

SEMINARY OF CHRIST THE KING

“See How the Cross of the Lord Stands Revealed as the Tree of Life”:

A COMPREHENSIVE BIBLICAL LOOK AT THE TREE OF LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

“See how the cross of the Lord stands revealed as the tree of life.”¹ On the 1st Sunday of Lent, the Church, in her official prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours, gives us this opening antiphon as a kind of mystical key that opens up the great treasury of salvation history that will unfold throughout the Lenten season. In order to cooperate well with these Lenten graces that the Church offers us on our *via Crucis*, we first need to understand an enigmatic biblical object: “the tree of life” (Genesis 2:9 NRSVCE). Providentially situated as an iconic bookend for both the opening and closing chapters of the Bible, namely, Genesis and Revelation, this mystical tree is both a Jewish appropriation of an ancient Near East mythological symbol to signify Yahweh’s life-giving presence and a subsequent Christian application to express how the Messiah’s crucifixion on a tree was actually the fulfillment of God’s original design in the Garden of Eden. In order to arrive at this current understanding that we now hold with clarity – that the cross of the Lord stands revealed as the tree of life, we will survey the historical development of “the tree of life” in the following manner: Old Testament appropriation, New Testament application, Church Father’s interpretation, and today’s actualization. In doing so, we hope to enter more deeply into the great events of salvation history and thereby arrive at a new appreciation of our Lord’s sacrifice for us on the cross.

TREE OF LIFE: OLD TESTAMENT APPROPRIATION

In the Old Testament, the tree of life is one of the first and most striking symbols that the biblical authors employ to signify a participation in Yahweh’s life.² The following three points are pertinent to how the Old Testament appropriated this important sign.

¹ The Liturgy of the Hours, *Antiphon of the first psalm of the Office of Readings, Sunday Week I*, vol.2: Lenten Season – Easter Season, trans. ICEL (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1976), 1082.

² Cf. Roger Good, “The Tree of Life.” *Affirmation & Critique*. A Journal of Christian Thought. Volume IX, No.1, April 2004, 52-55.

First, drawing upon a common motif found in ancient Near East mythology in presenting sacred trees and plants imparting divine life through heavenly food, the author of Genesis presents “the tree of life” (Gen 2:9) as a specific tree that Yahweh created in order to give us a share in His immortal life through divine sustenance.³ When Adam and Eve disobeyed Yahweh and broke their relationship with Him, Yahweh, out of His fiery and jealous love (cf. Deut 4:23-24), placed a cherubim with a flaming sword to “guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen 3:24), thereby preventing Adam and Eve from eating from this tree and thus living forever in a state of broken relationship with Him (cf. Gen 3:22).

Second, drawing upon the Hebrew understanding of the term “life” (חַיִּי, *chay*), which denotes a quality of life that is good and blessed in contrast to a life that is evil and cursed, the author of Genesis presents the tree of life as the preeminent sign of Yahweh’s role as the abundant provider and source of every blessing.⁴ In the Wisdom tradition, we see an important development at work here insofar as the attainment of wisdom – or that which constitutes a good and blessed life – is associated “with the tree of life (Prov 3:13-18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4).”⁵ Rather than speak about a particular tree, as found in Genesis, the author of Proverbs drops the definite article and speaks about “a tree of life” (3:18) in a broad sense to focus the audience’s attention away from that hidden tree in Eden – a sad distant memory – and instead toward the Torah – a happy present reality, thereby placing the Torah as the new embodiment of God’s goodness and blessing.⁶

³ Cf. Ingrid Faro, “Tree of Life”, Edited by John D. Barry, et al. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016. Two further points from Faro are noteworthy to mention here. First, in Egyptian literature, we read of deities described as trees providing divine food for souls. Faro notes that the Bible condemns ancient Near East goddesses associated with sacred trees, such as the Asherah, in Deuteronomy 12:2. Second, in the Babylonian poem, Epic of Gilgamesh, we hear about a plant that imparts heavenly sustenance. Although there are definite parallels to Genesis, Faro notes that Genesis’ depiction of the tree of life also stands in stark contrast to the life-giving plant found in Epic of Gilgamesh insofar as Genesis’ tree of life is a gift from Yahweh for humans to share in His immortal life whereas Gilgamesh’s tree of life is a gift only for the gods to rejuvenate them.

⁴ Cf. Faro, “Tree of Life.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cf. Ibid. Faro notes that in Rabbinic tradition, obedience to the Torah was seen as the way to restore the blessings of the tree of life and disobedience to the Torah is “likened to the destruction of trees.” Interestingly, the author of the Psalms also links the happy path of finding delight in the Torah with being compared to fruitful trees (Ps 1:1-3).

Third, in the prophetic tradition, Ezekiel, using language and imagery from the Garden of Eden, presents a glorious vision of God's temple being fully restored (47:1-12). In particular, Ezekiel envisions "a great many trees" (47:7) that provide abundant food and healing leaves because the trees are nourished by the life-giving river water that "flows from the sanctuary" (47:12).⁷ By communicating this eschatological vision to God's chosen people in exile, Ezekiel awakens new hope that the blessed life Adam and Eve once enjoyed in the Garden of Eden will one day be fully restored for the entire nation.

TREE OF LIFE: NEW TESTAMENT APPLICATION

In the New Testament, the only direct references to the tree of life appear in the Book of Revelation. Based on John's application of the Old Testament understanding of the tree of life, the following insights are important.

First, in a dramatic restoration of God's original plan in Genesis, John presents access to the tree of life and "permission to eat" (Rev 2:7) its fruit as a reward for the saints "who have come out of the great ordeal... [and] washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:14; cf. 2:7; 22:14, 19). Just as the shedding of a lamb's blood was an essential part of the deliverance from the first "great ordeal" of God's chosen people (cf. Ex 12:3-13), so now the shedding of the Lamb's blood is an essential part of our deliverance from the "great ordeal" that we face in this life of exile.

Second, the tree of life appears in Revelation's eschatological vision on both sides of the life-giving river with abundant fruit and healing leaves (cf. Rev 22:1-2). Drawing extensively upon the prophet Ezekiel's vision noted above, the author of Revelation shows not only the completion

⁷ Cf. Faro, "Tree of Life."

of Ezekiel's prophecy but also an actual manifestation of "*the* tree of life" (Rev 22:2 my italics).⁸ This bold proclamation of *the* tree of life's actual appearance is a radical departure from the development that happened in Old Testament thought as noted above. The specific tree that Yahweh created in the Garden of Eden has finally arrived on scene!

Third, the slaughtered Lamb in the book of Revelation, that is, Christ, receives eternal praise in heaven for His wisdom (cf. Rev 5:12) because He is revealed as both the only one worthy to open God's scroll and the divine source of the life-giving water that gives immortal life (cf. Rev 5:5; 22:1). Seen through this light, is it possible to see the Lamb as the fulfillment of the blessings promised by obedience to the Torah in Wisdom literature? At least one Scripture commentator, Joseph Ratzinger, considered this to be true: "In the Christian faith, Jesus is Torah in person."⁹ Furthermore, since Christ is both "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24) and "the Root [from] David[']s tree]" (Rev 5:5) and Proverbs states that God's wisdom "is a tree of life" (Prov 3:18), we see a unique fulfillment of this Old Testament text.

TREE OF LIFE: CHURCH FATHERS' INTERPRETATION

In the writings of the Church Fathers, the tree of life was often interpreted as an Old Testament symbol of Christ's crucifixion.¹⁰ Having reflected upon their extensive interpretations, I found the writings of St. Ephrem (306-373) to be most suitable for the focus of this brief essay.

⁸ Cf. Peter S. Williamson, *Revelation*. Edited by Mary Healy. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015, 358.

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 90.

¹⁰ Some of the noteworthy Church Fathers include: Justin Martyr, who spoke of the tree of life from an apologetic viewpoint to explain why Christ was crucified (Justin Martyr, "Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew," *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Vol. 1. The Ante-Nicene Fathers. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 242); St. Leo the Great (400-461), who said that Christ's blood gave us access to the tree of life by quenching the cherubim's flaming sword (*The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol.2, 313); and St. Jerome (347-420), who spoke of the nourishing food and healing leaves from the tree of life within the context of praying with the Sacred Scriptures (cf. Stevenson, Kenneth, and Michael Gluerup, eds. Ezekiel, Daniel. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 147.

First, St. Ephrem, known for his prolific poetry, said that Christ's crucifixion actually manifested "the Tree of Life... [that had] sank down into the virgin ground and was hidden to burst forth and reappear on Golgotha."¹¹ For St. Ephrem, symbolism gave way to reality – "Christ's cross *is* the Tree of life."¹² Just as the good thief was able to gaze upon the Cross and perceive the Tree of Life, so too are we called to "[s]ee how the cross of the Lord stands revealed as the tree of life."¹³ Although some would consider this interpretation of the tree of life to be an extreme – how could the actual wood used for Jesus of Nazareth's cross be the same wood from the original tree of life in the Garden of Eden? – St. Ephrem nevertheless sheds light on the biblical reality that the tree of life is indeed a specific tree that God created and intended to be the perpetual means of imparting His immortal life to us. Thus, we see a fulfillment in Christ's cross and a revelation of the glorious continuity of salvation history.

Second, building upon this first great idea, St. Ephrem states that the Eucharist *is* the immortal fruit of the Tree: "The Tree of the Cross has borne a fruit that gives eternal life unto the world; and as we eat of it, O Christ, we are delivered from death."¹⁴ Just as the fruit of the tree of life in the Garden of Eden was the means by which God shared His immortal life with Adam and Eve, so now do we discover in a glorious fulfillment of this Old Testament type that the Eucharist is the means by which God gives us a participation in His divine life. For St. Ephrem, these words were not mere poetry but a reality that he lived on a daily basis in the holy sacrifice of the Mass. As a priest, he made present *the Tree of the Cross* and experienced the fruit of *eternal life* that Christ promises: "Whoever eats my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life" (Jn 6:54).

¹¹ St. Ephrem, "The Lenten Triodion," accessed online at: Fr. John Wehling's St. John of Chicago Orthodox Church: <https://www.ocanwa.org/single-post/2017/03/18/The-Cross-The-Tree-of-Life>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The Liturgy of the Hours, vol.2, 1082.

¹⁴ St. Ephrem, "The Lenten Triodion."

TREE OF LIFE: TODAY'S ACTUALIZATION

In the holy sacrifice of the Mass, we get to see with the eyes of faith “how the cross of the Lord stands revealed as the tree of life.”¹⁵ As we step into “the entrance of the temple” (Ezek 47:1) and wade our way through the life-giving waters that “flow from the sanctuary” (47:12), we discover that this is no ordinary church building but rather the new Garden of Eden. As barren trees, we enter once more into this holy dwelling with our crosses and place them on the altar to be grafted onto Christ’s cross – the fruitful Tree of Life (cf. Rom 11:17-20, Eph 2:13-22). Having “washed [our] robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:14) through baptism (cf. Rom 6:3-4), we are rewarded with “permission to eat” (2:7) from the immortal Tree of Life. As the cherubim puts down his blood-soaked sword that was once flaming with the fire of God’s jealous love (cf. Deut 4:23-24), we see God’s holy protector bow down in adoration before the Bread of angels – for this is not merely divine sustenance but is actually God Himself. Being transformed into fruitful trees of life “for the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2), we are sent forth from Mass to proclaim: “See how the cross of the Lord stands revealed as the tree of life!”¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The tree of life is a key biblical symbol that connects the story of salvation in a unique way. By situating itself in only the opening and closing chapters of the Bible, we discover not only how the author of Genesis appropriated this mystical tree to signify how Yahweh wanted us to share in His divine life and how the author of Revelation applied this biblical type to show forth the glorious *eschaton* that Christ’s cross brought about but also how God invites each one of us to enter into the mystery of salvation that takes place on the altar of our local churches whereby we personally experience the transformative effects of Christ’s cross bursting forth as the Tree of Life.

¹⁵ The Liturgy of the Hours, *vol.2*, 1082.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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