

The Shroud of Turin, the Resurrection of Jesus and the Realm of Science: One View of the Cathedral

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Abstract— In a topic as controversial as the shroud of Turin, it is always surprising to notice that there still exists a large area of consensus among scholars holding opposite opinions on the topic. According to the consensus view, neither science nor history can ever prove that the Turin Shroud shows signs of the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. However, the reasons given for such an important claim are not convincing, especially in regard of recent developments in historiography and analytic philosophy.

Keywords— *philosophy of science; natural theology; historiography; Bayesian Approach; methodological naturalism*

I. THE CONSENSUS VIEW AND EVEN BEYOND

A. The current consensus

According to the consensus view, neither science nor history can ever prove that the Turin Shroud [TS] shows signs of the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is, for example, what thinks Giulio Fanti [1] who writes that: “The fourth level [of authenticity] states that the TS shows signs of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the Resurrection is not a reproducible phenomenon, it goes beyond the realm of science and therefore the fourth level of authenticity cannot be tested.” Historian Simon Joseph contends that: “the scientifically established (first-century) authenticity of the Shroud would not be able to prove Jesus’ divinity, virgin birth, or resurrection, but it would make significant contributions towards resolving numerous historical questions regarding Jesus’ existence, physical appearance, and the general reliability of the gospel passion narratives of Jesus’ death.” [2]

The main goal of this paper is to challenge the current consensus by offering, in an allusion to a

seminal contribution in Law and Economics authored by Calabresi and Melamed, another “view of the cathedral” [3]. This allusion is also here to emphasize how modest every approach of this complex, interdisciplinary and controversial topic should be.

B. Definition of the Resurrection of Jesus

As seen in many articles and books on the TS, what authors mean by “resurrection of Jesus” is not always crystal clear. In the rest of the article, we are going to follow an unambiguous and vastly shared definition: the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is his bodily resurrection from the Dead that occurred around 30 AD. Such a definition is for example in full agreement with the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “Christ's Resurrection cannot be interpreted as something outside the physical order, and it is impossible not to acknowledge it as an historical fact” [4]. Thus we avoid the metaphorical understanding of the Resurrection.

C. Philip Ball's 2008 editorial

Famous physicist and science writer Philip Ball goes even beyond consensus. In an editorial published in 2008 in *Nature Materials*, Ball writes : “Of course, the two attributes central to the shroud’s alleged religious significance — that it wrapped the body of Jesus, and is of supernatural origin — are precisely those neither science nor history can ever prove.” [5]

However, one can at least easily disagree with a part of such a bold philosophical statement (not to speak here of Ball’s arbitrary distinction between history and science). Historians could prove that the

TS wrapped the body of Jesus. There is neither theoretical nor practical impossibility.

The thesis of “theoretical impossibility”, i.e. impossibility by nature, can be easily dismissed. We are sure that the tomb KV62 discovered in 1922 by Howard Carter and his team was the tomb of Tutankhamun. This example makes easier to understand what the common practice is for historians and that there cannot be in the case of the TS a “theoretical impossibility”.

If one now considers the thesis of “practical impossibility”, i.e. impossibility due to some peculiar circumstances, one can notice that many historians, with different backgrounds, including religious ones, think that the amount of evidence is largely sufficient. This is the viewpoint of French leading modernist historian Jean-Christian Petitfils who published outside of his usual field of research a very good biography of Jesus [6], or the viewpoint of art historian Thomas de Wesselow who is also sure that the TS wrapped the body of Jesus [7].

In 2013, using a systematic historiographical approach (“Minimal Facts Approach”), a study also argued that the probability of the TS being the burial shroud of Jesus was very high [8].

Thus it is obvious that a part of the statement made by Philip Ball limits too much the field of research of historians. It does not seem able to withstand critical examination and the comprehension that many historians have of their profession.

II. THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

A. *The Resurrection of Jesus as a possible past event*

Although the word “history” is one of those “essentially contested concepts” put forward by Walter B. Gallie [9], the most frequent acceptance is largely employed by scholars. In 2009, philosopher of history Aviezer Tucker, as editor-in-chief of the *Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, required that all of his coauthors use this meaning: “history: Past events,

processes, etc. For example, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire” [10].

The Resurrection hypothesis, as already defined above, is a collection of events in the past. Thus it is an “historical event”.

B. *The Resurrection of Jesus accessible to the historical approach*

In this section, we will mostly focus on John P. Meier’s position on the Resurrection of Jesus, because of the huge influence, even on shroud researchers [6], of Meier’s seminal work: *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [11]. Meier claims that the Resurrection of Jesus is not accessible to the historian. According to him, ‘in the historical-critical context, the “real” has to be defined in terms of what exists in this world of time and space, what can be experienced in principle by any observer, and what can be reasonably deduced and inferred from such experience”.

Meier, citing Gerald O’Collins, contends that ‘although the “resurrection of Jesus is a real, bodily event, involving the person of Jesus of Nazareth,” the resurrection of Jesus “is not an event *in* space and time and hence should not be called historical”, since “we should require an historical occurrence to be something significant that is known to have happened in our space-time continuum” ’ [12].

Analytic philosopher William Lane Craig has convincingly shown that Meier’s position is incoherent. Jesuit O’Collins thinks that the Resurrection of Jesus is a transition out of space and ought not to be said to occur in space. Craig points out that “it is evident that O’Collins has unwittingly entangled himself in the ancient sorites paradoxes of motion. Transitional events like stopping, exiting and dying do not occur at any single spacetime point. That the sorites paradoxes are, indeed, the culprit here, and not the nature of the resurrection, is evident from the fact that even if the resurrection were conceived as a transformation wholly within space and time, one could not specify a single spacetime point at which it happened. It would either not yet have happened or have already happened. Nevertheless, just as it is perfectly

acceptable to say that the shopper exited the building, say, through the front door rather than the rear entrance, so Jesus' transformation to his glorified state can be similarly located in the sense that one can specify the spacetime point at which his corruptible existence ended. So just as the historian can determine where someone exited a building or when someone died, there is principle no objection to the historian's determining where and when Jesus' resurrection occurred." [13]

The other reason given by Meier for defining the real in the historical-context, "what can be in principle experienced by any observer", does not also appear to be very convincing. Meier, maybe just by reading *Acts* 10: 40-41 ("but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" [14]), sustains that the Resurrection appearances were not afforded to everyone.

In a nutshell, it is a philosophical/theological conviction on Meier's part that the Resurrection is affirmable only by faith and not accessible to the historian [13] [15], and this conviction enters in contradiction with Meier's own "neutral" historical methodology, making his historiographical cathedral fragile.

C. *The Shroud of Turin in the historical study of the Resurrection*

But beyond these philosophical and historiographical foundations, what about the place of the TS in the historical study of the resurrection? Today, the TS is perfectly localized in time and space. Just like a piece of cloth preserved since the fall of Masada, it is entirely subject to historical review. Logically, the historian cannot refuse to study it because this fabric is the result of the resurrection of Jesus, as the historian, adopting this position, would indicate that he already has the answer to his question. It would be like adopting a position similar to Meier's one with *Acts* 10: 40-41. And the immediate objection would be: how do we know that Jesus' resurrection did not take place in

space and time without having studied it historically? Theological convictions cannot justify a historiographical approach putting forward his theological neutrality, on pain of internal contradiction.

Moreover, it has recently been shown that when we adopt a "Minimal Facts Approach" in order to explain the image on the TS, the Resurrection Hypothesis is the most likely of all the hypotheses [8].

Thanks to the TS, a frequent critique addressed to the historical study of the Resurrection can also be called into question. According to Lidija Novakovic, "our sources preserve fragmentary memories and do not provide enough information for a comprehensive historical reconstruction of the resurrection events. They contain apostolic testimonies and are thus limited to the circle of believers. They not only mirror the worldview of ancient authors but also express the extraordinary nature of the Easter experiences" [16]. The objectivity given by the TS could offer a decisive help for historians.

III. FROM DAVID HUME TO NATURAL THEOLOGY

A. *The influence of Hume's argument against miracles*

In this section, we will focus on Hume's argument against miracles and its huge impact. Nowadays, many if not most of the arguments put forward by historians and theologians are simply variations on Hume's argument [17].

However, since the 1980's, this argument has been strongly criticized by analytic philosophers of religion. In a decisive and trenchant critique, analytic philosopher John Earman even calls Hume's argument an "abject failure" [18].

Much more than that, for those who still agree with Hume's reasoning, one may wonder whether the TS, an artifact studied by dozens of scientists, enters fully in the traditional category of dubious oral testimony.

B. *The argument from miracles and the Turin Shroud*

This question leads us to examine the “Bayesian Approach” which is now frequently used in the “argument from miracles”, for example by Richard Swinburne [19].

However, although a cumulative case for the Resurrection of Jesus, with a Bayesian approach, has been made in recent years [20], the TS has unfortunately never been included in it. If it had, it would probably have reinforced the case for the Resurrection [8].

The TS should be part of a concrete argument for the Resurrection, an argument from miracle, as defined by Robert Larmer, that “must be understood as genuinely interdisciplinary, inasmuch as it presupposes the involvement of historians, archeologists, linguists and a host of other specialists that is necessary if the relevant data is to be critically engaged with in necessary detail” [21]. But in the actual context of methodological naturalism in science, a strong case in favor of the Resurrection might not even be convincing for a vast majority of scholars.

IV. TURIN SHROUD, REPRODUCIBILITY AND METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM

There are many philosophical assumptions hidden behind the consensus view: reproducibility and Methodological Naturalism (MN) are two of the most important.

A common idea among sindonologists is that science should only be interested in “reproducible” phenomena. In order to illustrate this point we can go back to Giulio Fanti’s quotation: “as the resurrection is not a reproducible phenomenon, it goes beyond the realm of science, and therefore cannot be tested.”

This philosophical distinction is obviously very questionable. For example, we can think of an area that everyone will agree to define as scientific: cosmology. Scientific reasoning allows us to deduce that a past event (the “Big Bang”) occurred about 13.8 billion years ago. Scientists study unique events of the past, that human beings are not able to reproduce [22] [23]. Therefore, this argument against the study of the resurrection by scientists is

not strong and must be rejected. Maybe scientists (or just some scientists?) cannot study the Resurrection hypothesis, but “unrepeatability” is not a good argument in favor of this position.

The second notable philosophical presupposition is MN. In academic circles, MN is widely thought, and in fact often adopted without much thought, as one of the main characteristics of the scientific method [24] [25]. MN consists of the exclusion of any supernatural intervention as an explanation of an event [13]. MN has often been perceived to contradict religious beliefs. With the argument from miracles, the question now arises in the opposite direction: can MN be contradicted by a Bayesian approach?

Here, two approaches are possible: MN can be thought either as dogmatic (science could not accept any other explanation than an explanation excluding supernatural intervention) [25], or as pragmatic or provisional: science could accept another explanation [26]. Pragmatic MN seems to be preferred even among openly atheist scientists such as cosmologist Sean Carroll or the biologist PZ Myers. Myers thinks for example that “if a source outside the bounds of what modern science considers the limits of natural phenomena is having an observable effect, we *should* take its existence into account” [27].

Pragmatic MN implies a very high standard of proof. Clearly, our current (mis)understanding of the image formation process of the TS is unable to challenge pragmatic MN. One may wonder to what extent the level of requirements of pragmatic MN is realistic, especially when it touches an event from the distant past. Further inquiries, new scientific tests on the TS, might make more apparent the twinning between dogmatic and pragmatic MN.

V. CONCLUSION

In this article, we have examined some of the main reasons why the consensus view according to which neither science nor history can ever prove that the shroud of Turin shows signs of the Resurrection of Jesus is not convincing.

The recent developments in historiography and philosophy should be treated more seriously by sindonologists. The improvements in these fields of knowledge might have a strong impact on their research.

In every instance, studies on the shroud of Turin must be continued and intensified. It is a safe bet that new investigations will greatly improve our knowledge of this artifact. They might even offer us another view, not only of a linen cloth treasured in the Cathedral of Turin, but also of the "scientific cathedral" in which we all daily live.

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