THE SHROUD OF TURIN: A SURREJOINDER

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The rejoinder by Gary Habermas is very helpful. He clarifies his position and identifies weaknesses in ours. There are, however, still points of contention.

One of the basic issues in this discussion is whether the shroud itself, as Habermas claims in his rejoinder, furnishes us with evidence for a resurrection that is "new and apart from the gospels or historical evidences." In his initial article Habermas argues that three pieces of scientific evidence—the lack of decomposition stains on the shroud, the fact that the body was not unwrapped, and the fact that the image was probably produced by a burst of heat/light—provided "new and very strong arguments" for a resurrection. We argue in response that such evidence at best demonstrates that the dead body disappeared in a very strange manner and not that a dead body came back to life. In his rejoinder, Habermas offers an expanded statement of his position:

- 1. Scientific investigation of the shroud has established the following: (a) The body was in a state of rigor mortis—i.e., it was completely dead; (b) the body had not begun to decompose, so the individual wrapped in the shroud could only have been covered for a few days; (c) the body was not unwrapped but was separated from the cloth in some other manner; and (d) the three-dimensional, nondirectional, superficial image was probably caused by a burst of heat/light.
- 2. Scientists report that "no known natural causes could account for [these phenomena]."
- 3. To assume that there may be a yet unknown natural explanation is to "both beg the question in favor of an unknown naturalistic theory and to indefinitely postpone an investigation when adequate data is available."
- 4. Accordingly, the resurrection (supernatural) hypothesis is most plausible—i.e., it is more likely to be true than the other options.

Unfortunately, this argument still fails to meet our basic objection. To claim that the body in the shroud was resurrected is not only to claim that the body was separated from the cloth in a manner currently unexplainable by science. It is first and foremost to claim that the body in the shroud came back to life. But (1.a) to (1.d) do not in themselves stand as "empirical, repeatable evidence" for the claim that the body in question was resurrected in this sense. Scientists cannot, through repeatable experiments, demonstrate that bodies that come back to life produce an image like that found on the shroud. Nor do we have any historical evidence from Biblical or extra-Biblical sources supporting the assumption that bodies that come back to life produce similar phenomena to those described in (1.a) to (1.d).

Nor does it help to argue that since there exists no naturalistic explanation for (1.a) to (1.d) the supernatural (resurrection) hypothesis is most plausible. For

¹G. Habermas, "The Shroud of Turin and Its Significance for Biblical Studies," *JETS* 24 (March 1981) 53.

even if we assume that (1.a) to (1.d) were produced by a supernatural extrication of the body from the shroud, we would still have no scientific or historical basis for assuming that the body in question had been brought back to life. It is only if we also assume that Jesus was the man in the shroud and that he was resurrected that it becomes reasonable to assume that phenomena described in (1.a) to (1.d) were produced by a resurrection. But we can only assume justifiably that Jesus was the man in the shroud and that he was resurrected if we have good reasons to affirm the historicity of the relevant gospel accounts. In short, we must have good reasons for assuming the historicity of the gospel accounts before we can assume that (1.a) to (1.d) were produced by a resurrection. If this is the case, then it cannot be argued that (1.a) to (1.d) provide arguments for a resurrection that are "new and apart from the gospels or historical evidence." Accordingly, our initial criticism stands.

We have just seen that even if Habermas can establish the supernatural hypothesis his argument fails. But what of his attempt to establish the hypothesis in the first place? In our opinion, filling the gaps in naturalistic explanation with the supernatural is both difficult and dangerous, as the history of the tension between science and religion has shown.² Habermas tries to avoid these difficulties by stating that he is not trying to move from history to miracle or theology. While Habermas consciously acknowledges and tries to avoid the difficulties of moving from history to miracle, it would appear that his use of supernaturalistic language throws him right into the midst of the difficulties he is trying to avoid.

The other basic issue under discussion is whether the man in the shroud can be identified as Jesus. In his initial article, Habermas claimed that the mode of crucifixion found depicted on the shroud and the description of Jesus' crucifixion found in the gospel accounts are so similar and unique that the probability that the man buried in the shroud was not Jesus is only one in eighty-three million.

In response we first argued that if Habermas is not assuming the historicity of the gospel accounts in this comparison, his probability claim must be rejected. But as Habermas rightly points out in his rejoinder, for us to imply that he might not be assuming the historicity of the gospel accounts in this context is an oversight on our part. In his initial article his position on this issue is not clear. In his book, however, he clearly states that the historical reliability of the Scriptures must be established before "we compare the shroud image to the gospel accounts."³

We also acknowledged in our initial response that if there is strong evidence for the historicity of the relevant gospel accounts, the comparison in question may make it somewhat probable that Jesus was the man in the shroud. We added, however, two qualifications. First, we pointed out that those scholars who do not accept the historical reliability of the relevant gospel accounts will obviously not be convinced by the comparison in question. Secondly, we pointed out that if we must assume the historicity of the relevant gospel accounts before we can assume that the man in the shroud was probably Jesus, then we cannot appeal to the contention that the man in the shroud was probably Jesus to establish or strengthen

²See Basinger and Basinger, "Science and the Concept of Miracle," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 30 (December 1978) 164-168.

³G. Habermas and K. Stevenson, Verdict on the Shroud (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981) 113.

the historicity of these same gospel accounts.

Habermas responds to both of these cautionary comments in his rejoinder. With respect to the first, Habermas denies that the historicity of the gospel accounts is in fact a debatable issue. "The reliability of the NT," he argues, "is based on solid data such as ancient historical methodology, the rejection of radical NT criticism by many critical theologians themselves and, most important, evidences for the reliability of the NT. We are thus on strong ground when we accept the trustworthiness of the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion."

Habermas is of course correct to argue that many scholars do affirm the general historical reliability of the relevant gospel accounts. And we do not wish to deny that those who do so are basing their beliefs on credible evidence. But the crucial question in this context is not whether a plausible case can be made for affirming such general reliability. The crucial question is whether there is any reasonable basis for questioning the historical reliability of the very specific, literal reading of these accounts on which Habermas' comparison is based. Is this type of specific, literal historicity something that sincere, competent scholars can justifiably debate? If it is, as some believe, then it still holds that Habermas' very strong probability claim need only be seriously considered by those who accept his historical perspective.

In response to our second qualification, Habermas points out that he has never held that the shroud is required to prove the trustworthiness of the gospels. This is a valid criticism. We ought not to have implied that Habermas believes that the shroud evidence should be used to establish the historicity of the gospel accounts. The general apologetical point, however, still holds. If one must already have conclusive evidence for the literal historicity of the relevant gospel accounts before one can justifiably conclude that the man in the shroud was Jesus, then the similarities between the shroud image and the gospel accounts cannot in any meaningful apologetical sense be said to strengthen such historicity.

We also need to clarify our position on the strength of the comparison in question. Habermas' claim that the probability that the man in the shroud is not Jesus is only one in eighty-three million is not only based on his belief that the gospels give us an accurate description of Jesus' passion. It is also based on his belief that the shroud is in fact a first-century burial cloth from Palestine that bears an image produced by a body wrapped in it. In our initial response we simply assumed for the sake of argument that Habermas is correct on this point. And it was on the basis of this implicit assumption that we argued that if the historicity of the gospel accounts can be established, the claim that Jesus was the man in the shroud becomes plausible. But we have not committed ourselves one way or the other on Habermas' claim that "scientific testimony has established the shroud's authenticity." Accordingly, even if we were convinced that the historicity of the relevant gospel accounts was beyond dispute, we still would not have necessarily committed ourselves to Habermas' view that "there is no practical probability that someone other than Jesus Christ was buried in the Shroud of Turin." 5

We would like to make one final observation. Habermas initially implies that

⁴Habermas, Verdict 121.

⁵Ibid., p. 128.

our response is misguided due to our failure to take into consideration the explicit claim in his original article that (1) the article was by necessity brief and (2) he was restricted against divulging all the relevant shroud data. From our present response it should be clear that the problem we originally had (and continue to have) with Habermas' position is one of principle—i.e., we find the basic structure of his arguments problematic. The fact that his article was brief and did not contain certain data did not mislead us. The fact that our original criticisms still stand even in light of Habermas' lengthy reply and additional data shows that this is the case.