

Did Jesus give his Shroud to “the servant of Peter”?

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Abstract

Jerome credits the *Gospel of the Hebrews* for the following statement: “And when the Lord had given the linen cloth to the servant of the priest, he went to James and appeared to him.” Since it appears unlikely that Jesus would have presented his Shroud to the priest of the Jerusalem temple, various emendations to the text have been suggested to support a restoration to an alternate reading: “to the servant of Peter.” This solution has been uncritically accepted in numerous papers relative to Biblical research and has served to support the claim that Peter had possession of the Shroud. The proposed restoration is shown conclusively to be untenable.

Keywords: Jerome, Gospel of Hebrews

1. INTRODUCTION

The origin of the *Gospel of the Hebrews* (*GH*) is obscure. It has come down to us in fragments quoted or paraphrased by various Church Fathers -- Jerome, Papias, Hegesippus (cited by Eusebius), Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Origen and possibly Ignatius [1]. It has been dated to the first half of the second century. It has proto-gnostic tendencies and a strong Jewish-Christian character, not only as may be seen in the title, but also in the emphasis on the figure of James.

Near the end, *GH* tells of an appearance of Christ to James. This appearance of the risen Christ is an independent legend, apparently a reflex of *I Corinthians* 15:5-7: “He [Christ] appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time. . . . Then he appeared to James. . . .”

Jerome, in *De Viris Illustribus* 2, writes: “The gospel called *According to the Hebrews* which I recently translated into Greek and Latin, and which Origen often uses, recounts this after the Resurrection of the Savior: And when the Lord had given the linen cloth to the servant of the priest, he went to James and appeared to him.”

This is a peculiar statement, presenting us with a conundrum. Why would Jesus have given his Shroud to the priest of the Jerusalem Temple, who, after all, had just headed the council that condemned him? Although the “linen cloth” is quite credibly understood to refer to the Shroud now in Turin, it seems most unlikely that Jesus would have presented his Shroud to the priest of the

Temple, through his servant or otherwise. Moreover, if this were true, Peter and “the other disciple” would not have seen the Shroud when they entered the tomb, as recounted in *John* 20:5,6.

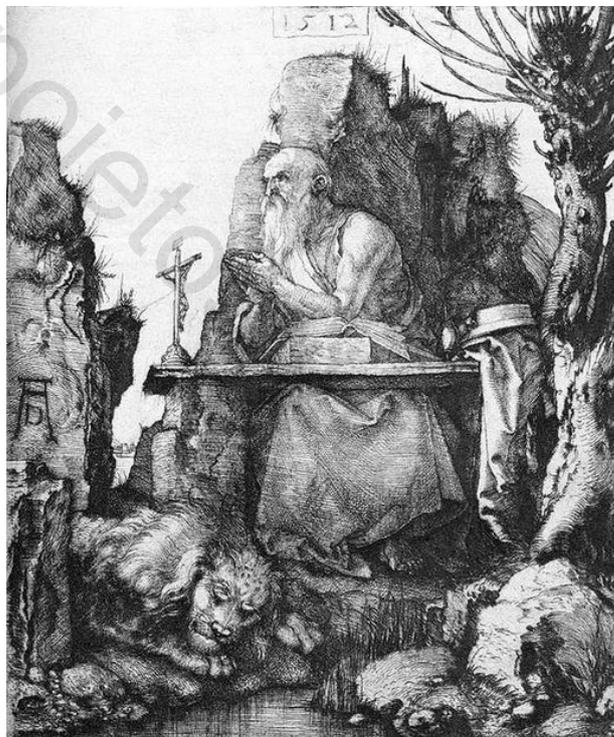


Figure 1. The scholar Saint Jerome, 337 – 420, with the faithful lion, from whose paw he had removed a thorn. (Albrecht Dürer)

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Nevertheless, a number of emendations to the text have been suggested to support an alternate reading: “to the servant of Peter.” On the basis of common sense, this does not appear plausible. Analysis of the arguments in favor of the emendation reveals that it is not only implausible, but impossible [2].

2. HEBREW CONSONANTS “SOLUTION”

Alfred O’Rahilly, writing in 1942, commented: “It is generally felt that there is something wrong with the [phrase] but it is difficult to conjecture what [it] should be. . . The Hebrew consonants for slave (*ebed*) and priest (*Cohen*) would not be very different from those for Peter (*Kepha*) and John *Yochanan*” [3]. O’Rahilly here appears to have conflated Jerome’s text with a later tradition [4] that the grave cloths were taken away by “Simeon and John” (i.e., Simon Peter and the “other disciple” of the fourth gospel 20:2-8) because the text of Jerome does not mention “John.”

Let us examine O’Rahilly’s comparison of *ebed* with *Kepha* and *Cohen* with *Yochanan*:

servant / “*kepha*”
 עבד / כִּפָּא / כִּפָּא
ebed / *Keipha* / *Kepha*
 (Heb.) (Ar.)



Figure 2. Saint James, extolled in *GH*
 Sixth-century mosaic from Kankariá, Cyprus

כִּיפָּא (*Keipha*) is a Hebrew nickname, based on כֶּף (*Keph*) “rock.” “*Kephas*” is the English transliteration of the Greek transliteration of כִּיפָּא, *Keipha*, or in Palestinian Aramaic, which Jesus and his disciples would usually have spoken, כִּפָּא (*Kepha*). In Aramaic, *Kepha*, and the common noun, *kepha*, “rock,” are spelled the same [5].

The consonants are *Ayin*, *Bet*, *Dalet* for servant/*ebed* and *Kaf*, *Yod*, *Fe*, *Alef* for *Keipha*. It takes no knowledge of Hebrew whatsoever to see that the consonants are not at all the same and would not easily be confused.

priest / John
 כֹּהֵן / יוֹחָנָן
 (*Cohen*) / (*Yochanan*)

Consonants for the next pair are *Kaf*, *He*, *Nun-sophit* for “priest” (*cohen*) and *Yod*, *Vav*, *Chet*, *Nun*, *Nun-sophit* for “John” (*Yochanan*). This pair shares only one consonant, the final *Nun* and again, would not easily be confused.

Clearly, the Hebrew and/or Aramaic consonants have nothing to do with any supposed confusion on the part of the scribe. Thus there can be no Hebrew or Aramaic basis for O’Rahilly’s uninformed conjecture.

3. HEBREW VOWELS “SOLUTION”

The failure of this proposed solution on the basis of consonants led others to conclude that the confusion must have arisen from a (supposed) similarity of the vowels.

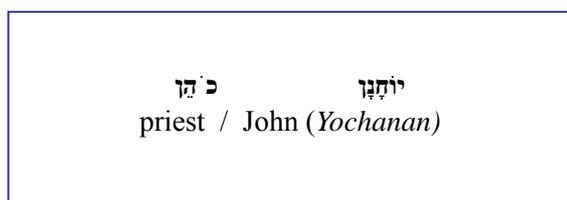
servant Keipha/Kepha
 עֶבֶד כִּיפָּא כִּפָּא

עֶבֶד is a segolate noun and the vowels, if they had been written, would have been written as three dots (*segol*) beneath the first two letters, *Ayin* and *Bet*. The vowels for כִּיפָּא would have been two dots (*tsere*) beneath the first letter, *Kaf*, and a line with a dot under it (*qamatz*) beneath the third letter (*Fe*) for pronunciation of the final vowel.

The vowels for כִּפָּא would have been a line (*patach*) beneath the first letter, *Kaf*, and a line with a dot under it (*qamatz*) beneath the second letter (*Fe*). These vowels are not the same as those for עֶבֶד.

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In the next pair, the vowels for כֶּהֶן would have been a dot (*cholam*) just to the upper left of the first letter (*Kaf*),



and two dots (*tsere*) below the second letter (*He*). For יוֹחָנָן the second letter, *Vav*, functions as the first vowel, with a dot (*cholam maleh*) written above it, and a line with a dot under it (*qamatz*) would have been written beneath the third and fourth letters (*Chet* and *Nun*). The vowels of these two words do not correspond to one another.

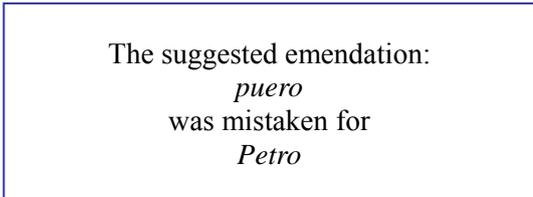
But this system of “pointing” to indicate vowels was a later development of the Masoretes. Pointed texts with vowels represented by dots and lines came into existence in Tiberias in the sixth century. The various systems of pointing were not standardized until the eighth or ninth century by a consensus of Rabbinic scholars. So vowels were not indicated in Hebrew texts at the time of Jerome, or previously, and thus a supposed scribal “error” could not have arisen from a confusion of vowels, which would not have been similar, even if they had been indicated in the text, whether Hebrew or Aramaic, and they most certainly were not.



Figure 3. Eusebius of Caesarea
263 – 339
(André Thevet)

4. LATIN MISREADING “SOLUTION”

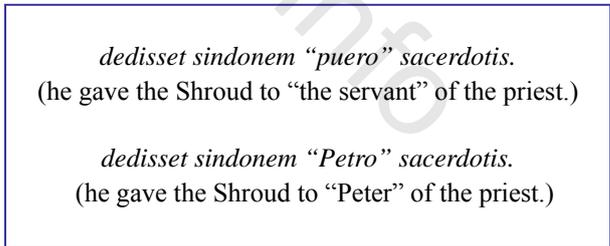
John Theodore Dodd, reputed scholar of Christ Church, England, suggested in 1931 [6] that the original text read *Petro* (dative of *Petrus*, “Peter”) instead of *puero* (dative of *puer*, “child,” “servant”). Dodd pointed to this same mistake, *puero* written for *Petro*, in the short ending of the *Gospel of Mark*, found, however, in only one Latin manuscript, and in an entirely different context [7].



Dodd further justified his conjecture by an appeal to *I Corinthians* 15:5-7: “It is more likely that the original did state that Jesus gave the burial Shroud to Peter, because Paul among the appearances of the risen Christ mentions the appearance to James but states he was first seen of Cephas,”

There are so many obvious problems with this spurious “solution” that it is difficult to understand why anyone would ever have taken it seriously, but it is still cited, after almost eighty years.

First, Dodd is trying to justify his emendation to a Latin translation of a Hebrew or Aramaic original (*GH*) by basing it on an erroneous Latin translation of a different Greek text (*Gospel of Mark*) which erroneous translation has been found in only one out of numerous manuscripts, and in a very different context. Moreover, although he was basing his emendation on Latin translations involving supposed Latin substitutions, the Latin words in question do not correspond to the Hebrew words the scribe is supposed to have miscopied or mistranslated.



“Servant” remains in Dodd’s “restoration”, which is a sort of translational oxymoron, for the scribe is said to have mistaken *ebed* for *Kepha*, substituting *puero*, “servant” for *Petro*, “Peter.” Yet the new reading, “the servant of Peter” retains the word “servant.” If the scribe had made the mistake Dodd ascribed to him, the amended text would necessarily read, “... to Peter of the Priest.” Absolute nonsense.

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Moreover, the proposed emendation is entirely the product of Dodd's imagination, because Jerome's text does not include the word *puero*. It reads, *Dominus autem cum dedisset sindonem servo sacerdotis, iovit ad Iacobum et apparuit ei*. We have no instance of another text where Jerome quotes *GH* with the word *puero* instead of *servo*.

This clearly untenable emendation to the text so that it reads that the Shroud was given to Peter is cited for support of the idea that Peter took the Shroud to Antioch and other attempts to connect Peter with the Shroud.

In any case, we should be cautious in using the Gospel of the Hebrews as a reliable historical source. It differs from the canonical gospels in important respects. For example, we are told in the fourth gospel that the burial cloths were found lying in the tomb, not that they had been given to Peter or to anyone else. The passage we have been considering, wherein we are told that the Lord gave the cloth to the servant, continues: "For James had sworn that he would not eat bread from that hour in which he had drunk the cup of the Lord until he should see him risen from among those that sleep."

GH suggests, contrary to *NT*, not only that the first appearance of Christ was to James, but also that James was among "the twelve" at the Last Supper [8].

5. CONCLUSION

Emendations to Jerome's text citing *GH* -- whether based on Hebrew letters, non-existent Hebrew vowels, Latin substitutions, or the passage in *I Corinthians* 15 -- are not credible. Jerome's text can provide no support for the idea that Jesus gave his Shroud to Peter. Are we left with a conundrum? I think not. *GH* is valuable for some theological ideas of early Jewish Christians, but its historicity is dubious and it may be discounted as far as historical authenticity is concerned, as Erbetta [9] concurs.

REFERENCES

1. The major primary sources for quotations from the *Gospel of the Hebrews* include the following writers and their works: Cyril of Jerusalem (*Discourse on Mary Theotokos* 12a), Origen (*Commentary on John* 2.12.87), Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* 2.9.45.5, 5.14.96.3), and Jerome (*Commentary on Isaiah* 4, *Commentary on Ephesians* 3, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 6, *De viris illustribus* 2). The relationship of *GH* to *The Gospel of the Ebionites* and *The Gospel of the Nazoreans* is not clear. They may in some instances have overlapped with *GH*. The *Oxyrhynchus Sayings* were formerly thought to have

originated in *GH*, but since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, they have been found to come from *The Gospel of Thomas*.

2. Professor Mario Erbetta has proposed an interesting interpretation. He suggests that the author of *GH* is recounting the transfer of the cloth to the servant of the Priest as a legend, not as historical fact, involving an elaboration of *Matthew* 27:65 -- "Pilate said to them [the chief priests and Pharisees] You have a guard (*κουστωδιαν*)..." This implies that the guard would have included a servant of the priest. In Erbetta's opinion, *GH* was written with apologetic intent to Jewish Christians. See M. Erbetta, *Gli Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*, Marietti, Torino, p. 122 with note 4 (1975). I am indebted to the reviewer for this information.

3. O'Rahilly, Alfred. "The Burial of Christ: Peter and John at the Tomb," in *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, LIX, p. 169 with note 6 (1942).

4. Isho'dad of Merv, fl. ca. 850. See M. Gibson, Ed and Trans. *The Commentaries on the New Testament of Isho'dad of Merv*, p. 208 (1903). Reprinted by Kessinger Publishings Legacy Reprint Series, (2008.)

5. The apostle's Hebrew name was שִׁמּוֹן (*Shimon*) but it appears that he was commonly known by his nickname. The English name "Peter" derives from English transliteration of the translation from Hebrew *Keph / Keipha*, "rock" into Greek *Petros*, "rock."

6. Dodd, J. T. "The Appearance of Jesus to 'The Priest's Servant,' as Recorded in the Gospel of the Hebrews, and 'The Holy Shroud,'" *The Commonwealth*, pp. 189-194 (October, 1931). Guscini's reference to C. H. Dodd is mistaken. M. Guscini, *The History of the Sudarium of Oviedo*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, N.Y. p 18 (2004)

7. Codex *Bobbiensis*, the version of the Bible used by Cyprian. It survives in a fragmentary copy of Mark and Matthew, now in Turin and in other fragments elsewhere.

8. Cf. W. Schneemelcher, R. McL. Wilson, trans. *New Testament Apocrypha*: The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, p. 160 (1963).

9. M. Erbetta, *op. cit.*

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