HYMN INTERPRETATION

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While many hymn texts unfold their themes in a rather logical, sequential fashion, some present a central idea or symbol and then weave round it a tapestry which cumulatively enriches and vivifies the principal image. One such hymn is "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree," which is also known as "The Tree of Life my Soul Hath Seen," and which has appeared most often historically under the title, "Christ the Apple-tree."

This hymn was first printed in America in *Divine Hymns, or Spiritual Songs; for the Use of Religious Assemblies and Private Citizens,* edited by Joshua Smith and published by Thomas Hubbard, Norwich, Connecticut, in 1794.[1] In the subsequent 200 years to our day, it has not appeared frequently in hymn books—just over two dozen times—and nearly all of those are dated before 1862.[2]

In Smith's collection, as in many of the other occurrences, the hymn text is printed without a tune. Elizabeth Poston (1905–1987), British composer and scholar, wrote for it a striking melody with which the hymn has been associated and also recorded.[3] While its elegant melodic contours support the poetic imagery, Poston's composition spans the interval of a twelfth and so is less than accessible for most congregations. The 88.88 meter of the text lends itself to other well-known tunes, although one must agree with Austin Lovelace that good Long Meter hymn tunes are in relatively meagre supply.[4] A recent printed version pairs the text with the tune PINKHAM, a very suitable match.[5]

"Jesus Christ the Apple Tree" has been recorded as Christmas repertoire; however appropriate that association, the hymn text is really seasonless. It would be fitting in connection with the Lent-Easter cycle when Christian communities honor the tree of Christ's cross, in celebration of Jesus Christ and of Christian life, as well as on any occasion marking religious commitment.

Poets have extolled the marvels of the tree in poem and song in every age and culture. The tree brings shade to the earth and provides a home for birds and a refuge for other living creatures; it yields medicinal leaves and health-giving foods and material for the building of humanity's homes. Wonderful woods are not only functional but also beautifying and uplifting in countless ways, even in contemporary times when so much else crowds the market. The tree is a sign of hope in the annual season of rebirth and renewal; it is a source of delight with the fragrant blossoms of spring, the verdant leaf of summer, the abundant harvest of autumn, and the subdued hues of winter. We know today, too, that the tree is an important part of the ecosystem and bio-cycle, breathing oxygen into the atmosphere and calling forth rains to water the earth. The tree is in truth a bearer of life and of healing for humanity and the earth.

Jesus Christ the Apple Tree

1. The tree of life my soul hath seen,
   laden with fruit, and always green.
   The trees of nature fruitless be
   compared with Christ the apple tree.

2. His beauty doth all things excel.
   By faith I know, but ne'er can tell
   the glory which I now can see
   in Jesus Christ the apple tree.

3. For happiness I long have sought,
   and pleasure dearly I have bought.
   I missed of all; but now I see
   'tis found in Christ the apple tree.

4. I'm weary with my former toil.
   Here will I sit and rest awhile.
   Under the shadow I will be
   of Jesus Christ the apple tree.

5. This fruit doth make my soul to thrive.
   It keeps my dying faith alive;
   which makes my soul in haste to be
   with Jesus Christ the apple tree.

—R.H.

For centuries in Judeao-Christian writings, the tree has been a significant symbol; of the many references in scripture and other sources, only a few can be explored in this brief space. In Psalm 1, the tree becomes a representation of the person, who is "like a tree that is planted beside the flowing waters, that yields its fruit in due season, and whose leaves shall never fade" (Ps. 1:3). Such a tree flourishes and prospers. But just as human beings can choose to live outside the good, so too a tree can be without fruit, and that barrenness stands as a sign of wickedness (Jer. 8:13). In the gospel, Jesus declares in parable that the fig tree, when it fails to yield a harvest, is in danger of being cut down (Luke 13:6–9).

In the Book of Genesis, a tree stands in the midst of the landscape at the beginning of human history (Gen. 2:9 ff). There, in the garden, no one is to eat from the

tree of knowledge of good and evil, and when the man and woman taste the fruit of the tree, they are sent out of the place of peace and promise. The tree in the garden of paradise produced a fruit that led to destruction; while the bible never says the fruit taken from that tree was an apple, that is the fruit which came to be associated with the Genesis passage.[6] In the Middle Ages, a day was set aside to commemorate the first parents of the human race, and on that day, a branch or a tree would be decked with fruits—an evergreen, which was available in northern and central Europe, usually decorated with apples—to recall the garden of God and the command of God. The day of the festivity of Adam and Eve was December 24; later, as decking a tree for Christmas became the custom, practises of these winter festivities merged and the decoration frequently used for the evergreen tree of Christmas continued to be apples.[7] Thus the tree that had been a symbol of paradise lost became as well and more importantly the tree of salvation given by God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. It was a visual reminder that what the old Adam lost, the new Adam, Jesus Christ, regained (Rom. 5:12–21).

Christian writers and hymnists over the centuries have reflected on the tree as sometimes the cross of Christ and sometimes Christ himself. Glorying in the tree of the cross, they have sung with the sixth-century poet, Venantius Fortunatus: " Faithful Cross! . . . None in foliage, none in blossom, none in fruit thy peers may be!"[8]

Composed centuries later in Hungary, the following hymn lauds Jesus Christ as the tree of life:

> There in God's garden
> stands the Tree of wisdom
> whose leaves hold forth
> the healing of the nations;
> Tree of all knowledge,
> Tree of all compassion,
> Tree of all beauty.
> Its name is Jesus,
> name that says "Our Saviour."[9]

In a meditation entitled "God's Grove of Trees," Gail Ramshaw pens a memorable passage, one which reminds us that knowledge of the true tree of life is accessible to the learned and the ordinary Christian alike:

> Over my desk hangs a reproduction of Hannah Cohoon's "Tree of Life." Hannah Cohoon, who showed up one day with her two children ("no record was found of her marriage," the museum plaque found it necessary to say) in Hancock, Massachusetts, joined the Shaker community there. She is known to us today by name, as precious few Shakers are, because she painted religious symbols. Hannah's drawings are art: this picture a mighty tree with checkered leaves and fruit round and full, greens and orange and gold, like fecund sunflowers, the leaves and fruits far too large for such a slender trunk but somehow perfectly balanced in a holy air. The Shakers revered the Tree of Life, which they, the elect, would enjoy—not now, but some day.[10]

"Jesus Christ the Apple Tree" is generally classified as a folk hymn, and it is improbable that its author was broadly acquainted with centuries of theological and ecclesiastical literature. The text is written simply in the first person singular, with the immediacy of deep spiritual insight.[11] It expresses the author's personal appropriation of the vision that Christ himself is the tree of life, "laden with fruit and always green."

In the last three stanzas, the hymn alludes to the human experience, late and often sadly gained, that our relentless search for pleasure and fulfillment of desire leaves us dissatisfied; as Augustine famously said in prayer, "our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."[12] The object of life's yearning is none other than Christ, whom we recognize with the eyes of faith. Alongside him, barren are both the ancient death-dealing tree of paradise and all the subsequent trees of creation, enticing though they appear! Worn by inner struggle and by our often-misplaced steps on life's journey, we may take our rest under the shadow of the blessed branches of Jesus Christ, the apple tree.[13]

Multivalent in its imagery, this hymn telescopes into unusual brevity a breadth of religious aspiration and allusion. At the center of individual and communal Christian life stands Jesus, ageless tree of life, with flowers and leaves of indescribable beauty, with nurture sweet and everlasting! Such is the tree, ever faithful and ever fruitful, that rejuvenates and sustains our faltering spirits. Such is the tree, unshakeable, unassailable, and unchanging, to which we cling with all our might in the perils of life, Jesus Christ himself, who is for each of us, hope and joy and salvation. ❦

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Notes

[1]This date and source are documented in the *Dictionary of American Hymnology* [*DAH*] files. They contradict the information sometimes given elsewhere, which states that the hymn first appeared in America in a 1784 publication in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; see, for example, *The Second Penguin Book of Christmas Carols,* edited by Elizabeth Poston (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), 27. This hymn text had been printed earlier in Britain, in the *London Spiritual Magazine* of August, 1761, where its author is identified only as "R.H." I thank David W. Music for making available to me a copy of this British source, as well as of his unpublished study, *Joshua Smith's Divine Hymns or Spiritual Songs,* which was presented at a symposium in honor of Harry Eskew at New Orleans Baptist Seminary, New Orleans LA, in January 2001.

[2]For clarifying the publication dates and tracing occurrences of this hymn in *DAH,* I am grateful to Paul R. Powell. The *DAH,* presently under preparation in CD-ROM format, is to be available

for public use shortly; see Paul R. Powell, "Research Director's Report," THE HYMN 53:1 (2002), 4.

[3]For Poston's melody, see *Second Penguin Book*, 93.

[4]Austin C. Lovelace, *The Anatomy of Hymnody* (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, 1965), 28; he presents a useful analysis of Long Meter melodies and texts, 24–34.

[5]*Common Praise* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1998), 488.

[6]The designation of the apple as the fruit of the tree in the garden of paradise may have emerged from linguistic association: in Latin, the root for both "evil" and "apple" is *mal,* and in the accusative case, the two words are identical *(malum)*.

[7]See Gerry Bowler, *The World Encyclopedia of Christmas* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000), 1; and, for a more extended discussion, Philip V. Snyder, *The Christmas Tree Book: The History of the Christmas Tree & Antique Christmas Tree Ornaments* (New York: Viking Press, 1976).

[8]Venantius Fortunatus, *Pange lingua gloriosi,* translated by John Mason Neale; for the entire hymn, see *The Collected Hymns, Sequences and Carols of John Mason Neale* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), 7–9.

[9]Imre Pécsely Kiràly, "The Tree of Life," translated by Erik Routley; the full text is published as hymn no. 578 in Routley's *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 219.

[10]Gail Ramshaw, *A Metaphorical God: An Abecedary of Images for God* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995), 100–01.

[11]The *DAH* indicates that in one occurrence of this hymn, dated 1833, the text is made plural, thus "our souls " rather than "my soul."

[12]Augustine, *Confessions,* translated by F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 3.

[13]The ideas of a return home to the apple tree who is Jesus Christ and of sheer delight in his goodness are further elaborated in two additional stanzas of this hymn in the 1761 British printing; these two other stanzas are also included within the article by Elizabeth Lockwood and Leonard Ellinwood, "Christ, the Appletree," THE HYMN 26:1, 25–27. The five-stanza version given here has been more commonly known. For her assistance in locating information on these points from several sources, I am indebted to Mary Louise VanDyke.