

The Turin Shroud and the Christmas Story

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The coupling of the Turin Shroud with Christmas may seem on the surface extremely bizarre. The Shroud bears an image of Our Lord's Resurrection on the first Easter Day and so may be said to have nothing to do with Christmas at all. However, without the events of that first Easter, to which the Shroud bears witness, Jesus would be remembered not as the founder of a new faith, who had risen from the dead; but as an obscure rebellious rabbi crucified by the Romans, whose life may be fit for research by a Ph.D. student, but nothing more; this means His birth would not be seen as an event for celebration, but one to ignore. Our celebration of Christ's birth depends on Easter and so is enhanced by our acknowledgement of the Shroud and the message imprinted on it.

When it comes to Our Lord's three years of ministry and events in Jerusalem during the last week of His earthly life, the gospels present a uniform picture with only slight differences, as would be normally expected from individual but basically truthful sources: that said, Jesus's teaching has been selected and edited by others. Indeed his sayings, like *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao*, found their way into a separate manuscript, now lost: it is known as *Quelle* [German for Source] or simply as *Q*: it was used with Mark as the basis of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. However, the four gospels each treat the incarnation, our Lord's assumption of human flesh, in different, though compatible ways.

Two of them have a solely theological focus: one is the gospel according to St Mark, thought to be the earliest and mostly based on St Peter's witness; it is written with a sense of urgency and hurry. The other is the gospel according to St John, possibly also early in origin, but evolving over the years differently from the others, gathering more theological reflection.

St Mark introduces his gospel quite simply with *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*, after which he launches into his account of Jesus's life, His Baptism, Temptation, Teaching, Miracles, Trial, Death and Resurrection. St John writes an introductory fourteen verses to his Gospel drawing on Biblical tradition and Greek philosophy. His aim was to show Jesus both as God and as an essential part of the Father's plan. For this, he might have drawn on the Old Testament tradition of Wisdom, Sophia, nicely described in Proverbs 8, vs 22 ff., in which the voice of Wisdom says, *The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the Earth.....* [R,S,V.] There were, however, two problems: the first was that Wisdom is described as *created*, even though also as the *beginning of God's work*; whereas St John wants it to be in the very beginning with God; the second was that Wisdom was female whereas Our Lord was a man. [This mattered less later: Justinian's great Church in Constantinople, taken by the Turks and with minarets added, a prototype for all greater mosques, was originally dedicated to the female *Hagia Sophia*, "Heavenly Wisdom," as an invocation of Christ.] John himself adopted a concept favoured by Greek philosophers known as the Neoplatonists: this was the Logos, translated as Word and central to the opening chapter of St John's Gospel.

Both St Mark and St John point in different ways to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. However, they lack the Christmas stories as found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. They are here explored in terms of four types of History: Recorded History, Narrative History, Midrash and Historical Fiction.

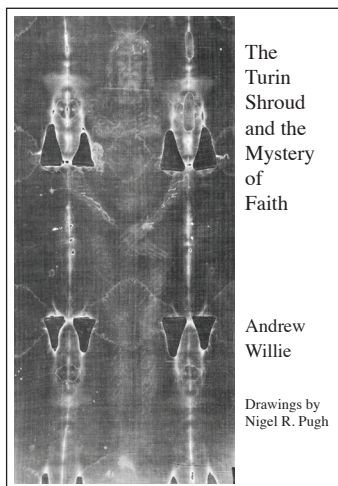
The first is Recorded History, though this can have a degree of speculation where there are gaps in documentation; the first two gospels have Q, a sayings source to validate the record. Recorded history is very keen on establishing **when** things happened; hence Luke's reference to Quirinius as Governor of Syria; and Matthew's making his story centre on the appearance of a star and Herod's murderous treatment of children. Though scholars have questioned the details, the fact is that both Luke and Matthew and their admirers have wanted their writing to be taken seriously as history: this wish has led to the tradition that Luke was not only a physician, but also an artist and heard Mary's story while painting her portrait. As for Matthew's star, there were enough events in the solar system, around the time of Jesus's birth, to cause controversy amongst astronomers as to what exactly the star was, but the fact is, there is a possibility of what Matthew describes as existing at the time he suggests and this could have prompted the Magi to embark on their journey. It is the basis of a scientific debate which, unlike the carbon dating of the Shroud, starts by accepting material presented as genuine, without the need of proof. Similarly it is quite possible that Joseph as a carpenter was also a jobbing builder and so he and his family came to live in a house in Bethlehem, after their previous experience in a stable. Although the accounts given by Matthew and Luke are very different, the two as history are not incompatible.

The second approach is that of Narrative History, essentially based on what is known, but attempting to enter into the minds of those involved to understand what they might have felt, thought and even said in various circumstances. Thus St Luke, lacking the recording machines we have nowadays, supplements his accounts in both his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles with creative literary devices, especially songs, dialogue and speeches, to convey what might have been said, The same is true of the seven "I am" sayings in John's gospel.

The third, which the birth narratives are at least, is Midrash, a theological commentary on History which My Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines as follows: "Hebrew, *midras*, commentary: from *daras*, meaning study, expound. Midrash was first used in English in 1613. And is *An ancient homiletic commentary on a text from the Hebrew Scriptures, characterised by non-literal interpretation and legendary illustration*". The term also refers to *the mode of exegesis characteristic of such a commentary*. This, though long found in oral tradition, began to be written down soon after the gospels themselves, in the 2nd. century AD. In his infancy narratives, Luke purposely used the anachronistic language and style of the Septuagint, the Hebrew Old Testament translated into Greek some two hundred years before Our Lord's birth: it also had books additional to those in the Hebrew Bible. Its use gave the text an otherworldly dimension, The Magnificat in Luke is so similar to Hannah's song [1 Samuel 2] that it may be counted as Midrash. Although very important similarities exist in Matthew and Luke, for example, birth in Bethlehem, the identity of Joseph and the ministry and presence of angels, details

are very different in the two gospels, though not contradictory. In fact, study of Matthew has revealed that the Bethlehem star, whatever it was, occurred at a time of great activity in the solar system. Discussion is reduced to which particular activity in the heavens led the wise men. Unlike the first carbon dating of the shroud, this is one issue all scientists approach with an open mind. However, the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke do carry a large number of purely theological messages. These are; the importance of angels as messengers of God; His concern for the world and us as; Jesus's birth in a stable, as humble as it could be, despite being Son of God and heir of the Davidic kings; His acknowledgement first by shepherds, very ordinary people responding to angels, and then some time later by academics, three astrologers, wise men, guided by a star. The message is for all people, everywhere to bring them hope. Parts of the stories have great appeal for children, as Christian parents know.

Numerous works of Fiction have been written concerning the Shroud, the same does not apply to Christmas or does it? The late Raymond Briggs wrote of Father Christmas brilliantly. At three years old, I certainly believed in Father Christmas. But I still remember the relief I felt when I was six and a boy from up the road told me that Santa was a Fiction and didn't exist. For the previous eighteen months, I had kept my instinctive doubts to myself. I was now free of the guilt they had given me. Where Our Lord is concerned, from a young age scripture has always inspired me and the inspiration started with the birth narratives, and carols I heard and the crib I saw. These spoke to me as a child. Various sorts of historical study are needed to understand fully the different sorts of truth they contain. I hope this paper is a contribution.



Canon Andrew Willie's book which is
fulsomely endorsed by Dr. Rowan Williams
and others, is available for just £10
including postage within the UK.
 Please email: andrewrobertwillie@gmail.com
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The Shroud exists, but is it genuine? I certainly believe it to be so and wrote a book on the matter. A retired Civil Court Judge read it, and said, "If the Shroud and its detractors had come before me I would certainly have found for the Shroud". In 2010 my wife and I went to Turin for the exposition. Joining the queue, we at last were before it; immediately, I saw God had been at work and felt moved to echo Thomas as he gazed at the Risen Lord, "My Lord and my God". Have I ever had such a feeling of God at work before? Yes, holding our new-born first child in his first 30 minutes of life on Holy Innocents' Day and repeating from Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*, the words, *Trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home*. For me the Shroud shows such clouds of glory, albeit from the Resurrection.

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