

The Shroud
by
Michael McCollum

The Shroud of Turin is thought by many to be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. As such, it could represent the greatest danger Christianity has yet faced . . .

(Caution: People with strong religious beliefs may find the subject matter disturbing.)



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John Frakes was jolted awake by the screech of tires on wet asphalt as the twenty year old airplane touched down at *Aeroporto di Torino*. He groaned and straightened up in his seat. The catnap on the forty minute flight from Rome had been his first rest in thirty hours. Ever since the final lab results had been verified, his sleep had been marred by the same recurring nightmare. He would barely doze off when the stern face of his father scowled forth from his deep subconscious, tugging him forcefully back to reality.

The Reverend Lester Frakes had been a fire breathing Episcopalian minister while he lived. Even five years after the old man’s death, Frakes still occasionally woke in the middle of the night covered with nervous sweat, his hands shaking in a fit of filial guilt. His father had never really forgiven him for changing his major from Religious Studies to Chemistry during his Junior year of college.

“I’ve raised me a damned atheist, have I?” the Reverend Frakes had screamed at him that fateful Christmas Eve when he had broken the news.

“No, sir, an agnostic.”

“I will pray for you, lad,” Lester Frakes had said, casting his eyes heavenward. “Perhaps the Lord will someday tear this veil of foolishness from your eyes so that you may see the path of righteousness once more.”

Even then Frakes had had to smile inwardly as his father slipped easily into the old fire-and-brimstone sermon mode. As they had done so many times before, the words washed over him as though from a scalding sea, their sting intended to bend his will to that of the old man.

Only that time he had refused to bend, and in the end, it had killed the Reverend Frakes as surely as a knife.

“*What would say now, Father, if you knew what I know?*”

He knew the answer even as he asked the question. Lester Frakes had always chosen a single sermon on those infrequent occasions afterward when his son had come to hear him preach.

“Never let your mind overpower your faith, my flock! Without faith we are little better than the poor guinea pigs these would-be-prophets slice open in furtherance of their evil experiments . . .”

“You may unbuckle your seat belt, *Signore*.”

Frakes looked up with a start. The pretty, black haired, black eyed stewardess who had welcomed him aboard in Rome was standing over him. He looked around, surprised to see the last of the passengers crowding towards the exit at the front of the plane.

“Sorry,” he said, reaching for the buckle. “I guess I was daydreaming.”

“Are you well?”

“Uh, *Mi sento molto bene, grazie*. Just a little tired is all.”

“You speak *Italiano* well for an American, *Signore*. Perhaps this is not your first visit?”

“I was here last summer for two months. I picked up a few useful phrases then.”

“Well, have a nice stay this time.”

Frakes levered himself out of his seat, pulling his briefcase with its precious cargo from under the seat in front of him, thankful for the chance to stretch his legs after so many hours in the air.

Sardinian Customs was almost peaceful after the organized chaos he had encountered at Rome City State. There were none of the hundreds of soldiers and *Carabiniere* that the Rome city fathers seemed to think necessary. Of course, the Sardinians had no need to guard against agents of the Peoples’ Republic of Naples at the moment, either.

Within half an hour he was out of the airport and headed north in a cab towards the gray smudge on the horizon which was Torino.

“You are in Sardinia on business, yes?” the taxi driver asked over his shoulder as he weaved nonchalantly between an oncoming Fiat and a cryogen tanker stopped half on/half off the road.

“Yes,” Frakes said, staring blankly at the glistening wetness of the highway. The static crackle of the windshield rain repulsors and the low throated hum of the turbine made him want to go back to sleep.

“*Ingegnere* . . . engineer?”

Frakes shook his head. “*Scienziato*.”

“Ah, here to visit our mills for making of the plastics?”

“No, to visit the Cathedral.”

“You come to see the Sacred Shroud?”

Frakes nodded.

“*Signore*, this is your lucky day! Mi brother, he is tourist guide. He would be most content to guide you personally. Perhaps, if you wish, he will arrange a most private tour for you, *Signore*. The cost will be not great. No more than a million New Lira. He will speak with the Guardians and perhaps you will even be allowed to touch the Relic.”

In spite of the sandpaper on the insides of his eyelids, John Frakes had to smile. “The payment will be in advances of course; and to you, not your brother.”

The driver’s brown eyes looked expressively at him in the rearview mirror as his whole body underwent a huge shrug. “It is the way things are done in Sardinia these days, *Signore*.”

“You wouldn’t disappear with the money the moment I handed it over, would you?”

“*Signore*, you wound me!”

“What would you say if I told you the Shroud hasn’t been on public display more than fifty times in the last eight hundred years?”

The taxi driver grinned, seemingly unbothered for having been caught red handed. “I see I am in the presence of one knowledgeable about such things.”

Frakes laughed. “You might say that. I’ve spent the better part of the last two years studying the Shroud. I know far

more than I ever wanted to.” Frakes felt a pang of guilt as he realized the statement held far more truth than he had intended.

#

The Shroud of Turin is a piece of linen dating back to the First Century, AD. Physically, it is quite large, measuring 4.3 meters long by 1.4 meters wide. However, it is not the mere fact of the age of the material that causes the Shroud to be venerated so.

For on the surface of the Shroud, clearly visible to the naked eye, there is miraculously imprinted the image of a man. Actually there are two images, one frontal, one dorsal; each nearly joined to the other at the head, as though the cloth had been folded lengthwise over a corpse and then removed before the process of decay set in.

The two images are so detailed that it is possible to know a great deal about the man who once lay in the shroud. He stood 172 centimeters tall in life, was possessed of a handsome face, a beard, and long flowing locks. He lies naked in death with his legs extended to their full length beneath him. His arms are crossed left over right, obviously tied together to combat the effects of *frigor mortis*.

More intriguing than his physical appearance is the manner of his death.

On the surface of the Shroud there are a number of bloodstains arranged in a meaningful pattern. Near the hands are marks of wounds that could only have come from having spikes driven through each wrist. Similar marks show up on the feet, as though they were pinioned together with a single large nail. Clearly the original owner of the shroud was a victim of the cross.

A series of marks on the dorsal image indicate that He of the Shroud had been severely flogged by two men prior to being nailed to the cross. A large bloodstain at the abdomen shows that he was pierced through the right side by a short spear, probably as a *coup de gras* administered after death. And most suggestive of all are the small spots of blood in the region of the head, the pattern of which suggests a Crown of

Thorns worn like a cap and tied under the chin for maximum torment,

Tradition has it that the Shroud is the burial cloth of Jesus Christ, given to Simon Peter for safe keeping following the Resurrection. As to the subject of what became of the burial garment in the years that followed, the Gospels are unfortunately silent.

The first independent historical reference to Christ’s burial shroud comes from Saint Nino in the Third Century. Then, in the year 570, an anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza reported that it was being kept in a convent in a cave by the River Jordan. And again, during the Seventh Century, a French bishop named Arculf told a tale of having seen the Shroud in Jerusalem.

For six hundred years there were no further reliable reports of the sacred cloth until 1204, when Robert de Clari, a chronicler of the Fourth Crusade, reported its presence in Constantinople. After the Crusaders plundered that great city, however, “no one, neither Greek or Frenchman, ever knew what became of it . . .”

The Shroud surfaced again in 1356 in Lirey, France. Then on December 4, 1532, the Shroud was involved in a fire in the sacristy of the Sainte Chapelle of Chambery. Its silver casket overheated and drops of molten metal fell on the folded linen, burning a series of deep black scars into its surface, luckily leaving most of the image unharmed.

In 1578 it was moved from Chambery to Turin on orders of the Duke of Savoy. And in Turin it rested for the next five hundred years.

For most of its history after 1356, the Shroud was believed to be a fake or a clever painting done by some unknown Michelangelo for the greater glory of God. Only in the nineteenth — and later the twentieth — centuries, with the invention of ever better photographic methods, did the true nature of the Shroud become clear. Quite simply, the Shroud was exactly what it appeared to be, the burial cloth of a First Century martyr. Even a cursory study of the image’s anatomical detail showed that no medieval artist, no matter

how much a genius, could possibly have been so precise.

As ever more powerful scientific tools were brought to bear on the Shroud's "authenticity", the question of whether or not it was truly Christ's image on the linen became ever more important. As in the case of most questions of religion, opinions were varied . . . and heated!

#

The Cathedral of Saint John, the Baptist, showed few indications that it had witnessed nearly a thousand years of turbulent history. Its great double doors stood agape, as if welcoming one and all to enter and take refuge within the dimly lit interior. Here and there across the Cathedral's stately face were the pockmarks of machine gun fire, some dating back to the Second World War. Other, smaller caliber pockmarks were less than thirty years old, stark evidence of the Breakup that accompanied the Second Reformation.

John Frakes wearily climbed the flight of steps to the cathedral's entrance, and crossed the threshold into the stately interior, glad to be out of the wet drizzle that fell from a gray sky. As he did so he was acutely conscious of the warm glow that washed over him both inside and out. The outer warmth came from the cathedral's efficient central heating system, installed by the Guardians when they carved the Shroud's resting place from solid rock beneath the foundation during the Time of Troubles. The inner warmth came from the knowledge that untold generations of men had trod this floor before him. Agnostic or not, Frakes couldn't help feeling a certain reverence whenever he thought of the lives so intimately entwined with this building and its Sacred Treasure.

There had been Secondo Pia, the first man to photograph the Shroud. It had been he in 1898 who had first clearly seen The Face in the Shroud as it appeared so starkly in one of his old fashioned glass negatives. Later the photographer had described that instant as an intensely personal religious experience.

Then there had been Filippo Lambert and Guglielmo Pussod, who risked their lives rescuing the Shroud's silver casket from the flames at Chambery. And later, Princess

Clotilde of Italy, who knelt on rough stone floors and laboriously attached the backing cloth which protects the Shroud stitch by stitch, refusing all help until the job was finished.

Frakes was suddenly conscious of standing inside the Cathedral with chills running up his spine. He flinched visibly as he remembered where he was and what he must do in the next few minutes.

His reverie was further interrupted by the hollow clatter of leather soles on the stone floor. A man dressed in a business tunic and neck collar came into view from between two of the giant pillars and made straight for him. Frakes shivered a little and waited for the other to reach him.

"Doctor Frakes?" the Reverend asked as he reached the waiting scientist and extended his hand.

"Yes," Frakes said, taking the hand. The other's grip was firm, but not bone crushing.

"The First Primate regrets he will be delayed a few minutes. I am his assistant, Giuseppe Calle. He has asked me to entertain you until he can arrive."

"You speak English very well, Signore Calle. No trace of an accent at all."

Calle smiled. "Don't let my name fool you, Doctor. I'm from Cleveland."

"What happened to Bartol?"

The Guardian lifted his hands. "He is on a religious retreat in the mountains."

"Sorry to have missed him. He was indispensable to me last summer."

"Ah, yes. The Great Inquiry. I've been meaning to ask you. What were all those immense tanks the news people kept taking photographs of?"

"Helium. Your Primate refused to break the seal on the Shroud's casket until we had flooded the whole underground vault with helium. I worked for nearly a week in breathing gear. You may have seen me in the newsmags. I was the one who looked like a drunken spaceman home on leave."

"Ah yes, I remember," Calle said, nodding. "Have you

been shown around our Great Cathedral?”

“I was given a very extensive tour while I was here earlier this year.”

“Then you are familiar with our Order’s history and works?”

“Only what I read in the fax, I’m afraid. My work, you know.”

“Yes, we all have our work. You explore the natural universe while I do the same for the spiritual. Perhaps we two are more alike than you know. May I give you the nickel lecture while we wait?”

“By all means.”

“A bit of background first, then. You know, of course, that our Order is not associated with any formally established religion. We make no claims of new insights into the nature of God, or of a private channel direct to His ears. We were founded in 2009 by a man named Bartolo Vasquez, a simple layman whose sole purpose was to protect the Holy Shroud from the exploitation so common in those days. We are an ecumenical organization. We care not if one of our members is Methodist, or Catholic, or Anglican, or Coptic. We ask only that he be a good Christian and to believe in the Shroud as the burial cloth of the Savior.

“Beyond that, we ask him to go forth and do good works.”

Frakes nodded. “I’m familiar with your medical center in Denver. A really marvelous place.”

“And then there are our missions to feed the poor and starving of the world,” Calle continued. “Last year we spent over ten billion decadollars on our public charities. But then what is money for if we can’t help others with it?”

“Your order has grown mightily in the last couple of decades,” Frakes agreed.

“Do you know why?” Calle asked.

“Because of the Shroud.”

“Yes, of course. Unlike the various established Christian religions, our order has absolute physical proof that our Savior died for our sins. The others have their faith, a faith

which we share I might add. But we have absolute proof! Is it any wonder that we attract so many supplicants each year?”

“Only the good Doctor doesn’t think our proof is genuine, Calle. Do you, Doctor?” The new voice echoed through the sitting room which Calle had directed Frakes to as they talked. Frakes turned to face the source of the sound.

Standing behind them was the First Primate of the Guardians of the Shroud of Turin — next to the Pope, the most powerful man in all of Christendom.

The First Primate was a tall, wizened man whose strongly lined face still managed to convey the feeling of complete inner peace. At the moment his features were contorted by a wry grin.

“‘Absolutely no proof that the Shroud is that of Jesus Christ.’ Wasn’t that what you told me at our first meeting, Doctor Frakes?”

“I fear I am being quoted out of context, Primate. What I said was that absolute proof is not possible. We know that the Shroud is a burial cloth, but it was my opinion last summer that the identity of the man in the -image could never be proven with utter certainty.”

“Does your curious phrasing of that answer mean that you have changed your mind and absolute proof is now possible?” Calle asked, excitement creeping into his voice.

“Well, I . . .”

The Primate held up his hand. “Just a moment, Doctor. Perhaps we should get one thing clear. Do you know why I granted your request last year and allowed you to scan the Shroud with your miraculous machine?”

“Frankly, Excellency, I truly don’t. I was both surprised and pleased when I received your letter.”

The First Primate nodded. “I understand you were turned down by quite a number of others.”

“Yes, Excellency. You must understand that I am not a religious man. My father was a man of the cloth and hoped I would follow in his footsteps. I’m afraid that it wasn’t to be. Instead I have spent my professional career working on the genetic structure of human blood and how it has or has not

changed with the centuries.

“The basic problem in my field, of course, is getting samples of ancient human blood to perform tests on. Unfortunately, the only part of our bodies that remains after death are the bones. Theoretically, we could run a .chromosome map on them, but in practice their calcified structure is unsuitable for the basic tests that are required.”

“Which brought you to us,” the Primate said.

“Yes. The two places where I could obtain material for my experiments were the mummies of Egyptian pharaohs and, of course, the blood stains on the Shroud. The tests are nondestructive, so I hoped there would be no objections to the procedure.”

“And the Egyptians turned you down while I accepted,” the First Primate said.

“Yes, Excellency.”

“But why are you so surprised?”

“I told you, Excellency. I am not a believer.”

“In this case, Doctor, that factor worked in your favor.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you know what the Achilles Heel of Christianity was before the Shroud was authenticated, Doctor?”

Frakes shook his head.

“The lack of validation by nonbelievers, of course. Are you aware that there are no eyewitness accounts of Christ except for those in the Bible?” Frakes opened his mouth to object, but the First Primate stopped him with an impatient gesture. “No, it’s true. Oh, no one doubts that He existed. There are historical references to His existence from the First Century, commentaries written by men who lived shortly after His time and who do not contest the fact of His existence. A few scholars have suggested that He did not exist, but by and large, they have been laughed into silence.

“But think, Doctor. How much better it would have been if we had even a single scrap of evidence that was not basically Christian in origin. Would it not be nice to have a pagan’s account of the Sermon on the Mount? Or perhaps a Roman soldier’s letter home telling of the crucifixion of

another Hebrew troublemaker? Some corroborating evidence, as it were, from a source other than our own holiest of books?”

“I guess I never looked at it that way, Excellency.”

“So for two thousand years the world’s Christians took their religion on faith alone. Now faith is a wonderful thing, but is it not so much better to have proof? That, at least, is the cornerstone on which our Order was built. It is, I’m afraid, the main source of friction between ourselves and the old established religions. Many of them still believe faith is enough.

“Whatever your side in that argument, however, it still remains that a number of sophisticated tests on the Shroud — the extensive analyses of the 1980s and 1990s — could not prove it a fraud. To those of us in the Order, they went much farther than the negative finding that shows up in the final reports. We have pondered the evidence and find it sufficient to prove our case beyond any reasonable doubt. It is on those results that our beloved Bartolo built this Order.”

John Frakes licked dry lips and wondered why it was suddenly so cold in the sitting room. He chose his next words carefully, wishing that the buzzing in his ears would subside long enough for him to concentrate on the business at hand.

“I do not wish to disagree with someone as learned as yourself, Excellency, but all those original tests proved was that the Shroud is truly the burial cloth of a man who was crucified. There was no proof whatever that he was the Son of God.”

The First Primate smiled. “Which brings us to why you are here Doctor. We are an Order that has no fear of science. As I have explained, our founding was the direct result of those earlier test results. But those discoveries were somewhat limited in scope as you have pointed out. The earliest researchers into the Shroud used nothing but their naked eyes. Later cameras and microscopes and Carbon-14 dating techniques were used in conjunction with computer analysis. These studies yielded many valuable results, but were still limited by the fact that — except for a few small samples taken during 1973 — all tests have had to be nondestructive in nature. Those early Keepers of the Shroud were quite correct

in refusing to allow additional pieces of the sacred cloth to be removed. If every scientist who wanted samples from the Shroud had been accommodated there would be little more than a handkerchief sized piece left today.”

“So you granted my request to examine the Shroud because my investigations are completely harmless?” Frakes asked.

“Of course,” the Primate said. “Even so, I had a hard night of it before making the decision to grant your request. If you had been one of us, if you truly believed that the Shroud was Our Savior’s burial garment, I would probably have turned you down.”

“I still don’t understand, Excellency.”

“It is quite simple, Doctor Frakes. You will be my pagan at the Sermon on the Mount, my Roman soldier writing his family of the Crucifixion. You have no connection with this Order and a worldwide reputation for honesty and scholarship. You will go forth and publish your findings, and we will use those findings for the further Glory of God. Now, sir, pardon my excitement but I have waited most of my adult life for this moment. What can you tell us of our Holy Relic?”

“Have you the proof positive that we seek?” Calle asked, his eyes shining with excitement no less than the Primate’s.

Frakes cleared his throat and averted his eyes, keenly aware that the moment of truth was upon him.

“I have proof, but I fear you will be disappointed.”

“Come now, Doctor. out with it. What have you discovered?”

“As we discussed, Excellency, I first concentrated my instruments on the body images and not the blood stains. It has been a mystery for centuries just how the image came to be on the cloth of the Shroud. Well, the mystery is mysterious no longer. The body image is the result of a complex, but perfectly understandable chemical reaction. I have a report in my briefcase that you can study at your leisure.”

“Go on.”

“Our next objective was to determine the chromosome

structure of the individual whose blood is on the Shroud. This is what took the better part of four months. You understand, Excellency, that there is much we do not know concerning chromosome structure. We have another millennium of study in front of us before we understand the underlying principles. But in our initial, groping way, we have scanned the cloth and developed sufficient data to identify his chromosome pattern with a ninety-five percent probability. We then analyzed the pattern extensively. The man whose shroud that is in your underground vault was almost surely a Semite. With one exception the chromosome pattern correlates well with that of a modern man of Semitic extraction.”

“Exception?” the First Primate asked, his manner suddenly intense. “You have found evidence that this was no mortal man?”

“Not exactly, Excellency.”

“Out with it man! Was it Our Lord or not?”

“No, Excellency, it couldn’t possibly have been. The very idea is grotesque, unthinkable.”

“You let me worry about what can be thought or not thought, Doctor. What have you discovered?”

“The chromosome pattern, Excellency. It had a strange structure in some of the peptide chains. It took us quite a while to identify it and even longer to check our conclusions. In fact, the implications are so far reaching for your order, that I had the work completely rerun six separate times. There can be no mistake.

“The man who lay in the Shroud had a genetic defect. He suffered from a condition known as Kurusoku Syndrome.”

“We are not medical people, Doctor Frakes,” the First Primate said, an edge developing in his voice. “What does that mean in English?”

“Kurusoku Syndrome was first identified around the turn of the last century. It is a genetic disease characterized by a progressive reduction of the afflicted person’s mental capacity, an ever increasing sense of disorientation with respect to reality, and if allowed to go untreated, can lead to delusions of grandeur. If it were proved that the Shroud were the true

burial cloth of Jesus Christ ... well, I think you'll agree that the consequences for Christianity would be catastrophic."

#

It was twenty minutes after the alarm went out that the first ambulance arrived on the scene. For the better part of an hour the doctors worked on the First Primate before they dared send him to the coronary unit of Our Lady of Fatima Hospital on the outskirts of Turin. He was given only a fifty-fifty chance of surviving the night. As John Frakes descended the Cathedral steps to the waiting cab, he shivered in the cold drizzle. He sat inside the vehicle in a daze. All he could remember was the memory of the old man's eyes just before the heart attack took him. The look of betrayal was one that would stay with him all the rest of his life.

It was the same look that had been frozen on his father's face on that fateful Christmas Eve so many years before. It was the look that now haunted his very dreams. Somehow he knew that it would haunt his dreams for a long time to come.

The End

Author's Note:

The basis of fiction is conflict and one of the techniques of the art is to place the characters and readers on the horns of a dilemma for which there is no solution. In *The Shroud* I present the reader with a series of facts which add up to the conclusion that The Shroud of Turin cannot possibly be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. However, throughout the story the reader is presented with another series of facts which convinces them that the shroud is indeed genuine. When the scientist announces his discovery at the end of the story, the reader is presented with a conundrum for which there is no satisfactory solution. The result — a strong piece of fiction.

The Shroud won an honorable mention in the Locus Reader Poll for 1981. Not bad for a story that I thought would be unsalable due to its subject matter.

For those who are disturbed by this story, The Shroud of Turin's age was confirmed by radiocarbon dating in 1990. Three different laboratories determined that the cotton which went into the weaving of the cloth was grown between the years 1260 and 1390 AD. In other words, The Shroud is a medieval fake!

Some may have noticed that John Frakes' name is strikingly similar to that of Jonathan Frakes, the actor who plays Commander Ryker of *Star Trek, The Next Generation*. This is a coincidence. I wrote *The Shroud* long before I had heard of the actor.

Michael McCollum
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