



9th November 2008
Trinity XXV
Choral Evensong
Ecclesiasticus 14 v. 20– 15 v 10
The Heliand, Saxon Gospels (from songs 66 & 67)

Darkness at Noon: Blind to the Evidence?

By Professor Simon Conway-Morris

“the sun went dark, its brilliant, beautiful light was unable to shine. It was wrapped in shadow, dark and gloomy, and in a deep sinister fog”.

The Heliand, Song 67ⁱ

Anyone familiar with the narratives of the Crucifixion will readily recall how in almost identical words Markⁱⁱ, Matthewⁱⁱⁱ and Luke^{iv} describe how for three hours, from noon to 3 pm, the world was enshrouded in darkness. No mention, however, of even a slight haziness, let alone a deep sinister fog. But for the ninth-century writer of the *Heliand* the purpose was not only to bring God’s spell, the small matter of the world’s redemption, to the attention of the robust Saxons, but in order to do so he had to make it resonate and reverberate in a land very far removed from the seductive warmth of the Mediterranean. For the few readers and many hearers of the Saxon Gospel their constant backdrop were rain-lashed shores, vile sleet, leaden skies and plenty of fog, swirling around dank rivers and gloomy forests. Nor is the translation simply one of climate. The Sea of Galilee seems suspiciously similar to our North Sea, and is cleaved by long-ships more suited for voyages of war-fare than a spot of fishing. And as we have heard Jesus is the mighty chieftain, the disciples his warrior-companions, and their enemies relentless and grim-faced. Here, by a series of masterly retellings, the gospels are transmuted into a heroic mould.

Consider, for example, how the *Heliand* deals with what was perhaps Jesus’ earliest miracle, the marriage feast at Cana. Still a wedding, but now clearly we are in a great mead-hall. And as ever the *Heliand* is spot on: Thus we read “The warriors were merry, the people were enjoying themselves together, the men were feeling good. The servants went around pouring from pitchers, they had clear wine in steins and barrels. The conviviality of the earls in the drinking hall was a beautiful sight, and the men on the benches had reached a very high level of bliss, they were really happy”^v. As we would say, they were plastered. Who could possibly ask for more? Well, as you will remember a truly desperate situation had arisen because the conviviality of the earls notwithstanding, the wedding feast had descended into crisis situation. Unbelievably the stocks of wine were completely exhausted. As the *Heliand* chillingly reports “There was not the smallest drop left in the house that the servants could still bring to the crowd. The vats were empty; the liquor was gone”^{vi}. For any self-respecting Saxon this was not a disappointment; it was an unmitigated disaster. Not that the guests, least of all Jesus, had any responsibility in the matter. After all did he not say “What is it to Me and You ... what happens to these people’s liquor, to these warriors’ wine?”^{vii}. Nevertheless, after a bit of prodding he performs the miracle. The water-filled vats are at first cautiously tasted and then gulped with incredulous delight, and in the *Heliand* the roistering continues with gallons of cider. Not Bulmers, not even White Lightning. As the amazed host proclaims “Now you have ordered the loveliest of all apple wines”^{viii}.

It is difficult not to smile when we read this account mutated through Saxon eyes. Indeed given our limitless powers of condescension for anything which is even a few years old, our chronic chronological snobbery will almost certainly find no point of reference. Grudgingly we might identify the Saxon Gospel as a neglected literary masterpiece, but it is just as likely that this curious work will read as an exercise in anthropology. Not however for the Saxons: whatever our failure in empathy we can at least intuit the world from which they were being summoned by the *Heliand* was very different. Prior to the arrival of the Christian message there lay a world of human sacrifice and runic magic, ever-corrosive time governed by the Norns of implacable fate, where even the greatest courage of the mightiest warrior sooner or later was doomed to final and irreversible

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defeat. Heroic and magnificent, full of songs of defiance, but ultimately one of cosmic despair. And of course if we have any similar point of reference it is the world of Beowulf. It too is seen through Christian eyes but looks back to a world thronged by monsters.

To us it seems an alien world, but I would suggest that it is actually full of present-day resonances. Let me give what may seem a trivial example. Consider that bizarre clock, newly embedded in the exterior of the library of Corpus Christi. As its critics have already observed this show-case bauble looks as if it has been torn from its rightful place in some grotesque shopping centre. But I smell something nastier. Recall how it is surmounted by a Beowulfian monster that devours time to no obvious purpose, and can only tell the hours by a series of circular flashing lights. No chimes, no bells, just cyclical time being eternally consumed. Perhaps I am reading too much into a mere mechanical contrivance; in post-modernist terms I am entirely unable to see the joke. A pagan monument, bristling with gold and scintillating with blue lights? Come on, Simon, it is only a clock! Maybe so, but as I see the West take the dual carriage-way of nihilism and pagan despair I beg to differ. The Saxons were heroic, but lived in a society ultimately without hope. And us? Why I believe the *Heliand* matters is because its very retelling of the Gospels not only resonates with us, but can equally be addressed to a society that is now convinced it has no future.

Which brings me back to the disaster of the Crucifixion and the accompanying darkness. It would be easy to dismiss this episode as simply an artistic flourish, along with Matthew's further embellishment of an earthquake^{ix} and even more implausible stories of dead people wandering around Jerusalem^x. But I wonder. What may be the earliest reference to Christianity outside the New Testament is by one Thallus, a prolific writer of whom practically nothing now survives. As is, however, well known a fragment of text is recorded by later Christian writer, one Julius Africanus who in about 220 AD paraphrases the long-dead Thallus to the effect that "A most terrible darkness fell over all the world, the rocks were torn apart by an earthquake, and many places both in Judaea and the rest of the world were thrown down"^{xi}. Thallus, who almost certainly was writing within living memory of the Crucifixion, interpreted the terrible darkness as an eclipse, but given the companions of the murdered Jesus returned home under the light of a full Passover Moon this is patently impossible. If you want to see a solar eclipse, look to the day of the new Moon.

But we need to retain our critical faculties. The original text of Thallus has vanished, Julian Africanus was a Christian (even if he wrote as a historian rather than one engaged in apologetics) and even his work only survives as extracts that are reported by others. And if he equates the words of Thallus of "A most terrible darkness" with the gospel accounts, how are we to know Julius Africanus has not wrenched the original words out of context?

We are right to be suspicious, but as it happens it is not the only evidence. More famous, and even more controversial, is another work, this time by a Greek historian, one Phlegon. He probably wrote his grand chronology, known as the *Olympiades*, about a century after the Crucifixion. Alas, it too has only survived as a few fragments, again embedded in the text of later writers. Because Phlegon based his narrative on the recurrent ancient Olympic games and thus on a series of Olympiads, each of 4 years duration, so in principle we can date any event given the first Olympiad was in 776 BC. Now as it happens there are only two viable dates for the Crucifixion and the evidence suggests that the later, that is Friday, 3 April, 33 AD is the more likely. Now to the ancient world the timescale of the Olympiads was quite as important as our ironically named Anno Domini. The calendars intersect and if we have done our sums right then April 33 AD falls almost at the end of the 202nd olympiad. Any report of the Crucifixion by Phlegon? Not quite, but unsurprisingly this part of Phlegon's now vanished book certainly attracted the attention of the early

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Christians because we do read “In the fourth year, however, of 202nd Olympiad [that is sometime in either 32 or 33 AD] an eclipse of the Sun happened, greater and more excellent than any that had happened before it; at the sixth hour, day turned into dark night, so that the stars were seen in the sky, and an earthquake in Bithynia toppled many buildings ...”^{xii}.

This account is also regarded with the deepest suspicion. Not only is reported by a series of Christian writers, doubtless past masters of mutual plagiarism not to mention general mendacity and fathomless intellectual dishonesty – or so we might be lead to believe – but by all accounts Phlegon loved a marvel and doubtless if with us today would be writing blogs for UFO web-sites and popping into W.H. Smith to pick up the latest *Fortean Times*.

But still I wonder. Of course the veracity of the Gospels depends on neither Thallus nor Phlegon. But as Tom Wright insists our understanding of the Gospels these days is almost entirely crippled by a hermeneutic of suspicion. From this perspective, most notoriously manifested in the so-called “Jesus seminar”, the gospels are almost entirely corrupted, being written long after the eyes of the original witnesses had turned to dust, and depicting little more than venomous power struggles in the early church, fairy tales composed by crafty priests for gullible slaves and peasants. Well, believe that if you will.

One might wonder if the last hundred years, devoted to organized lying and truly heroic mendacity, has perhaps slightly coloured our views. As I read the New Testament I am more struck by the view, now being forcibly articulated by a number of scholars, that these are not distortions of remote events, let alone fables, but are the records of eye-witnesses^{xiii}. The Acts of the Apostles, for example, are studded with apparently irrelevant historical information. Who cares about the proconsul of Achaia, approximately equivalent to eastern Greece, a chap called Gallio?^{xiv} A foot-note to history? Well, yes in nearly all respects but he was the brother of Seneca, and an inscription found in Delphi that refers to Gallio the proconsul allows us to date precisely when Paul was having yet another bust-up, predictably in a synagogue, in nearby Corinth. But in addition to the Acts Luke also wrote an accompanying account of what had happened from the birth of Jesus to his execution. Along with the other gospels the narratives are strewn with the most peculiar stories. So now we are asked to engage in the strangest suspension of disbelief. Here, and especially in Acts, we have narratives that contain a mass of verifiable historical details but they are interspersed with what the moderns must insist is utter nonsense: water into wine, or if you prefer cider, people strolling across the surface of lakes, crucified men only visible in starlight at two in the afternoon, one of whom reappears a couple of days later literally larger than life and then promptly vanishes, and oh yes I forgot to mention those who were born blind but now could *per impossible* see.

So another sermon draws to a close, and as ever you have subject to a hefty dose of apologetics. But as you will most likely recall the theme this Michaelmas term is one of science and religion. And I am, I suppose, a scientist but in the present context a real oddity, an evolutionary biologist. Don't see them too often in chapel, let alone in the preacher's stall. But the reason I am a Christian is for the same reasons as C.S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers, because of the evidence. And in the remaining few minutes I will attempt to explain how the enquiry after truth applies as much to Christianity as it does to science. On the 5th April 33 AD, very early in the morning, the tomb of the murdered Jesus was visited by a group of about five women, and found to be empty. Well, barring theft or the wrong directions, that as we all know is impossible; Luke uses the helpful words “pure nonsense”^{xv}. And as Paul understood only too well, if the Resurrection was a sham, hoax or just the reports of some extremely confused people (who skilfully manage to transmit that confusion to Paul within a few years of the event) then he, I and a handful of other deluded maniacs in this chapel are to be

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the most pitied^{xvi}. As Evelyn Waugh would have succinctly put it “the poor boobey”. And at first sight it would seem very curious that the evidence from the New Testament, now widely regarded as little more than a set of fairy tales, has the least connection to the way we do science. But I think there is.

Well I hardly expect most of you to take this suggestion very seriously. Indeed for some dare I say it is now impossible: after all we live in somewhat difficult times. I strongly suspect that it is no accident that scienticism, the touching belief that all and everything will one day be explained by Science, has arisen in direct parallel with religious fundamentalism. Behold the fundamentalists: atheist or Christian, it seems to make little difference: cocksure, ignorant, narrow-minded, literalists and humourless, they rejoice in their possession of irrefutable certainties.

Science and religion: something in common, even partners? A tall claim; after all we are all familiar with the gibe that religion deals with faith, but science deals – and here the fist crashes down on the table – with facts. We’ll conveniently overlook that facts by themselves are useless unless put in a context of meaning and it would be extraordinarily poor form to ask any scientist why he should put his trust in a meaning that otherwise we can only assume is based on a purely arbitrary concatenation of atoms. But even if science, actually rather mysteriously, deals with interpretable facts it is too often forgotten that the very success of science makes it all the more likely that what we next discover will be entirely unexpected. In fact, science is a huge gamble. Yes it constructs hypotheses, makes predictions and as often not links things that appear to be entirely unrelated. Yet not only must we take its rationality on simple trust, but we have not the least inkling of what the ultimate basis of science might be. Already we dimly intuit there may be things that may quite literally be beyond our comprehension. Or if not that, at least matters so knotty, so complex, so intricate, that it may take centuries of Research Fellows to even begin to solve the problem.

Even now there are indications that present-day science is running into difficulties. Extravagant claims of future progress have to date failed to yield much fruit. And this I insist is not because I subscribe to some sort of God of the Gaps argument, but because I now suspect there are questions that will remain unanswerable using any known scientific methodology. Most blatantly how is it that we are conscious? We take it for granted, but how is it that matter can think? So far as I can see the only coherent naturalistic explanation is consciousness has to be a gigantic illusion, a trick of the brain, a necessary fictional state with no underlying reality. Do you believe that? But oddly enough in this case we already have an answer, or at least theologians do. Suppose mind precedes matter? And the consequence? How about our brains being more like an antenna? Yes, the brain itself is material, but imagine it is embedded in a mental world that is quite independent of ourselves. If that is true then in principle, as I think Coleridge understood, it can act as a conduit to entirely new dimensions.

What else do science and specifically Christianity have in common? The latter is not some daft superstition. It is open to investigation, to the interrogation of potentially verifiable facts that in any other historical context would be taken seriously. But again like science, it is full of risks. We just might be utterly, gloriously, stupendously wrong – or if you prefer, deluded boobies. So much is rumoured in North Oxford. But if not, the implications are, to put it mildly, intriguing. As importantly both are open-ended endeavours; small sunlit areas of certainty quickly move to vast expanses of ignorance. Think you understand quantum entanglement or for that matter the Trinity? We don’t, but one day we might.

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And I believe there is an even more powerful similarity and that is to do with our powers of imagination. Without this any scientist is crippled, but best not ask where these powers might come from. Suppose as I have already suggested that our brains are only conscious because they make contact with the immaterial—that's right the stuff that isn't meant to exist, like minds. If that is the case then an enquiry into the well-springs of our imagination begin to look very different.

And imagination is why the great myths resonate so strongly with us. In our world, alas, the well-springs of mythopoeic imagination have almost completely dried out. Until they flow again, I fear it will be next to impossible to re-ignite any truly religious vision. In myth, however, we do not deal with vague fantasy but with bedrock truths that language can scarcely articulate. When I dwelt briefly on the heroic society of the Saxons I also deliberately mentioned Beowulf. Oddly when you trace the kingly lineages of the Geats in southern Sweden in the 6th century Beowulf himself almost enters history^{xvii}; he is very, very close. Myth and history almost coincide. So too I believe it is no accident that in our time a re-telling of our primal myth, of how a world in despair and in the grip of ineradicable evil, was against all the odds saved, has struck such deep roots. I refer, of course, to J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece of how the decisions and courage of the imaginary heroic societies in Middle Earth prefigure the Gospel stories. It is no accident that it was Tolkien, and he knew a thing or two about Beowulf, who insisted to C.S. Lewis on their famous night-time stroll in Oxford that the Gospel story was unique because on April 5th, 33 AD myth became reality.

ⁱ Murphy, G.R. 1992. *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel*. Oxford University Press, p. 186.

ⁱⁱ Mark 15.33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 27.45.

^{iv} Luke 23.44.

^v Murphy, op. cit., p. 67.

^{vi} Murphy, op. cit., p. 67.

^{vii} Murphy, op. cit., p. 68.

^{viii} Murphy, op. cit., p. 69.

^{ix} Matthew 27.51, 54.

^x Matthew 27.52.

^{xi} Jacoby, F. 1929. *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. Berlin, p. 1157.

^{xii} Jacoby op. cit., p. 1165.

^{xiii} See, for example, N.T. Wright 2003. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. SPCK; R. Bauckham 2006 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* – Eerdmans; and M. Mosse 2007 *The Three Gospels: New Testament History Introduced by the Synoptic Problem*. Paternoster.

^{xiv} Acts 18.12-17.

^{xv} Luke 24.11.

^{xvi} 1. Corinthians 15. 15-19.

^{xvii} Green, C. 1968 *Sutton Hoo: The Excavation of a Royal Ship-Burial*. London, p.132, 137-139