, he adds, is "the fact that a number of occurrences in Jesus' passion are known to have been out of the ordinary in usual crucifixion procedure, yet the same things happened to the man buried in the shroud as well." For example, it was not common for crucified individuals to be stabbed in the chest, be buried immediately or wear a crown of thorns. Yet both Jesus and the man in the shroud were treated in this manner. "Because of these and other unusual points that both Jesus and the man in the shroud have in common," he concludes, "a number of scholars have studied the data and have concluded that it is highly improbable that the crucifixion of the two different men would agree so closely." In fact, Habermas believes that given the similarities there is only a "one-in-83-million probability that the two men are not the same."⁹

Is Habermas correct? If we grant that the shroud is an authentic first-century burial cloth, is the probability that Jesus was the man in the shroud this high? To answer the question adequately, we must first decide whether Habermas is assuming the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion to be historically accurate. It initially appears that Habermas wants simply to compare "the similarities between the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion and a description of the man in the shroud."¹⁰ That is, it initially appears that he is not presupposing the historicity of these gospel accounts. However, by the time he makes his very strong probability claim he is talking about "Jesus and the man buried in the shroud" as if both are established, first-century personages.¹¹

However, that we know exactly what Habermas is assuming in this regard is of crucial importance in analyzing his probability claim. There is a significant difference between comparing the shroud evidence with an established, historically accurate account of a first-century death and comparing it with an unsubstantiated account of a death from this time period. If we have good, independent evidence for assuming that a man named Jesus actually died in a manner that happens to be similar to that depicted in the shroud, the crucial probability question becomes this: Do the similarities between our knowledge of two historically substantiated, first-century crucifixions make it likely that the man buried in the shroud was Jesus? If we do not have this good, independent evidence the basic probability question is quite different: Do the similarities between the gospel accounts and the shroud data make it probable that (a) such gospel accounts are in fact historically accurate and thus also probable that (b) the man who was

⁹Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹Ibid., p. 52.

wrapped in the shroud is the same man mentioned in the gospel accounts?

Habermas' very strong probability claim (one in 83 million) must be rejected if he is responding to the second question—that is, if he is not assuming that the gospel accounts with which he is comparing the shroud data are historically verifiable on independent grounds. For it is not clear that if there were not adequate, independent evidence for the historicity of the gospel accounts a simple comparison of the similarities between these accounts and the shroud data alone would establish the historicity of the accounts. And if we do not have a sound historical basis for believing that the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion are in fact accurate, then the similarities between these accounts and the shroud evidence give us no sound basis for believing that the man in the shroud was in fact Jesus. If Habermas is in fact arguing this way, his strong probability claim simply does not follow.

But perhaps when he makes his strong probability claim Habermas is assuming that there is strong, independent evidence for the historicity of the relevant gospel accounts. If so and if he is correct then the claim that Jesus is the man buried in the shroud may well have some probability. However, two cautionary comments are necessary.

First, not all scholars accept Habermas' historicity assumption. Most scholars may acknowledge that Jesus lived, died by crucifixion and was buried. Not all affirm, however, that the gospel accounts are, or are to be taken as, straightforward historical accounts of these events. Such scholars may of course be wrong, but the point still holds. If Habermas is basing his high probability claim on the historical accuracy of the gospel accounts in question, his argument will only be convincing to those who grant him this initial assumption.

Second, to assume that there exists independent, historical verification for the gospel accounts has a significant apologetical consequence. It is sometimes argued, as Habermas does elsewhere, that the shroud evidence "verifies the historical trustworthiness of the gospels."¹² However, to claim both that the shroud evidence verifies the historical accuracy of the gospels and that it establishes the fact that Jesus was the man in the shroud generates an obvious dilemma. It is only important to argue that the shroud evidence verifies the historical accuracy of the accounts if we do not already have sufficient, independent evidence for such historicity. Yet, as we have seen, it is only highly probable that Jesus was the man in the shroud if we assume that there exists independent evidence for the historicity of the gospel accounts in question. Accordingly a choice must be made. We can assume that Habermas' strong probability claim has some plausibility and deny that the shroud evidence is needed to establish the historicity of the gospel accounts. On the other hand we can assume that the shroud evidence is needed to establish the historicity in question and reject Habermas' strong probability claim. We cannot have it both ways.

In conclusion, let us make it clear what we are and are not arguing. We are not taking issue with any claims concerning the shroud's authenticity. Moreover, we have no problems in principle with Habermas' attempt to use the shroud apologetically. In opposition to Habermas we are arguing that he overstates the apologetical usefulness of the shroud. Scientific evidence is relevant to Christian belief, but the move from scientific evidence to significant religious conclusions is more difficult than Habermas seems to recognize.

¹²K. E. Stevenson and G. R. Habermas, *Verdict on the Shroud* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981) 120.