

Annotated extract from: Anna Maria Maetzke.
Piero della Francesca. The Legend of the True Cross
in the Church of San Francisco in Arezzo¹

... [*The Legend of the True Cross*]², was especially dear to the Franciscan clients; in Franciscan churches it often featured on the walls of the main chapel. Cycles with similar subjects had previously been executed by such artists, to name only the best known, as Agnolo Gaddi in Santa Croce in Florence, a church that clearly evoked this theme even in its name, by Masolino in the Collegiate Church of Empoli, and by Cenni di Francesco di Ser Cenzo in Volterra. This recurrence should come as no surprise if we consider the fact that the theme of the Cross has a special significance for the Franciscans, since devotion to the cross dates back to Saint Francis himself: in fact, Saint Bonaventure tells in his biography of the Saint that he had a special veneration for the symbol of the Passion and that he received the Stigmata during a spiritual retreat he undertook at La Verna precisely during the period of the 'Feast of the Cross' ('Exaltation of the Cross', 14 September). The legend, whose primary source was the *Apocrypha*, was gathered by the Bishop Jacopo da Varagine who codified it in 1265 in his compendium of 'Lives of the Saints' known by the title of *Legenda Aurea*. [*The Golden Legend*]. The passages that concern this story are two chapters that feature in the *Santorale* [agreed sanctorials] of the liturgical year: the days 3 May ('Discovery of the Cross') and 14 September ('Exaltation of the Cross'). The legend is, in brief, as follows:

1. *The Death of Adam*.³

Adam on his deathbed asked his son Seth to hasten to the gates of Paradise to ask for some oil of the wood of Mercy; applying that oil to his body would heal him. The Archangel Michael, however, refused to supply the oil, and told him that the oil would only become available in five thousand years, the time that remained until the Passion of Christ. Instead, the Archangel gave Seth a branch from the tree of Good and Evil, and told him that when that branch had grown into a tree and that tree had given fruit, Adam would be cured. When Seth returned, he found his father had already died and, obeying the Archangel's instructions, he planted the tree branch upon his body. The branch became a luxuriant tree by the time of King Solomon. The king, impressed by its beauty, had it chopped down and, though he was unable to use it in the construction of the temple of Jerusalem as he would have liked because of its size, he did use it as a bridge over the river Siloe.

3. *The Queen of Sheba Kneeling Before the Bridge over the River Siloe and Her Meeting with King Solomon.*

That is where it lay when the queen of Sheba, who had come to pay a visit on King Solomon, saw it and, seized by a premonition that the Saviour of the World would be placed on that wood, she kneeled to adore it. She confided this information to King Solomon ...

4. *The Burial of the Holy Wood.*

he had the bridge removed, since he knew it was to be the cause of the scattering of the Jews, and ordered it buried in a spot where later the 'Piscina Probatica' [the Pool of Bethesda]—whose water had the power of curing the infirm—would be built. When the Passion of Christ drew nigh, the wood emerged from the earth, and the Hebrews chose to use it to build the Cross. Centuries passed, as Jerusalem was destroyed, the Jews were scattered, and the Cross—along with the crosses of the two thieves—was also lost ...

4. *The Dream of Constantine.*

... finally came the eve of the battle of the Milvian Bridge when Constantine and Maxentius [312 CE], on the banks of the river Tiber, fought to determine who would rule the empire. As Constantine slept, an angel appeared to him: the angel showed him a luminous cross and announced that he would win by virtue of that sign.

¹ Milan: Skira, 2000.

² The annotations to the Maetzke text are in square brackets or in small changes left silent.

³ These headings have been added as a quick guide to the fresco sections referred to. It might be noted that the frescoes do not follow an obvious chronological or narrative order.

5. *Victory of Constantine over Maxentius.*

On the day of the battle, Constantine, holding a cross in his hand, put his adversary to flight; he then converted to Christianity and, with the Edict of Milan of 313 CE, ordered freedom of worship and put an end to religious persecution.

6. *The Torture of Judas Cyriacus.*

Desiring to find the Cross, the emperor sent his mother Helena to the east in quest of Judas [Cyriacus], who knew the secret of where the Cross lay buried. Judas refused to divulge the secret; he was lowered into a well and tortured by starvation. At the end of six days, Judas begged to be released in exchange for the information.

7. *The Discovery and Recognition of the True Cross.*

Digging on Golgotha, on the spot where the emperor Hadrian had, in the intervening years, built a temple dedicated to Venus, Helena found the three crosses; only one of the crosses, placed upon the corpse of a young man, actually brought him back to life, revealing itself as the True Cross.

8. *The Battle of Heraclius Against Chosroes.*

Three more centuries went by: in 615 CE the king of the Persians, Chosroes, carried off the wood of the Cross from Jerusalem and, in a fit of blasphemous exaltation, he set it next to his own throne to symbolise the Christ of the Holy Trinity; on the other side was placed a little rooster, in lieu of the Holy Ghost, and Chosroes thus identified himself as God. It was the eastern emperor Heraclius, in a furious battle during the course of which Chosroes was decapitated, who won back the relic and returned it to Jerusalem for its Exaltation ...

9. *The Exaltation of the Cross.*

... but at the price of his own humiliation; [Heraclius] was obliged to carry the Cross barefoot on his own shoulders within the walls of the city.

The Legend of the True Cross—quite widespread during the time of the Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and then throughout the Middle Ages right up to the Renaissance—clearly bears a profound symbolic and religious significance in virtue of a redeeming vision of human events by the grace of divine power, ensuring salvation. (2000: 16-17)

10. *The Annunciation.*

This scene is set on the far wall, in the lower level, to the left of the window. Serving as a counterweight on the opposite side is the *Dream of Constantine*: both scenes present an annunciation delivered by an angel. The *Annunciation* is not actually part ... [of the *Legend*] as it has been handed down, and was certainly introduced by Piero at the express request of the Franciscan Order. Its meaning is not in fact extraneous to the context of the cycle, since it represents the central moment at the beginning of the process of Redemption and Salvation, which is undertaken when God the Father, with the Incarnation, sends his Son to earth, which ... is the central theme of the entire iconographic program.... (2000: 43-45)

[These are the ten sections in the fresco sequence. They exclude the small sections that depict angels, the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah and the saints Peter the Martyr and Louis.]

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