

DOES THE MAN OF THE SHROUD LOOK JEWISH?

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I asked that question to a noted Orthodox Jewish-American scholar and holder of a Ph.D. in microbiology. His subtle reply was: "He would not stand out in a group of Jews."

The Man of the Shroud with his beard and forelocks epitomizes strict adherence to Jewish law. Among the ultra-Orthodox Jews even today, forelocks and beards are traditional and customary parts of a millennia-old Mosaic prohibition against drawing unnecessary blood. Blood equals life in Jewish as well as in African tribal societies. During the four hundred years of Jewish slavery in Egypt and the forty-year journey of both liberated Hebrew and African slaves through the Sinai Desert, the Jews adopted many of the concepts of African tribal culture, one of which was the African attitude of reverence towards blood. The color red that is used in the rows of stripes woven into Yoruba textiles as well as into Jewish prayer shawls signifies blood, sacredness of life, and the protection of life. The hairstyle of the dorsal image of the Man of the Shroud seems to be typical of the trend for Jewish men at the time of Christ. A Jew must be careful not to shed unnecessary blood even at the nape of the neck and, by wearing a pigtail, there would be less of a likelihood of blood being drawn during the grooming process.

The dimensions of the Shroud are clearly expressed in the Jewish Cubit, a measurement that was utilized in Ancient

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Israel at the time of Jesus and within the First Century Mediterranean/Asian Jewish Diaspora. The Cubit is a cherished part of Jewish religious tradition that has staunchly continued over the millennia since its Semitic origins as the Royal Cubit of Ancient Mesopotamia. The Shroud's measurements are eight Cubits long and two Cubits wide. The Cubit is equivalent to 21.7 inches.

It is not easy to find an abundance of information on First Century Jewish burial customs in Israel or anywhere, for that matter. Even the Jerusalem-based "Encyclopedia Judaica" acknowledges that much of what is known of First Century Jewish burial customs is derived from the Gospel accounts. The chronology of the last days of Jesus conforms to a rich body of long-standing Jewish laws and traditions. Most of these laws are still in effect today and are strictly adhered to within the Orthodox Jewish community. Burials of Jewish people now – and at the time of Jesus – take place within twenty-four hours following the death of the deceased. In Jesus' predicament, the burial had to take place by sundown – an ordinance that is still strictly observed. The late Rabbi Chaim Binyamin Goldberg stresses the Jewish legal obligation to bury the dead on the day of death. "In Jerusalem, it is forbidden," he states, "under all circumstances, to leave the body unburied overnight."

Why wasn't the body of the Man of the Shroud washed before burial? Skeptics, upon noticing the numerous bloodstains upon the Shroud of Turin, often conjure up the question "If the Shroud is the product of the Crucifixion of Jesus, why wasn't Jesus' Body washed before burial?" The bloodstains that are on the Shroud do indicate that the body of the Man of the Shroud was, indeed, not washed – a fact that is in total compliance with Jewish law.

According to Jewish law or "halachah", a Jewish man or woman may not undergo ritual purification or "tahara" before burial if they fall into one of the following four categories:

- 1) The Jewish person was a victim of a violent death and/or blood flowed uninterrupted at the time of death

- 2) The Jewish deceased received capital punishment for a crime of a religious nature
- 3) The Jewish candidate for burial was an outcast from the Jewish community or "poresh mayhatzeeboor"
- 4) If the Jewish deceased was killed by a non-Jew

Jesus did not qualify for purification under all four conditions and the Man of the Shroud did not qualify for cleansing under two of the above conditions. The manner of burial of the Man of the Shroud is consistent with Jewish burial practices of the First Century. The Man of the Shroud's burial reflects the simplicity and lack of embellishment that has characterized traditional Jewish burials for 2,000 years. During the First Century, Jewish attitudes towards burials began to change. Once ornate and lavish burials gradually became simple. The movement towards funerary simplicity was popularized by Rabbi Gamliel, the mentor of Saul of Tarsus and further perfected and standardized by his son and grandson. The Shroud is the essence of simplicity. It is white, seamless, and has neither knots nor pockets. Among the Orthodox Jews today, burials are simple, in unchiseled pine boxes containing remains wrapped in unadorned white linen burial garments.

Another aspect of Jewish culture that is important for the Shroud is the concept of Sha'atnez. Sha'atnez is the illegal mixture of wool and linen within a fabric. The laws pertaining to Sha'atnez date back to the Mosaic period of Jewish history. Dr. Gilbert Raes, a Belgian textile chemist, performed studies on the Shroud and found the fabric composition to be linen with traces of cotton. The Shroud, in keeping with that analysis, does not appear to contain Sha'atnez. In matters of burial, Sha'atnez is not absolutely required, but, in Jewish burial tradition, every attempt should be made to bury the Jewish deceased in non-Sha'atnez shrouds. The mentality behind the loopholes in the Sha'atnez laws vis-à-vis burial was aimed at those situations when the urgency and immediacy of burial took precedence over issues of fabric composition. We must remember that most of the escape clauses to the Biblical laws of Sha'atnez for Jewish laity did not come before Mishnaic times, two centuries after Christ.

The Shroud, as explained above, is free of Sha'atnez and the entire burial of the Man of the Shroud was considered to be a correct Jewish burial. In the Gospels, it is clearly indicated that Jesus was buried according to Jewish burial customs.

"They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews."

The disciples and the other followers of Jesus were under intense scrutiny for their affiliation with the one who the Sanhedrin allowed to be tried as a traitor to the Jews. Even if these escape clauses in the rules of Sha'atnez were in existence at the time of Christ, the Disciples would not have wished to irritate an already uneasy situation by having a Sha'atnez laden cloth. It was safest for everyone involved if Jesus, even though he was executed for religious treason, was buried, as he most likely was, in a Sha'atnez-free shroud and according to Jewish burial customs.

It is my contention that the Shroud of Turin has characteristics that are authentically Jewish and reflect the traditional customs, folkways, laws, and burial practices that were in effect among the Jews at the time of Christ. Jesus Himself was subject to these very same laws and was enveloped in the Jewish culture and attitudes of the very era in history that now bears His Name. Jesus was Jewish, because His Mother, the Virgin Mary was Jewish, so much so that exactly eight days after the Birth of Christ, St. Mary made sure that Her Son underwent circumcision in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

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