

# Behold The Man

## Turin Shroud Studies Confirm Image's Unique Nature

by Shafer Parker Jr.

FOUNTAIN VALLEY, Calif. — The Shroud of Turin is undoubtedly the most famous relic in Christendom — and the best loved. During those rare times when it is displayed, millions of pilgrims travel from all over the world to see the purported burial cloth of Jesus Christ, a piece of linen 3 feet 7 inches-by-14 feet 3 inches that bears the detailed front and back images of a man who was crucified in a manner identical to that of Jesus of Nazareth as described in the Scriptures.

In 1978, more than 3.5 million people stood in line for up to 16 hours for a brief glimpse. Twenty years later, another 3 million filed past when it was displayed as part of the celebration of Turin cathedral's 500th anniversary. So why do so many people care so much about a relic that according to available records was first displayed in the French village of Lirey in 1357 and was supposedly "proven" by Carbon-14 dating done in 1988 to have been created somewhere between 1260 and 1390?

Beyond the compelling attraction of the image itself, the answer lies in part with the dozens of men and women around the world, experts and amateurs working in a wide range of unrelated disciplines who spend their free time studying the Shroud. They have uncovered enough anomalies and unexplained phenomena to be certain of one thing: Whatever the Shroud may be, it clearly is no run-of-the-mill medieval forgery.

One such researcher is Dr. August Accetta, an obstetrician-gynecologist from southern California, husband and father of three daughters and founder of the Shroud Center of Southern California ([Shroudcentersocal.com](http://Shroudcentersocal.com)). First opened in 1996, the center is dedicated to discovering the truths within the Shroud. While appreciating the importance of the work done by researchers seeking to confirm the date of the artifact — for instance, three years ago Dr. Ray Rogers showed that the 1988 Carbon-14 dating was not done on the original burial cloth, but rather on a Shroud patch that in the Middle Ages had been cleverly re-woven into the border area — Accetta focuses on uncovering the mysteries that lie within the Shroud itself.

### Image of Suffering

Accetta is particularly interested in the image's photographic aspects, including its three-dimensional qualities and its human anatomical features. He has published four peer-reviewed papers on the Shroud in the area of nuclear imaging. The doctor's work with nuclear imaging demonstrates that in terms of the Shroud's inverse color intensity (often described as being like a photographic negative, but actually a mere reversal of light and dark), the image encodes only about the top 1.5 inches of the face and body in three dimensions. "It's like a relief sculpture," he said, "sort of like when Han Solo was frozen in carbon in" *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*.

Of equal interest to Accetta is the X-ray-like imaging upon the Shroud; the image reveals the roots of several upper teeth, the metacarpal bones in the left wrist and the femur under the left hand. Furthermore, the image reveals bruising on the cheek just below the left eye. Bruising, according to Accetta, is completely part of the body image, not at all like the bleeding wounds that left blood residue on the surface of the Shroud.

It is a natural mistake to assume the image on the Shroud resulted from visible light emitting from the body, Accetta said. But even if light had streamed from the body's surface any resultant image would have been as flat as a photograph, possessing no 3-D information. Instead, Accetta has shown by injecting nuclear isotopes into his own bloodstream that he can produce a similar image, complete with 3-D information, in photos taken by the gamma camera doctors use to make images of internal organs. "The amount of radiation in the skin and bones," Accetta said, "correlates to the number of pixels on the Shroud."

Nevertheless, exactly how the image was imprinted on cloth remains a mystery that, so far as anyone knows, has never been repeated. Studies by other scientists have shown that the actual image — which lies on the very surface of the linen fibers at a depth less than 100 times as thick as a human hair — is the result, not of paint or any sort of pigment, but of rapid dehydration of the natural cellulose present in the fibers accomplished without heat.

Shroud investigators stress that while relics like the Shroud are not central to belief in the divinity and salvific mission of Christ, they can serve as powerful aids to developing a working faith. "It's silly to suggest that evidence like the Shroud should play no role in under girding our faith," said Gary Habermas, chairman of the department of philosophy and theology at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., and co-author of two books on the Shroud. "Jesus himself said if people could not simply believe what he said, then 'at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves'" (John 14:11).

As an evangelical Christian, Habermas is careful to separate his own appreciation for the Shroud — "There's a good chance it is authentic," he says — from his worship of the living Christ. Still, for him the Shroud is nothing less than a pictorial Gospel. "It's all there: deity, death and resurrection," he said. "The Shroud shows that he's dead, but that there's something happening to bring him to life." He also suggested the evidence of Jesus' awful suffering imprinted on the Shroud should cause every Christian to re-examine his commitment to the faith. "A university student once said to me that it removes the flippant approach," he recalled. "You know how some people talk, 'Yeah, Christ died for my sins. Hey, you wanna get a burger?'"

For his part, Accetta grew up Catholic but left the Church as an agnostic in his youth, convinced that belief in God was "pretty much just a way to deal with mortality." In spite of his skepticism, he was intrigued by a radio talk on the Shroud in 1992 by Dr. Alan Whanger, professor emeritus at Duke University and chief researcher for the Council for Study of the Shroud of Turin ([duke.edu/~adw2/shroud](http://duke.edu/~adw2/shroud)). He met with Whanger and began to collect information, enthralled by the "clarity" of the materials available. Nevertheless, it was not the Shroud itself but his study of it that made Accetta a believer, he stressed. To know more about the Shroud, he had to study Scripture and Tradition.

To learn about the cloth's early history, Accetta had to research the Church Fathers. "Somewhere in 1997," he said, "I realized my data had changed and that I was now a believer." But not, at that point, a convinced Catholic. That quickly changed and Accetta came back to the Church of his childhood as he read the Ante-Nicene Fathers and understood their emphasis on sacramental theology. "The Shroud became the fulcrum that turned my life in a new direction," said Accetta. "The Christian faith had been a puzzle, but as I studied the faith in order to understand the Shroud the pieces fell into place."

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