

### **Daniel the Abbot On Spirituality and Tape Measures**

Daniel the Abbot reveals, in an obsession with quantity, measurement, directional mapping and physical detail, his preoccupation with the tangibility of Christianity, building with his words a materially precise replica of the Church of the Resurrection for readers of *The Life and Journey of Daniel, Abbot of the Russian Land* to explore. Daniel takes great care to contextualize the church before he even reaches its doors, describing the “flat hill about a verst from the road to Jerusalem” on which pilgrims dismount and pay their first respects (127). Shortly thereafter, he locates the Church of St. Stephen the Protomartyr “on the left hand side of the road,” giving just the barest taste with “left hand side” of the overwhelming amount of direction and position-related detail contained in the pages of one Russian abbot’s narrative.

The Church of the Resurrection itself is not treated by Daniel as a singular entity, but rather divided into many small pieces that are carefully quantified, categorized and described according to their function or connection to Christ. In the very first depiction of the church he counts eighteen pillars, six doors and sixteen columns, before narrowing his focus to the front of the church where there are mosaics on top of an additional two columns that flank the altar (127). When taken as a whole, the totals for Daniel’s exhaustive account of church segments are rather staggering. The church proper and the Lord’s tomb boast thirty pillars, eighteen columns, fourteen steps, and eleven doors (127-129). And this is just a tally of building components. Everything is assigned a number, measurement, or type, be it the “three small windows” that Daniel notes were “cut in order to see the holy stone [on which Christ’s body lay]” or the “five great lanterns” in the tomb that “burn ceaselessly day and night” (128).

This penchant for detail goes beyond numbers and types into an appreciation for the artistic beauty of the church and tomb. Daniel writes that the church is “beautifully paved with marble slabs” and that above the galleries the holy prophets are depicted in mosaic “as if they stood there alive” (127). Later, in describing the mosaics decorating the walls around the site of the crucifixion, Daniel again praises their hyper-realistic quality, saying the mosaic is “skillfully and marvelously done just as if alive and even more so, just as it were then” (129). Just as if alive *and even more so*. In a text swimming with numbers and measurements this qualitative, even subjective observation is a rare treasure. The careful recording of length in cubits, versts, and fathoms, and the fastidious, almost ridiculous counting of steps and other components—“seven steps to the door, and passing through the door, another seven steps”(129)—all suggest Daniel’s desperate desire to translate the abstraction of his religion and its long-passed events into something tangible and immediate. Of even more importance to this quest for religious tactility than a catalogue of every pillar in the church and tomb is a mosaic so realistic it is somehow “alive and even more so” (129). The material stone-and-wood church that surrounds a place of such great religious significance can be recorded in exact detail of length, breadth and height, but the mosaics on its walls bring it to life for Daniel in a way that knowing the exact dimensions of the stone on which Christ’s body lay (four by two by one half cubits) simply cannot.

For Daniel, it seems the carefully recorded measurements of the Church of the Resurrection are a tangible foundation for Christ’s crucifixion, a foundation that is fleshed out by artful mosaics. These mosaics provide a visual retelling of some of the most sacred moments in the Christian canon, and where there are not mosaics to do the re-imagining, Daniel must paint with his words. Locating, in typical directional fashion, “a hill to the west above the tomb and the Crucifixion,” Daniel recounts the Bible in his own words: “And here on a rise is the place to

which the holy mother of God hastened as she tried to follow Christ and said in the agony of her heart as she wept: ‘Where are you going my son. Why do you hasten so fast?’” Daniel carries the heart-wrenching account of a mother losing her son to its end in which “[Mary] was horror-stricken at what she saw and sank down and was overcome with grief and sobbing” (130).

This emotional retelling of the Gospel narrative is a far cry from the dry tallies and calculations that both precede and succeed it. And yet, in spite of their drastic disparity, Daniel links dramatic recount and cold quantification. By virtue of their textual proximity and alternation, not just in this particular section of Daniel’s narrative but throughout its entirety, the immediate reality and the re-imagination of the Bible are necessarily superimposed. The Church of the Resurrection deepens this connection between physical and spiritual, certainly encouraging Daniel’s obsessive measuring, if not perhaps even inspiring it in the case of one mosaic. He describes this particular mosaic thus: “Beyond the wall behind the altar is the navel of the earth and a vault has been built above it and high up is depicted Christ in mosaic and a scroll which reads: ‘Behold I have measured heaven and earth with my hand’” (128). In relation to the contents of this scroll, Daniel the Abbot might, in furiously measuring the Church of the Resurrection and its surrounding areas, be re-interpreting the practice of *imitatio Christi*, imitating Christ’s *measurement* of heaven and earth rather than the path or method of his suffering.

In following Christ by measuring “heaven and earth with [his] hand” (128) Daniel not only fulfills, albeit obliquely, the tradition of *imitatio Christi*, but also indirectly addresses the central paradox of Christianity. That is, the Biblically ordained absence of Christ’s remains. Daniel’s religion, the Church of the Resurrection, and ultimately the entirety of *The Life and Journey of Daniel, Abbot of the Russian Land* rest upon the assumption that Christ’s body

ascended to heaven leaving no physical earthly remnants. In this context, Daniel's obsessive measurement and classification of church and tomb take on a deeper meaning. In addition to providing a concrete background against which to locate biblical events, Daniel may be amassing overwhelming amounts of physical detail in an attempt to fill the gaping theological void where Christ's body, the greatest relic of all, should rightfully be. Considering the absolute mania surrounding relics in the Middle Ages, many devout Christians might have felt an unconscious anxiety at the absence of Christ's body. When one can visit the body of Saint James at Santiago, and the head of John the Baptist in Rome, but not even the pinky finger of the Lord and Savior where should highest devotions be turned? And in what way should they be carried out, given that nothing remains to touch or even pray before? Daniel the Abbot reconciles this paradox for himself by obsessing over numbers, lengths, and types, systematically encoding the Church of the Resurrection in quantities and qualities, and providing a level of detail that assaults the senses to compensate for the one detail that must necessarily be missing from his pilgrimage narrative: Christ's body itself.