Addendum to *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*

In chapter 11 of that book, I discuss five theories rival to the traditional theory of what happened at the tomb on the first Easter day, that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, leaving his grave clothes behind. These five theories are: (1) Jesus was only half-dead when taken down from the cross, and he revived in the cool of the tomb, and managed to walk away from it before the women arrived; (2) Jesus’s body remained in the tomb, but the disciples mistakenly thought that an empty tomb which they found was Jesus’s tomb;(3) Jesus’s body was stolen by enemies of Jesus; (4) Jesus’s body was stolen by grave-robbers uninterested in whose body it was; (5) Jesus’s body was stolen by friends of Jesus. I gave arguments against each of these theories. But it occurred to me that John 20:7, telling us that Peter and “the other disciple”, whom I take to be the apostle John, found “the cloth that had been on Jesus’s head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself” is to be expected on theory (3), and possibly also on theory(5). This is because these grave-robbers would have wanted to be sure whose body was wrapped in the linen wrappings, before they stole it; and they could most easily do this by removing the face cloth, so that they could see the face. Hence that verse would seem to give significant support to those theories.

But I then reflected that the only reason for believing that the face cloth was removed was the authority of John’s Gospel; and if that was reliable on such a small detail of the Resurrection story, it was surely very reliable on the apparently more important events which it records in chapter 20 – Jesus’s appearances to the apostles, and particularly to Thomas whom he invited to “reach out your hand and put it in my side” (John 20:7)- which in turn gave significant support to John’s claim that Jesus was bodily resurrected; and so to the traditional account of what happened at the tomb. Hence, while superficially supporting theories (3) and (5), John 20:7 counted equally in support of the traditional theory and so against theories (3) and (5).

However, the Gospel writer must have had some reason for recording this detail, especially, it was in consequence of the state of the tomb, including the separate location of the facecloth and it being wrapped up, that John “ saw and believed” (John 20:8). Among the many commentaries on the Gospel at which I looked, only one provided any explanation of the significance of the facecloth. I find very plausible the suggestion of Sandra M.Schneiders (“ The face veil: a Johannine sign (John 20:1 – 10)”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 13 (1983)94-97). This is that the Gospel writer had in mind Exodus 34:33 – 34. This tells us that although Moses normally put on a veil when he went up the mountain (presumably to protect himself from the smoke), whenever he “went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off until he came out”. So Moses talked face to face with God. One commentary which I read suggested that the writer put this in detail into his account in order to suggest that Jesus had gone to talk with God; but I see no reason to doubt that this detail is what on in fact John saw, since it was part of what had the effect on him that he “saw and believed”. Although the Gospel does not provide this explanation, it also does not provide an explanation of a detail of the Crucifixion, which the Gospel writer clearly thinks to have had a similar effect on John – that after Jesus had died on the cross, “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out” (John 19:34), and it adds that “he who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.” (John 19:35). In this case the explanation of the significance of what John saw needs no explanation – obviously to the Christian world the water prefigures the water of baptism, and the blood prefigures the “blood” of the eucharist., although to the secular world. it is a mere trivial detail. So, because the state of the tomb caused John to “believe” (presumably in the bodily resurrection of Jesus), although the Gospel does not provide an account of why the state of the tomb was regarded as significant by John, we should look for a similar explanation of the significance of the location of the facecloth, which - although also trivial from the point of view of the secular world -also had such a great effect on John. And the traditional theory of the Resurrection – that Jesus himself rose from the dead – can provide that explanation. This is that, on rising from the dead, Jesus, as the new Moses, giving us the new law had taken off his facecloth to go to talk with God face – to – face; and put the facecloth rolled up separately, as his own testimony to this; and John understood its meaning. This would in turn explain the words put into the mouth of Jesus in his farewell discourse in John 13 – 17 more than once (for example, John 14:12), to the effect that Jesus is “going to the Father.”. It would also explain the words address to Mary Magdalene very shortly after John visited the tomb, attributed to Jesus, “I have not yet ascended to the Father.” (John 20:17). So I suggest that on balance, John 20:7 significantly increases the probability of the traditional theory of what happened at the tomb.