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)
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 (Keipha) 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 Keipha and Cohen with Yochanan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>servant / “kepha”</th>
<th>כֵיפָא / כֵיפָא</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ebed / Keipha / Kepha</td>
<td>כֵיפָא / כֵיפָא</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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Figure 2. Saint James, extolled in G H
Sixth-century mosaic from Kankaria, Cyprus
In the next pair, the vowels for כֹּהֵן would have been a do t (cholam) just to the upper left of the first letter (Kaf), and two dots (tsere) below the second letter (He).

For יְחָנָן 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.

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 1 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.
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, ivit 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.


5. The apostle’s Hebrew name was ש♠ (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.”


7. Codex Bobbienensis, 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.


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